



Martin Luther's Lectures on Romans (1515–1516): Their Rediscovery and Legacy

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Remember this name: Johannes Ficker. Without Professor Ficker's initial dogged sleuthing, followed by years of painstaking editorial work, Luther's lectures on Paul's Letter to the Romans (1515–1516) might have remained hidden in plain sight. At the very least, without Ficker's considerable determination and exacting scholarship, Luther's *Commentary on Romans* would not have appeared—in German or in English—when it did, in the manner it did. This essay will discuss the making of Luther's first and only series of Romans lectures, as well as the significance of these lectures for understanding Luther's early theological development. However, the fascinating story of Ficker's (re)discovery of Luther's Romans lectures will serve as a fitting start.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, there existed a large gap in the historical record—a gap where Luther's Romans lectures should have been. By 1890, two of Luther's three initial lecture series had been edited for publication and made available for study. Volumes 3 and 4 of the famed Weimar Ausgabe (Weimar Edition) of Luther's works featured the Reformer's first lectures on the Psalms,

It was his new reading of Romans that led Martin Luther to his evangelical breakthrough. But scholars have long argued about the dating and nature of that breakthrough. With the rediscovery of Luther's early lectures on Romans, we received a window into his breakthrough and his new understanding of God's justification of the Christian person.

which he gave over a two-year period, 1513–1515.¹ Volume 2 of the Weimar featured Luther's first lectures on Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Luther delivered these lectures in 1516–1517 and prepared them for publication in 1519.² Conspicuously absent in these early volumes, however, were the lectures that fell in between Luther's Psalms and Galatians lectures: namely, the Romans lectures. Professors and preachers would have to wait more than fifty years before the definitive, critical edition of Luther's Romans lectures was published as volume 56 of the Weimar Ausgabe.³ Why the half-century gap?

After Luther's death in 1546, many of his original writings were preserved by his heirs. In 1582, Luther's Romans lectures were bound within an ornate, leather cover. In 1592, Luther's son Paul, a physician, reported that the Romans notes were in his possession and that he hoped to have them translated from Latin into German.⁴ After Paul Luther's death in 1593, his sons sold their father's collection of their grandfather's writings to a German noble, Joachim Frederick, the margrave of Brandenburg. The volume containing Luther's Romans lectures were handed down to the margrave's great-grandson, Frederick William. In 1661, the forty-one-year old Frederick William had his entire literary collection catalogued and made available in a public library in Berlin. In this way, Luther's original, hand-written notes for his 1515–1516 Romans lectures found their way into the collection of what would become the Berlin Royal Library.⁵ It was in this library that the lecture notes would be "discovered" more than two hundred years later.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Pope Leo XIII opened the Vatican's archives to researchers. In 1899, Johannes Ficker, with the help of a former student, was able to confirm that the Vatican possessed a hand-written transcription of Luther's original Romans notes. The transcription, as it turned out, was created by Johann Aurifaber, one of Luther's earliest publicists. Ficker began editing Aurifaber's text in preparation for a printed edition of Luther's Romans lectures. At the same time, Ficker began a focused search for Luther's original copy. Ficker wrote letters of inquiry to libraries and book collectors all over Germany and beyond. "I fairly ransacked all of Europe to locate the original," Ficker confessed. Alas, all inquiries—including the one sent to the Berlin Royal Library—received the same reply: a document matching Ficker's description could not be found.

¹ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–1980) 3:11–652 and 4:1–462 (hereafter cited as WA).

² WA 2:443–618.

³ WA 56:1–528.

