



Reading 1 John with Martin Luther

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On August 2, 1527, the Black Death struck Wittenberg. Until that point Luther had been lecturing on Isaiah, but his lectures were put on hold due to the plague. Many of his students and fellow faculty members fled Wittenberg.¹ To those who remained, Luther gave a series of lectures on 1 John from August 19 to November 7, 1527.

Without knowing this information, it would be difficult to argue that the plague had any material effect on Luther's interpretation of 1 John. Only in the commentary on 1 John 3:16 is the plague explicitly mentioned.² Yet while the "pestilence" did not shape Luther's approach to 1 John, the background to Luther's lectures provides a convenient excuse to examine the lectures now and to ask, How does 1 John, and so also these lectures, give comfort in the midst of pain, sadness, fear, and death—then and now?

¹ We have details about Luther's lectures from George Röer, who also stayed to minister to those suffering from the plague. See the introduction to the 1 John lectures: *Luther's Works*, vol. 30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1967), x–xi. Hereafter, cited as *LW*. Röer himself endured unimaginable hardship during this time: his pregnant wife died from the plague.

² See *LW* 30:277–78. 1 John also appears in his 1527 pamphlet "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague."

Luther sees that the author of 1 John is dealing with both a lack of true faith and a lack of true love in his community. Both are a result of sinful human nature that is a part of every person: Luther's simul iustus et peccator. But though humans sin, they can, with God's help, fight against that sin and cling to the Rock that cannot be snatched away.

For Luther, John's purpose in writing 1 John was simple. John was dealing with two errors: a lack of true faith and a lack of true love.³

With regard to faith, John's main target was the christological heresy of Cerinthus.⁴ When John asks, "Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?" (1 John 2:22), Luther answers: "This is a reference to Cerinthus." The problem with Cerinthus's error, of course, is that "he who denies Christ in one point necessarily denies Him everywhere."⁵ With regard to love, John wrote against lazy Christians. Thus, John declares: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). On the basis of texts like these, Luther states: "Do not declare that anyone is a Christian unless you see that his works declare that he is such a person."⁶

This emphasis on the necessity of love leads to the real theme of this essay. Anyone who reads 1 John can feel that it seems to give comfort with one hand only to take it away with the other.⁷ First John powerfully proclaims that our forgiveness and hope fully depend on Jesus Christ. Yet there is such a strong emphasis on sinlessness and the necessity of works that one may not know how to hold onto the comfort of the gospel. John can declare both that "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1:8), and yet also that "no one who abides in him sins" (3:6).⁸ How does Luther relate the former to the latter in such a way that the letter is seen to "buoy up afflicted hearts"?⁹

LUTHER'S INTERPRETATION OF SELECT PASSAGES FROM 1 JOHN

Three themes help Luther hold together the letter's seemingly contradictory emphases: first, the starting point for Johannine anthropology is an understanding of the believer as *simul iustus et peccator*;¹⁰ second, the absolution given in Christ has a particular shape or purpose for new life; and third, John's statements about keeping God's commandments are not about the law but the "commandments of the Gospel."

³ LW 30:219. Luther's approach is not dissimilar to modern summaries: e.g., Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 15.

⁴ See LW 30:221, 227, 251–52, 256–58, 284–85, 299, 319. While Cerinthus is connected to John in historical sources (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*), modern scholars are reticent to specify John's opponent(s) in particular.

⁵ LW 30:299. See also LW 30:258.

⁶ LW 30:271.

⁷ John Calvin, "Commentaries on The Catholic Epistles," in *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XXII*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 157: John "everywhere mixes teaching with exhortation."

⁸ Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 500–501: "The most striking stylistic element in 1 John is the apparent self-contradiction regarding the believer and sin that is found throughout the letter: one sentence affirms something that another appears to deny."

⁹ LW 30:219.

¹⁰ Here Luther is followed by many NT scholars. See David DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 460–61.

1 John 1:8–10: “If we say we have no sin . . .”

To interpret this first text, Luther employs the *simul*: “although we have become a new creature, nevertheless the remnants of sin always remain in us.”¹¹ To be a Christian does not mean we are without sin; indeed, the “true knowledge of Christ causes a person to feel that he has sin.”¹² Denial of sin is the opposite of the faith that trusts that Christ’s blood has freed us from sin. There are no internal resources for the Christian by which to be justified; it is a gift of God. This fact alone gives certainty and leads away from despair: to confess is to be free of sin, “as if you had no sin.”¹³ God here promises to forgive sins, and God is faithful to keep his promises.¹⁴

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The presence of sin is a constant in the Christian’s life. But here we begin to see Luther’s understanding of how Christians should relate to sin—or what the effect of absolution is. Luther quotes Augustine on 1 John 1:8: “To have sin is one thing; to sin is something else.”¹⁵ What distinguishes a Christian from an unbeliever is not the absence of sin but that “sin does not rule in him.”¹⁶ All people have sin; but Christians are to resist the sin within that incites us to its fruits.¹⁷ The Christian’s war against sin—a theme developed further in the commentary—is related to the text’s proclamation of divine absolution as the answer to sin: “A Christian always cries out: ‘Forgive us our sins!’” And so, a Christian is “always at war with those sins.”¹⁸ The way to fight against sin is to cry out to God, thus trusting the Gospel promise.

