



# Faith, Love, and “a Sea of Comfort”: Luther’s Lectures and Sermons on 1 John

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**P**andemic, political chaos, church controversies, and personal afflictions of body and spirit: these were the conditions amid which Martin Luther gave lectures on the First Letter of John to members of the university community who remained in Wittenberg during a 1527 outbreak of the plague. In the following, previously untranslated alternate introduction to the lectures, Luther describes the situation with dramatic clarity:

“We declare to you what was from the beginning” [1 John 1:1]. Satan assails us on all sides and “God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals” [1 Corinthians 4:9]. There the world, Satan, the heart, the flesh, and fanatics assail us, so that we do not have peace or any good thing, through which we see that God wants to test us. God gave the Word so that it can be preached. Now God sets us in this place so that we might experience how powerful God’s holy Word is, greater even than sin and death. “See, I am sending you out like

*In 1527, in the midst of pandemic, sorrow, and controversy, Martin Luther lectured on I John. In such a time of trial Luther found in the words of this epistle a message of consolation and hope meant to encourage. He showed his listeners a Christian path, a “middle way,” to release them from sin and despair and to free them for lives of love of God and neighbor.*

sheep into the midst of wolves” [Matthew 10:16]. While, therefore, we are thus being assailed by death, sin, and heretics, I have decided to lecture on this epistle, so that we might in turn be comforted and pray against the sorrows of the devil, who plagues us in more than one way. And I know that God is with us. “I will never leave you or forsake you” [Hebrews 13:5]. Therefore, I will discuss this epistle with the greatest simplicity so that we might put such a Word to use. In addition, we have the promise that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” [Matthew 18:20]. Therefore, we hope here that when I speak in the name of God and you listen, the Lord may be just as present as the devil. This is an exceptionally beautiful text, in both parts and sum.<sup>1</sup>

Never meant for print (they were first published from a set of notes in 1708),<sup>2</sup> these lectures put us in the room with a small band of beleaguered souls receiving comfort and encouragement through discussion of the “word of life” (1 John 1:1).

Believing that this New Testament letter was written to preserve early Christian teaching and to encourage good works, Luther built his commentary around faith in God and love of neighbors: “In short, in this epistle, the apostle wants to teach faith in opposition to the heretics, and true love in opposition to those who are wicked.”<sup>3</sup> When these lectures are studied in conversation with Luther’s published sermons and postils on 1 John from the 1530s, readers today will see how Luther pursued a “middle way” for Christian life that trusts God for salvation and produces works of love in the world. To borrow from the lectures, Luther experienced the reconciling God proclaimed in 1 John as “a sea of comfort.”<sup>4</sup>

## HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS OF THE 1527 LECTURES ON 1 JOHN

The year 1527 was a difficult one for Martin Luther and the Wittenberg community. In early July, Luther had been so sick with fevers and other pains that his colleagues Justus Jonas and Johannes Bugenhagen recorded events around his illness in case these might be the reformer’s last days.<sup>5</sup> A month later, the plague arrived in Wittenberg, severe enough that the University of Wittenberg was closed and

<sup>1</sup> *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 71 vols. to date (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–). 20:599, 2–15 [Rörer text]. Hereafter, cited as WA. Biblical citations have been extended. The author thanks Cassandra Borges for proofreading the translation.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–), 2:512; 17:325; 30:xi, 31. Hereafter, cited as *LW*.

<sup>3</sup> *LW* 30:219.

<sup>4</sup> *LW* 30:280.

<sup>5</sup> See Martin J. Lohrmann, “Bugenhagen’s Pastoral Care of Martin Luther,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2010), 125.

classes were held elsewhere. Colleagues like Jonas and Philip Melanchthon went to Jena with most of the students.

Luther and Bugenhagen, however, remained in Wittenberg to continue their pastoral roles there and because their wives were pregnant. Bugenhagen's sister Hanna had married another Wittenberg church leader, Georg Rörer. In the autumn of 1527, her pregnancy ended with a stillbirth and then she herself died of the plague.<sup>6</sup> In a letter to Jonas, Luther expressed sorrow and worry about this deep loss: "I am concerned about the delivery of my wife, so greatly has the example of the Deacon's wife [Hanna Rörer] terrified me."<sup>7</sup> That same month, one-year-old Hans Luther did not eat solid foods for twelve days as he fought illness, too.<sup>8</sup> Even after most of his own physical symptoms had gone away, Martin Luther continued to struggle in body and mind, unable to work at his usual pace and suffering extended bouts of melancholy that Pastor Bugenhagen called *tristitia* (sadness).<sup>9</sup>

These were the personal trials that Luther, his family, and his colleagues faced in the later part of 1527. Strikingly, Georg Rörer's notes are the primary source of these lectures. Based on Rörer's own dating of the lectures, it seems as if Luther was teaching his way through 1 John 5 in the days surrounding the deaths of Hanna and her child.<sup>10</sup> As words of edification and encouragement shared among a grieving community, passages like 1 John 5:9–12 (the first verses covered in the days after Hanna's death) must have been experienced poignantly: "And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (5:11).