⁴ I have used four main sources for my rendition of the history of the physical copy of Luther's original notes for the Romans lectures. These sources are (1) Martin Luther, *Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/1516, Anfänge Reformatorischer Bibelauslegung*, vol. 1, ed. Johannes Ficker (Leipzig: Theodor Weicher, 1908), vii–xvi (Ficker's Forward); (2) Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. and trans. Wilhelm Pauck, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), xxvii–xxiv (part of the Pauck's thorough "General Introduction"); (3) George Croft Cell, "Luther's Lectures on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans," *Methodist Review* 93 (September 1911): 682–93 (includes reportage of correspondence between the author and Ficker); and (4) Brian Cummings, "Luther in the Berlinka: A Story of Twentieth-century Loss and Recovery," *TLS, The Times Literary Supplement*, issue 5985 (December 15, 2017): 15.

⁵ After World War II, the library was renamed Berlin State Library (*Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin*).

However, in 1905, while visiting the Berlin Royal Library, Ficker decided to inquire in person. Here is Ficker's description of what happened next:

When I made this inquiry I had no idea or expectation of getting anything; but to my utter astonishment, I was told that the manuscript, whose existence had, in answer to my written inquiries, been specifically denied . . . was there in the Berlin library and, *mirabile dictu*, in a showcase!⁶

A librarian confirmed to Ficker that the manuscript had not only been on display there for many years but that it was also listed in the library's catalogue. As an added insult, the librarian expressed surprise that Luther researchers never appeared to make use of it.⁷

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Now, with access to Luther's own, original handwritten lecture notes in the Berlin library, as well as access to the copy of the Aurifaber transcription found in the Vatican, Ficker was able to compile and complete a definitive, printed edition of Luther's Romans Lectures—the first ever.⁸ Published in 1908, *Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/1516* was greeted with a great deal of scholarly and public interest.⁹ Thirty years later, Ficker's decades of work with Luther's lectures on Paul's Letter to the Romans would culminate with the 1938 publication of the consummate critical edition.¹⁰ However, since Luther prepared and delivered these

⁶ Croft Cell, "Luther's Lectures," 688.

⁷ Apparently, at least one person, a professor named Nikolaus Müller, had made prior use of the notes. Before Ficker's discovery, Müller had already begun editing Luther's lectures for the Weimar Edition—without alerting the Weimar editors, who had already assigned the task to Ficker! See Croft Cell, "Luther's Lectures," 688.

⁸ See note 2, above. In the public domain, Ficker's edition is available at <https://archive.org/details/luthersvorlesun01fickgoog>.

⁹ According to Croft Cell, who wrote three years after the publication of Ficker's first edition, "The discovery . . . of any document throwing light on any period of his career would command widespread attention; how much more so this commentary which mirrors back to us the Baccalareus ad biblia wrapped up in profound intensive study of Saint Paul's understanding of the gospel. . . . And so we may say that one of the most important documents Luther ever wrote has, after lying for three centuries in obscurity, been brought to light and now at length has focused attention upon [Luther] anew." Croft Cell, "Luther's Lectures," 684.

¹⁰ See WA 56. It should, however, be noted that 1938 did not mark the end of Ficker's work with Luther's Romans lectures. In 1939, Ficker's critical work on several versions of students' notes (*Nachschriften*) of Luther's 1515–1516 Romans lectures was published as WA 57. Johannes Ficker died in Halle, Germany, on June 19, 1944.

lectures in Latin, the Reformer's full Romans commentary was—as late as the start of the 1960s—only accessible to those who could read and understand Latin or German.¹¹ Stated another way: most preachers in the English-speaking world were unable to consult Luther's groundbreaking work on Romans until the publication of the first English translation in 1961.¹²

It took the better part of a century, but Johannes Ficker's careful work editing Luther's handwritten lecture notes was finally accessible in the North American context—just as Lutheranism and “mainline” Protestantism were at their cultural peak.¹³ The importance of having access to Luther's formative and first New Testament commentary will be discussed below. First, however, a description of the physical copy of Luther's lecture notes—and how they were implemented in the Wittenberg classroom—is in order.