2:1–2: “. . . so that you may not sin . . .”

The transition from the admission of sinfulness in 1 John 1:8–10 to the declaration in 2:1–2 that John’s purpose in writing is “so that you may not sin” raises a

¹¹ LW 30:228, 236.

¹² LW 30:229.

¹³ LW 30:230.

¹⁴ LW 30:231.

¹⁵ LW 30:228.

¹⁶ LW 30:233.

¹⁷ Cf. similarly LW 30:244–245 on 1 John 2:12.

¹⁸ LW 30:234.

question: How can this text follow the previous one? Luther declares: “He who can make this text intelligible to us should be called a theologian.”¹⁹

Without acknowledging it, Luther grasps the sense of the Greek verb, which emphasizes sin as discrete acts.²⁰ Thus, continuing the same theme, the call here is to “wage war against sin,” to take up arms against discrete acts of sin.²¹ Since no one is without sin, John is not urging us to be sinless. He is calling us to “walk carefully,” to be “nourished by the Spirit,” and to be ever in Holy Scripture.²² This, Luther says, is “our armor.”²³ Luther’s paraphrase of the text is instructive: “The desire to sin should not reign in you. No, you should be watchful. But even if you fortify yourself to the utmost, yet sin remains, and you sin from day to day.”²⁴

The fight against sin does not lead to spiritual presumption of victory over sin, but rather to the humility that pleases God. For we should “not despair after sin, but lift [our] eyes on high to where Christ intercedes for us.”²⁵ In the fight against sin, the Christian flees to Christ in the comfort that we know Christ to be our “great High Priest.” Because the *simul* marks the fact and experience of Christians in this world, Luther declares, “this text should be written with golden letters and should be painted in the heart.” Sin distorts our picture of Christ; it “shows Him to us through a colored glass.”²⁶ The work of proclamation is to lift up bleary eyes to the true Christ who shed his blood for us sinners.

2:4–7: “. . . *whoever keeps his word . . .*”

Here the letter transitions from “the chief point of Christianity”—knowledge of God and of Christ—to admonition.²⁷ The movement is natural: “True knowledge does not consist in speculation but moves forward to performance.” Christian knowledge contains an intrinsic energy that will not lie inert. In this exposition Luther states some matters in ways that readers may find unexpected.

For example, Luther explains that “the first part of Christianity is the Law,” which prompts the reader to expect the second part to be the Gospel.²⁸ However, because of the inextricable nature of knowledge and performance, the second part is “love for one’s brother.” To know God is to keep his commandments; so, to be freed from sin is to serve one’s neighbor. Those who do not keep God’s

¹⁹ LW 30:235.

²⁰ Martin Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 21.

²¹ Cf. similarly Calvin, “Commentaries,” 169–170; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 22.

²² Cf. Judith Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary*, New Testament Library, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 61: “The purpose of God’s forgiveness is to prompt those who experience it not to repeat the wrongs of the past.”

²³ LW 30:235.

²⁴ LW 30:235.

²⁵ LW 30:236.

²⁶ LW 30:237.

²⁷ LW 30:238. Cf. LW 30:252: “The chief article of the Christian doctrine is this, that Christ is our Righteousness.”

²⁸ LW 30:238.

commandments are “false and negligent Christians” who need to be admonished about how to do battle against sin.²⁹ Is the whole Christian life thus directed back to the Law?

Here Luther makes another key interpretive move. When he reads John speaking about those who keep God’s word in 1 John 2:5, he states: “It is my understanding that John is not speaking about the commandments, but that he is speaking about the Word of the Gospel.”³⁰ Thus, John is not writing a “new commandment” but an “old commandment,” which Luther clarifies is “the commandment of the Gospel.”³¹ This idea of the “commandments of the Gospel” will receive further exposition in the commentary on 5:2–4, but already here there is a different logic—a different inner working—to the commandments of the Gospel: “Where Christ dwells through faith, there He makes that person conform to Him.”³²

3:1: *“Behold what manner of love . . .”*

So far, we have seen Luther follow John in insisting on the connection between faith and works. But how can we be assured that we will bear this fruit? Luther explains that we have an unshakable confidence not in our willpower but in Christ: “Here we have that forge and furnace, namely, that Christ loved us in this way and rendered obedience to the Father, who gave us His Son to redeem us through Him. He who keeps this in mind cannot fail to bear fruit.”³³ “Behold what love the Father has given us,” John declares, and for Luther, it is only in knowing the Son in whom that love was poured out that we will have both deliverance from sins and the fruits that follow.³⁴ Following John’s logic, Luther locates both the power and the motivation for good works in the Gospel: the priority and incongruity of grace is the engine of its efficacy. God’s love for the unworthy is what unlocks us from the prison of self-love and frees us for that freedom whose form is love of others.

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²⁹ Cf. the similar logic to his interpretation of 1 John 2:29 at LW 30:264.