While the specific timing of such an evangelical passage was certainly not planned, the practice of addressing life's hardship by dwelling in Scripture had long been an intentional part of Luther's theological and hermeneutical method. Amid the struggles of the Peasants War, for instance, Luther turned his attention to the Minor Prophets.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, one of the first insights to be gained from a study of these lectures on 1 John is their methodological foundation: our living and dying happens within the horizon of God's Word. As Luther had stated in his introduction to the epistle, God's Word "is the Word of life. But we are in death every day. And because we are never without sins and the danger of death, we should never cease to ruminate on the Word."<sup>12</sup> Luther's theological method was to begin in Scripture and let it speak to the challenges of life in this world as we experience them.

The broader social, political, and theological contexts surrounding these lectures were just as uncertain and perilous as the situation in Wittenberg. An outbreak of the plague in the city of Breslau in August had inspired a minister

<sup>6</sup> Robert Kolb, *Luther's Wittenberg World: The Reformer's Family, Friends, Followers, and Foes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 77–78.

<sup>7</sup> LW 49:173.

<sup>8</sup> LW 49:173–74.

<sup>9</sup> Lohrmann, "Bugenhagen's Pastoral Care of Martin Luther," 132.

<sup>10</sup> LW 30:x–xi.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, LW 19:35, Luther's preface to the 1526 German publication of his Jonah lectures.

<sup>12</sup> LW 30:219.

there to write to Luther asking whether pastors should leave the city. Luther wrote his reply—*Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*—that autumn, noting that his own poor health had delayed his response.<sup>13</sup> A likely synergy between the lectures in Wittenberg and the pastoral letter to Breslau is evident as Luther cited words of encouragement from 1 John 3:15–17 for those providing ministry in plague settings.<sup>14</sup>

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Politically, the temporary suspension of the Edict of Worms had led to the first of the Saxon church visitations, but these were interrupted by the arrival of the plague.<sup>15</sup> Luther's occasional references to Thomas Münzer in the 1 John lectures are a reminder that the troubles of the Peasants War were still very fresh and that other radical preachers like Melchior Hoffman remained on the scene. Even with his strong view that 1 John includes good works as an integral part of Christian life, Luther ended his lectures by saying that Christians should still expect sorrow for all their efforts. "Therefore a Christian should trust no one. . . . For what do they pay for our troubles? Nothing else than their desire that we be thrust into hell and be afflicted with evils of every kind. For the greatest deeds of kindness they return the greatest deeds of wickedness. Accordingly, this passage [1 John 5:19] pertains to patience."<sup>16</sup> Although a passage like this might promote a cynical removal from worldly service, Luther meant even more to strengthen believers' commitment to neighborly service in the face of significant and potentially disheartening opposition from all corners of society.

On the theological front, the year 1527 also saw an escalation of the Sacramentarian Controversy about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, with Ulrich Zwingli and Johannes Oecolampadius having recently published works against Luther on that topic.<sup>17</sup> This debate directly entered the 1 John lectures when Luther discussed the divinity of Christ who "abides in you" in chapter 2 of the epistle.<sup>18</sup> The topic of the real presence also appeared in the reformer's commentary on the lines "Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in

<sup>13</sup> LW 43:119.

<sup>14</sup> LW 43:126–27.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, trans. by James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 264.

<sup>16</sup> LW 30:326–27.

<sup>17</sup> LW 49:172.