THE LECTURE NOTES

On the first day of “summer” semester 1515, Martin Luther began a new lecture series. Luther had spent two years lecturing on Psalms. Now, the still relatively new Wittenberg professor turned his attention to the New Testament, namely, the apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans. Twenty-two-year old Johann Oldekop was among those gathered in the *aula* on the main floor of the Augustinian monastery. On April 9, “in the year 1515, the Monday after Whit Sunday, that is the first Sunday after Easter, I came to Wittenberg,” Oldekop explained, “and at that time Martin Luther began to lecture on Paul's Letter to the Romans.”¹⁴

In preparation for the lectures, “The Doctor had requested that each line of Paul's letter would be printed far apart from the other lines so that notations [*Glossen*] could be made.”¹⁵ Luther had instructed the printer, Johann Rhau-Grunenberg, to format the biblical text so that there was plenty of room to make interlinear and marginal *glossae*. Rhau-Grunenberg's gloss-friendly edition of the Latin text (*Vulgata*) of Paul's Letter to the Romans was printed on twenty-eight “quarto” pages—a rather compact volume measuring about seven inches wide by

¹¹ In 1927, Eduard Ellwein, a German pastor, began translating Luther's Romans lectures, with selections appearing in publications in 1927 and 1938. Finally, in 1965, Ellwein's German translation of Luther's full Romans scholia appeared as a supplemental volume to a collection of Luther's writings. This volume was recently reprinted as Martin Luther, *Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/1516*, trans. Eduard Ellwein (Waldems, Germany: 3L, 2017).

¹² There are two main English translations of Luther's Romans commentary. The 1961 translation by Wilhelm Pauck (see footnote 2) and the 1972 translation begun by Walter Tillmans and completed by Jacob A. O. Preus II. The latter is found in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1958–86), 25:3–524 (hereinafter: *LW*).

¹³ One famous artifact of this cultural peak is the 1958 appearance of “Mr. Lutheran,” Franklin Clark Fry, on the cover of *Time* magazine. “Religion: The New Lutheran,” *Time*, April 7, 1958, <https://tinyurl.com/y6hubdko>.

¹⁴ Johann Oldekop, *Chronik des Johan Oldecop*, Bibliothek Des Literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart 190, ed. Karl Euling (Tübingen: Laupp, 1891), 45. My translation.

¹⁵ Oldekop, *Chronik des Johan Oldecop*, 45. My translation.

eight and a half inches tall.¹⁶ Since the printshop was on the monastery's premises at the time, students could easily obtain a copy to bring to the first lecture.

Luther also used Rhau-Grunenberg's booklet to prepare his lectures. In advance of a given lecture, Luther made notations about the meaning of specific words or phrases in the spaces between the lines of text. Notes (glosses) that were of a more general nature—a citation of an ancient or medieval authority, for instance—were usually entered in the margins. Any observer of these pages will agree that that they are *packed* with notations. With impressively small yet intricate handwriting, Luther usually filled all available space between the lines and in all four of the margins—right, left, top, and bottom. Next, Luther prepared his overall commentary. This commentary, called *scholia*, was written on blank sheets of paper. Over the course of three semesters, Luther wrote out his *scholia*—general commentary—in neat, straight lines, about thirty to thirty-four lines per page. The end result: 123 pages of densely-packed handwriting representing the professor's essential findings during his eighteen-month-long study of Romans.

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What was it like to experience Luther's Romans lectures as a student? There is a long scene in the 2000 film *Luther* that portrays Luther regaling his classroom with off-hand jokes and inspiring waves of hearty laughter.¹⁷ If what's depicted in that scene ever happened, there's no record of it. Instead, as was common practice in the late medieval classroom, Luther mainly stuck to his script. He slowly and carefully dictated his *glossae* and *scholia* to his students, who were expected to make verbatim copies in their own notebooks.¹⁸ That Luther delivered his Romans lectures in keeping with the pedagogy of the time is borne out by the fact that

¹⁶ Four photographic images of sample pages from Luther's original lecture notes are included as appendices in WA 56. The dimensions of the pages were reduced when they were placed in their present binding. In addition, an online image search for "luther roemerbrief" will yield several additional examples. Finally, for a fine online exhibit that includes images of Luther's Romans notes, see Irene Dingel and Henning P. Jürgens, "Key Documents of the Early Activity of Martin Luther," trans. Robert Kolb (2017), at <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/3wlyuklRxxPJJQ>.