<sup>18</sup> LW 30:258, 262.



the flesh is of God" (1 John 4:2).<sup>19</sup> Late in the lectures, Luther made further statements against theologians like Zwingli and Oecolampadius in his interpretation of 1 John 5:1, as he connected their claims of spiritual interpretation through new revelations of Holy Spirit with the Montanist heresy of the early church. "Our Sacramentarians are people of that kind. They teach that the bread is bread, and it is evident that they consider this a wiser statement than what the anointing [of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost] taught the apostles, namely, that the body is under the bread and that the blood of Christ is under the wine."<sup>20</sup>

If "under the bread and wine" sounds familiar to Lutheran audiences today, it is likely because this is how Luther described Christ's presence in the Eucharist in the *Small Catechism*, which was published a short time later.<sup>21</sup> An additional context for the 1 John lectures, therefore, is Luther's ongoing development of simple language for teaching the faith. In a passage similar to his introduction to the Lord's Prayer, for instance,<sup>22</sup> Luther followed 1 John 3:1 to describe God's fatherly love: "John calls God 'the Father.' With these words he wants to inflame Christians to know that they have a God who has been reconciled, and that they have Him as their Father."<sup>23</sup> A discussion of sin and lawlessness in 1 John 3:4 led Luther to talk about the negative and positive aspects of honoring the commandments in a way that foreshadowed his approach to the Decalogue in the *Small Catechism*: "It is impossible for them [antinomians] not to offend their neighbors, if not in a positive way, certainly in a negative way, by not giving their neighbor his due. For the other part of Christianity is love."<sup>24</sup> Another sign of budding catechetical language—this time resonating with the explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed—appears at the end of Luther's comments on 1 John 3, in which the reformer attributed all faith in God's Word to the work of the Holy Spirit. "It is not within the power of our perception or judgment to recognize this, much less to confess it; but we have it all from the Spirit whom God has given us."<sup>25</sup> In these examples, we see Luther honing his theological language in ways that would resound in Lutheran communities for centuries to come.

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<sup>19</sup> LW 30:285–86.

<sup>20</sup> LW 30:306.

<sup>21</sup> BC 362.1–2.

<sup>22</sup> BC 356.2.

<sup>23</sup> LW 30:265.

<sup>24</sup> LW 30:269; compare with Luther's approach to the commandments, that they not only involve negative commands but evoke positive actions toward God and neighbors: BC 351.1–354.22.

<sup>25</sup> LW 30:283; compare with BC 355.6: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian Church on earth."

## PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL POINTS OF EMPHASIS IN THE LECTURES

Luther interpreted 1 John as a letter primarily and explicitly commending faith in God and love of neighbor, a biblical pairing that played a greater role in Luther's theology than many have recognized.<sup>26</sup> By *faith*, Luther meant both the formal doctrines of Christianity and the personal trust of God alive in believers. *Love*, for Luther, indicated the good works done freely by those who have been justified by grace through faith. As elsewhere in Luther's works, he taught here that Christian love is an effect of justification, not a cause.

Following the report of the second-century church leader Irenaeus of Lyons, Luther believed that John wrote this epistle against the Gnostic teachings of the Cerinthians, who denied the full divinity of Christ.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, the letter presents apostolic teachings about Christ, the Word of God, fellowship with God in Christ, and the reconciliation of sinners with God. In words reminiscent of *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther comments on 1 John 1:3, "John portrays the Son distinctly, because in the epistle it is written that the Father and the Son have life, truth, and eternal salvation. On our side there are nothing but sins. We share His good things; He shares our wretchedness. I believe in Christ. Therefore my sin is in Christ."<sup>28</sup>

With Christology and justification as focal points of 1 John 1, Luther named two obstacles to reconciliation with God: presumption and despair. He saw presumption as the sinful condition of those who do not see their need for Christ, including both heretics like the Cerinthians and his own contemporaries—both those in the papal church and reformers like Ulrich Zwingli—who elevated good works and human righteousness.<sup>29</sup> The opposite of presumption is a despair that comes from feeling trapped in one's unworthiness. Luther concluded his comments on chapter 1 by summarizing how God's Word strikes down self-righteous presumption and lifts up those in despair through the twofold work of law and gospel.

Christians always cry out: "Forgive us our sins!" They are always at war with those sins. Therefore though sins still cling to them, yet they are not imputed. For blasphemy is a great sin. But those who trust in their own righteousness blaspheme God. Our monks were people of this kind, and, provided that there were no gross sins, they lived in the greatest smugness, namely, by reason of their presumptuousness. Look also at others, who have sinned because of despair. Therefore it is a great

<sup>26</sup> For more on the role of faith and love in Luther's theology, see the forthcoming essay by Martin J. Lohrmann, "Faith and Love in Luther's Small Catechism," in *Preaching and Teaching the Reformation: Essays in Honor of Timothy J. Wengert's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. Luka Ilić and Martin J. Lohrmann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> LW 30:221, and footnote 1.

<sup>28</sup> LW 30:225; see also LW 31:351–52.