¹⁷ Eric Till, *Luther* (2003; Los Angeles: MGM Home Entertainment, 2004) DVD. The scene in question begins near the 0:22:00 mark.

¹⁸ The student, Oldekop, wrote, "I applied my diligence and industriousness and gladly heard Martin lecture" and "also went to all of his sermons and became closely acquainted with him—he was my confessor" (Oldekop, *Chronik des Johan Oldecop* 45; my translation). The implication is that the classroom offered little opportunity for personal interaction between professor and student.

extant student notebooks echo in large part the material that appears in Luther's original notes.

Thanks (again) to Johannes Ficker and his critical edition of these surviving student notebooks, we know a great deal about whether and how students received what Luther had prepared in his original notes.¹⁹ For instance, based on these student notebooks, it is possible to see where, during lecture, Luther repeated certain words for emphasis or clarity. In addition, by comparing Luther's original notes with the students' notebooks, it is known that while Luther dictated most of his interlinear and marginal notes, Luther's students never heard large portions of his prepared commentary.²⁰ According to one twentieth-century scholar, Luther did *not* dictate to his students "most of those sections which, from our modern point of view, are the most interesting and important ones, namely, those where he sharply criticizes the church . . . and especially those where he struggles for the understanding of the gospel and for the clarity of his own thought about it."²¹ This comes as a surprise, perhaps, because four centuries later, scholars would point to Luther's Romans lectures as a key "moment" in Luther's theological development—an important advancement in his "breakthrough" process.

LEGACY

In his preface for a 1545 collection of his own writings, Luther recalled the moment that a new insight concerning God's righteousness finally dawned upon him. Referring to Rom 1:17, Luther explained:

At last, by the mercy of God . . . I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.²²

The passage is well-known among Luther scholars because Luther's recollection appears to contradict what can be ascertained from his lectures, sermons, and

¹⁹ See WA 56 and WA 57.

²⁰ The difference between what Luther prepared and what students recorded during class can roughly be determined by comparing WA 56:1–528 and WA 57:5–232. For instance, students recorded about half of the material that Luther had prepared for Romans 5:1–2. (Compare WA 56:297–300 to WA 57:167–68.)

²¹ Wilhelm Pauck in his "General Introduction" to Luther, *Romans*, xviii. Why such a significant difference between what Luther prepared and what students received? One simple explanation: transmitting the *glossae* took most of the hour, leaving little time for the *scholia*. Another reason, Luther at the time was not ready to share his most controversial findings with students. Yet another reason: Luther "overprepared" because he intended to publish the lectures one day.

²² LW 34:337.

correspondence between 1513–1518. In the 1545 reminiscence, Luther portrays his “breakthrough”—his “tower experience”—as a single, sudden flash of insight. In addition, he appears to set the moment in the spring of 1518, after he had “begun to interpret the psalter anew”—in other words, well after he had completed his lectures on Romans in the summer of 1516.²³

But did Luther really experience the core insight of his theology as a Rom 1:17–based “aha” moment in 1518? Or did he develop his “new” theology over time, at an earlier date, and as the result of pondering a variety of Scripture? One Luther expert tries to have it both ways: “The Reformation breakthrough,” explains Bernhard Lohse, “marks an especially important caesura within a development extending over several years.”²⁴ This approach gives Luther his legendary “Eureka!” in the midst of his theological evolution. Heiko Oberman, on the other hand, describes Luther’s development as “a series of successive waves, one tumbling over the other,” which made it difficult to establish “the point at which we may locate the Reformation breakthrough.”²⁵ In light of these considerations, Bernd Hamm’s view on the subject of Luther’s breakthrough perhaps best represents the current scholarly consensus: Luther’s “Reformation reorientation” developed in stages. These stages were themselves marked by “cognitive and affective discoveries and breakthroughs,” which Luther himself may have later “stylized.” For Hamm, Luther’s “tower experience” is simply “an electrical interpretive discovery” that “rearranged a string of new and important Reformation concepts” that Luther had already developed.²⁶