<sup>29</sup> LW 30:229.

gift of God to have God's Word, to acknowledge sin on the basis of the Law, and to believe the Gospel.<sup>30</sup>

Typical of the Lutheran "law and gospel" approach to Scripture, Luther interpreted 1 John as both revealing sin through the preaching of law and applying the gospel of Christ's salvation to broken hearts.

As the epistle's original context addressed what it means to know, trust, and experience Jesus Christ as savior, so too Luther followed the apostle by considering the role of love and good works in a life of faith. As he had stated in his foreword to the lectures, John had written first against false teachers and then against "sluggish Christians, who thought that they had heard Christ's Word enough and that it was not necessary to forsake the world and to do good to their neighbors."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the importance of good works in Christian life is so strong in these lectures that Luther could positively cite the Epistle of James six times in them. Naturally, these references are not to justification by faith alone but to fruits of faith like perseverance, prayer, and acts of love.

Contemporary readers looking for Luther's view that faith in God is expressed through love of neighbors will find an abundance of riches here. This is no surprise, as 1 John is the letter that gives us passages like "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3:18), "God is love" (4:8), and "We love because he first loved us" (4:19). Strong connections between faith and love appear, for instance, in Luther's comments on 1 John 3:11. "These are the two messages of the entire Gospel: the message of faith and the message of love—through faith before God, through love before or toward one's neighbor."<sup>32</sup> It is hard to imagine a stronger commendation and exhortation to good works than what Luther presents a little later in the text: "Love goes to work. . . . Just as love is evident in Christ, so it should also be evident in us. And love for one's neighbor should not be neglected. A true Christian is good at all times and in all places."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> LW 30:234, amended for inclusive language.

<sup>31</sup> LW 30:219.

<sup>32</sup> LW 30:274.

<sup>33</sup> LW 30:277.

prayer in trying times—for instance, Abraham and Sarah’s long wait for a promised child and the people of Israel’s harrowing flight from Egypt: “They have deliverance, but they see neither the manner nor the persons. The sea opens, but this manner could not go into their hearts. . . . The ways of deliverance are not known to us, yet meanwhile we should be sure that we shall be heard, yes, that we have been heard.”<sup>34</sup> Considering the challenging context in which Luther gave these lectures, such words of encouragement were not mere platitudes, but served as passionate and pastoral calls to turn to God for life, hope, and all good things.

### LUTHER’S POSTILS ON 1 JOHN

The lectionary of Luther’s time included readings from 1 John,<sup>35</sup> which means that Luther included appointed passages from this epistle in his *Summer Postil*, a collection of sermons or sermon notes published as an aid for gospel preaching. Stemming from the 1530s, these sources match and reinforce the themes of the 1527 lectures on 1 John.

In the postil for the second Sunday of Easter on 1 John 5:4–12, for instance, Luther described being “born of God” as trusting in God through faith and lovingly observing the commandments. “The new birth will teach me that I should not so shamefully throw away and voluntarily lose the treasure I have through Christ, nor push away from me the Holy Spirit who dwells in me. Faith, if it is and remains in me, will not permit me to do what is against my conscience and God’s Word and will.”<sup>36</sup> This agrees entirely with the positive pairing of faith and good works taught throughout the 1527 lectures.

Luther also gave the same interpretation of 1 John 5:6—“This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood”—that he had presented in his lectures. Granting that some might interpret “the water and the blood” as referring to baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Luther nevertheless found it preferable to interpret both water and blood as marks of baptism. This connection appeared to him in how baptism simultaneously washes away sin and covers believers in the blood of the Crucified One. “Thus the blood of Christ is powerfully mixed into the water of Baptism, so that we should not look at it or regard it as being plain water, but rather as already dyed and reddened with the precious, rose-colored blood of the dear Savior, Christ.”<sup>37</sup> As in his lectures, Luther’s postils strongly urged Christians to know themselves as having

<sup>34</sup> LW 30:323.

<sup>35</sup> The one-year lectionary of the Middle Ages had been in use for several centuries by Luther’s time and was kept with little change by Lutheran churches. The ecumenical three-year cycle of readings developed in the twentieth century retained and expanded upon the patterns of that earlier lectionary. For Luther’s brief discussion of the customary readings for Sunday in the 1523 *Formula Missae* and the 1526 *Deutsche Messe*, see LW 53:23–24, 68, and 78.

<sup>36</sup> LW 77:118. Explicit connection to the commandments comes in the lines immediately preceding this citation.

<sup>37</sup> LW 77:121.



life through the saving action of Christ's cross and resurrection, given in body and spirit through baptism.