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So, what does the discussion of Luther’s breakthrough have to do with his Romans commentary and its legacy? Namely this: the relatively recent

²³ Two additional accounts of Luther’s “breakthrough”—one recorded by Luther’s friend in 1532 (*LW* 54:193) and the other by a former student (*LW* 54:308)—represent additional reminiscences that have been questioned by scholars. The discovery of Johannes Bugenhagen’s 1550 recollection of Luther reminiscing about his breakthrough adds another piece to the puzzle. See Martin Lohrmann, “A Newly Discovered Report of Luther’s Breakthrough from Johannes Bugenhagen’s 1550 Jonah Commentary,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (Autumn 2008): 224–330.

²⁴ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 86. Lohse offers an analysis of the questions surrounding the matter of Luther’s theological breakthrough regarding the righteousness of God; see Lohse, 85–95 (Chapter 9: “The Reformation Discovery”). See also Carter Lindberg, “Luther’s Breakthrough,” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 470–73.

²⁵ Heiko Oberman, “Headwaters of the Reformation: Initia Lutheri—Initia Reformationis,” in *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era: Papers for the Fourth International Congress for Luther Research*, ed. Heiko Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 40.

²⁶ Bernd Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin Lohrmann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 28–29.

discovery and translation of Luther's Romans lectures gives interested parties access to eighteen-months' worth of Luther's developmental stages, discoveries, and breakthroughs. As Hamm observes, prior to the Romans lectures, "Luther's view remained focused on the God who judges" whereas "the manuscripts of Luther's [Romans] lectures show how he was released from the negative obsession with the self and the judging God, opening up a new insight about God's generosity."²⁷

In fact, early on in Luther's dealings with the Romans letter, a key Reformation discovery can be clearly discerned—the very discovery that Luther later "stylized" for his Latin preface (mentioned above). In his *scholia* for Rom 1:17 ("the righteousness of God is revealed"), written in midspring 1515, Luther proclaims: "For the righteousness of God is the cause of salvation. And here again, by the righteousness of God we must not understand the righteousness by which He is righteous in Himself but the righteousness by which we are made righteous by God. This happens through faith in the Gospel."²⁸

In fact, readers of Luther's Romans commentary will discern many familiar Lutheran themes. For instance, in his *scholia* on Rom 2:15, written in May or June 1515, Luther observes, "To be sure, from our conscience we get only thoughts of accusation, because our works are nothing in the presence of God." In response to such self-accusation, Luther writes that only Christ can "defend us" for "He has made His righteousness my righteousness, and my sin His sin. If He has made my sin to be His sin, then I do not have it, and I am free. If He has made His righteousness my righteousness, then I am righteous now with the same righteousness as He."²⁹ Here, the astute reader will note that Luther, as he encounters Paul, is already discerning the accusing function (or use) of the law as well as the joyful exchange.

Similarly, in a drawn-out meditation on Rom 4:7, written in midsummer 1515, Luther begins by observing that "the saints are always sinners in their own sight," while to God "they are at the same time both unrighteous and unrighteous."³⁰ Again, the astute reader will recognize that in this early stage of his theological development, Luther was already in the process of discerning what would later become a distinctive Lutheran insight, namely, that in Christ, the believer is *simul iustus et peccator* ("simultaneously righteous and sinner"). Indeed, one of the pleasing aspects of reading through Luther's Romans commentary is the experience of seeing familiar Reformation concepts take shape via Luther's earliest attempt at understanding the apostle Paul. Such a reading may even inspire preachers in their own development, discovery, and breakthrough, as they prepare their own sermons based on passages from Paul's letter to the Romans.

²⁷ Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 160.

²⁸ LW 25:151.

²⁹ LW 25:188. However, the record indicates that Luther's prepared commentary on this passage (WA 56:203–4) did not get dictated to students (WA 57:145–46).

³⁰ LW 25:257–58.

Whatever the personal effect of reading these lecture notes, Luther's Romans commentary—and Professor Ficker's rediscovery of it—has a legacy worthy of broad appreciation.

First, these lectures represent Luther's only "shot" at Romans. Unlike with Psalms and Paul's Letter to the Galatians—to which Luther returned to lecture again—Luther never prepared another course on Romans. Instead, he gave the chore of lecturing on Romans to his associate, Philip Melancthon.³¹ Yet even after Melancthon had taken over the course, Luther maintained that Romans "is really the chief part of the New Testament and is truly the purest gospel." According to Luther, Christians should learn Romans "word for word, by heart" and study it each day "as the daily bread of the soul."³²

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Second, as described in this essay, these lectures fill the one, major lacuna in Luther's vast writings that still existed at the beginning of the previous century. Without access to Luther's original notes, it would have been difficult to determine Luther's theological development in the middle of the 1510s with the precision scholars now enjoy. That is, if these notes had remained hidden and the only versions of Luther's Roman's commentary available were the notebooks of students—notebooks that included only a fraction of the *scholia* prepared by Luther—knowledge about the "early Luther" would not be what it is today.

Third, renewed interest in Luther and the scientific (read: historical-critical) study of his writings—the so-called "Luther Renaissance" initiated more than a century ago—would have transpired differently, if at all, had it not been for the appearance of Luther's Roman's commentary. Karl Holl, the controversial German scholar credited with launching the Luther Renaissance, described the Romans lectures as "an achievement that remains unsurpassed even today."³³ Holl introduced the first volume of his groundbreaking commentary on Luther's writings with a long chapter analyzing Luther's Romans lectures, thereby demonstrating

³¹ See Philip Melancthon, *Lectures on Romans*, 2nd ed., trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 2010). This translation is based on the 1540 edition of Melancthon's Romans commentary. Melancthon first lectured on Romans in 1519. It is worth noting that although Luther never published his Roman's commentary, he did champion the publication of Melancthon's Romans commentary in 1522. Besides demonstrating Luther's regard for Melancthon's ability as a biblical exegete, it is otherwise not known why the Romans course was handed over to Melancthon.

³² LW 35:365.

³³ Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1, *Luther*, 2nd ed. (Tubingen: Mohr, 1923), 550. Quoted and translated by Wilhelm Pauck in Luther, *Romans*, xvii. Holl's World War I-era nationalism is part of what made him (and makes him) controversial.

the import of Ficker's discovery.³⁴ Holl's work framed the scholarly conversation for a new century, launching an academic renaissance that influenced scholars with names like Aulén and Ebeling, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer, Iwand and Wingren.³⁵

The reader of this essay may want to know: is the original copy of the handwritten notes Luther made to prepare his Romans lectures still on display under glass in Berlin? The short answer is no. During World War II, the manuscript went missing. But in yet another seemingly miraculous reappearance, the notes emerged in 1971, this time in the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland. There, it is possible to make an appointment to see Luther's lecture notes with your own eyes—provided you have a proper letter from a sponsoring institution stating your business.³⁶ ⊕

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³⁴ Holl, *Luther*, 111–54. The English translation of the chapter title is “The Doctrine of Justification in Luther's Romans with Special Consideration to the Question of Assurance of Salvation.”

³⁵ For an in-depth study of the Luther Renaissance as it developed in Germany, see James Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Savior: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917–1933* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000). For an in-depth study of the Luther Renaissance in Scandinavia, see Mary Elizabeth Anderson, *Gustav Wingren and the Swedish Luther Renaissance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

³⁶ Cummings, “Luther in the Berlinka.”