The pericope for the second Sunday after Holy Trinity, 1 John 3:13–18, follows a reference in the epistle to Cain and Abel. Luther, therefore, lets this passage speak powerfully to loving neighbors, even when they do not show love or kindness in return. Once again, he explicitly roots this love of neighbor in the liberation that comes from faith. "So they [Christians] are always to remain in love, both toward God, from whom they have received and experienced grace and love, and toward their neighbors, even their enemies."<sup>38</sup> Whether in the time of the apostle John, the conflicts of the Reformation era, or the challenges of the early twenty-first century, God's Word provides encouragement and strength to be people of faith and love at all times. This conviction continues to the final paragraph of the postil, as Luther preaches, "The world and false Christians pretend with words to have great love, but in deeds and when it should be demonstrated, then there is nothing. . . . Therefore, whoever wants to act correctly and be found to be Christian must intend to show it with deeds and works, so that people can perceive that they are not a liar and a murderer like the others who imitate their father, the devil, but that they truthfully with all their heart cling to God's Word and have come out of death into life."<sup>39</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: A CHRISTIAN "MIDDLE WAY" IN LUTHER'S SERMONS ON LOVE AND 1 JOHN

The same Johannine themes that appeared in Luther's lectures and postils—abiding in faith, persevering in good works, and participating in the life of a God who is pure love—also mark Luther's five-part published sermons on 1 John 4:16–21. While much more could be said about the details of Luther's theology expressed in each of those sources, this article will conclude with some of Luther's observations about what these features of Christianity look like in daily practice.

For one thing, Luther recommends that Christians see themselves not as experts but as lifelong learners of what it means to follow Christ. "This is how to speak about it: not to make much blustering and bragging about their great skill and high spirit, but rather to regard themselves as students who have barely begun and have much to learn each day."<sup>40</sup> He follows this advice with words from Philippians 3 and Romans 7 about Paul's own continual—and frequently humbling—journey of faith.

Next, from the apostle's words "God is love," Christians can know that God dwells in believers through faith, a holy love that gives itself freely to others. In a first-person paraphrase of the apostle (a form of biblical commentary that Luther often used), the reformer says,

<sup>38</sup> LW 78:75.

<sup>39</sup> LW 78:80, amended for inclusive language.

<sup>40</sup> LW 78:368.

“Now,” St. John means to say, “because you, who want to be Christians and know God, see and know that God is nothing other than pure love poured out on us most richly, take this to heart and do the same to your neighbor. The only possibility is that whoever feels the fire of God’s love will also be warmed and kindled a little by it. When you do that,” he says, “then you have from it the benefit and comfort that you remain in God, and God remains in you.” It is an exceedingly excellent treasure and glorious honor to be certain that God is in us and dwells with us—yes, that we are in the Lord and are one cake with God.<sup>41</sup>

This indwelling of God through faith matches many other statements throughout Luther’s career about how Christ is truly present and active in believers, a view that resonates with many people’s interests in spirituality today and that scholars are continuing to explore in Luther’s works.<sup>42</sup>

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Finally, throughout the second half of this sermon series, Luther discusses a “middle way” for Christian life in which faith and love are like the two sides of a single road. He contrasted this balanced path with worldly, ungodly ways that care nothing either for faith or for works of love. The world “always goes aside, abandoning either faith or love; it wants to blame the middle way and cannot grasp that it must with an upright heart, pure and intact, use both faith toward God and love toward the neighbor. St. John requires and emphasizes both, though in this Epistle reading he has resolved chiefly to admonish to love; yet he does not forget about faith but is always drawn to it.”<sup>43</sup>

Whether in lectures delivered amid the challenges of 1527 or sermons and postils composed in the 1530s when the Reformers were working to build stable institutions, the message of 1 John provided a strong foundation for Luther and those around him. Here he met a rich resource for teaching Christianity in the classroom, preaching Christ in the pulpit, and living out faith in daily life. First John presented him with a “middle way” that releases Christians from sins of

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<sup>41</sup> LW 78:374–375, amended for inclusive language. In several places, Luther used the image of ingredients being mixed together in a cake to describe the communication of attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*); see, for instance, LW 23:148–149 and 30:67.

<sup>42</sup> For more on this subject, see, among others, Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), chapter 5; and Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), chapter 8.

<sup>43</sup> LW 78:386. Other mentions of a “middle way” or “middle course” appear in LW 78:390 and 399.

presumption and despair and sends them into a life that trusts God above all else, and unconditionally and courageously loves the neighbor. ⊕

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