³⁰ LW 30:239.

³¹ LW 30:241.

³² LW 30:240.

³³ LW 30:265.

³⁴ Cf. LW 30:265–67.

3:2–10: “. . . everyone who has this hope in him will purify himself . . .”

John states that “we are God’s children now.” As such, we are called to purify ourselves as Christ “is pure.” Luther notes: “John does not resort to flattery. No, he immediately urges me to bear fruit either through love—for we should love the brethren because the Father loves us—or through hope, because I hope to see God.”³⁵ Indeed, God does not “tolerate the hypocritical Christians who consider it sufficient for them to believe that they are Christians, remain in sins and filth, and are not changed.” Rather, to believe that one is God’s child is sufficient motivation to purify one’s self.³⁶

Here again we must consider why Christ came: “He appeared to take away our sins,”³⁷ not to leave us in them nor to give us license to sin.³⁸ Jesus took away our sins “to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). Luther says that this is enough reason to exhort Christians to good works. Luther thus returns to his theme of fighting against sin to explain the relationship of Christians to sin: it is not that Christians do not sin, but that they do not permit sin to reign over them. Christians can and will fall, for nothing “is easier than sinning.”³⁹ But what distinguishes Christians from those “of the devil” (1 John 3:8) is that Christians feel the “poison” of sin, they are penitent, and God raises them up. For “to be born of God and to sin are incompatible,” where “sin” means “the sin one strives to commit.”⁴⁰ Though we have many sins before God, all sins . . . are swallowed up by faith” and “love checks manifest sins.”⁴¹ John is warning against willful sinning. On this basis, Luther states without qualification that no one should declare a person to be “a Christian unless you see that his works declare that he is such a person.”⁴²

3:19–20: “God is greater than our hearts”

After reading another text where John stresses the necessity of works, Luther comments: “Faith is established by its practice, its use, and its fruit.”⁴³ Yet Luther does not throw out the Christian who lacks—or feels as if they lack—these works. Instead, he points to the comfort that God is greater than our heart. “If you lack works,” Luther reassures, “yet you should not lack faith.”⁴⁴ For our conscience “is

³⁵ LW 30:268.

³⁶ LW 30:268. See also LW 30:269.

³⁷ Cf. LW 30:270 on 1 John 4:2, where Luther states that the baseline teaching against which everything must be compared is that “Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

³⁸ LW 30:270.

³⁹ LW 30:273.

⁴⁰ LW 30:274. Cf. Article IV of the Apology: “faith . . . does not coexist with mortal sin,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 131.

⁴¹ LW 30:274.

⁴² LW 30:271.

⁴³ LW 30:279.

⁴⁴ LW 30:280.

one drop; the reconciled God is a sea of comfort.” Luther points to the example of David, whose sense of his own sinfulness overwhelmed him; yet in “opposition to this darkness of heart it is said: ‘God knows everything.’” Our conscience can be fearful at any turn, “but God is deeper and higher than your heart and examines it more intimately.” Our conscience closes us in darkness; but God “gives us a light, so that we see that our iniquity has been taken away from us.”⁴⁵

4:8–10: “. . . *not that we loved God but that he loved us . . .*”

That God loved us first both comforts and compels the Christian. With regard to the former: “Every word condemns our efforts.”⁴⁶ There is no room for our works to come first in any form, nothing to which God responds. As Luther declares on 1 John 4:9, “Our text has emphasis and forcefulness.”⁴⁷ It draws strong lines: the initiative and the work in salvation are due to the love of God given in Christ for sinners. “We are sin and death. But through Him, the Son, we live and are righteous. If all things are through Him, it follows that they are not through us.” Christ alone is the expiation for our sins; when we feel temptation from Satan to attribute any work in salvation to ourselves, “we must fall down before Christ . . . by confessing that we are truly sinners and by hoping for a blessing from God.” The Christian wages war against sin by staying in Scripture, which reveals our reliance on the God who will pull us even through failure and sin.⁴⁸

5:2–4: “. . . *this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments . . .*”

Luther makes a distinction: heretics do not love God because they do not keep his commandments, but Christians do keep the commandments. But to “keep God’s commandments,” Luther clarifies, “is to believe.”⁴⁹ When John speaks about “commandments,” then, he is speaking about the “commandments of the Gospel.”⁵⁰

What distinguishes the “commandments of the Gospel” from the Law?⁵¹ John states in 5:3 that God’s “commandments are not burdensome.” In his interpretation, Luther steps into a debate about who gave the most burdensome Law: Moses or Christ? To quote Luther:

⁴⁵ LW 30:280.

⁴⁶ LW 30:295.

⁴⁷ LW 30:293.

⁴⁸ LW 30:296.

⁴⁹ LW 30:308. Luther is standing on Johannine ground here: cf. John 6:28–29.

⁵⁰ Contrast Calvin, “Commentaries,” 252–253, for whom John is speaking about the Law. For Calvin it is “through the power of the Spirit” that “it is not grievous nor wearisome to us to obey God.”

⁵¹ See Herbert Rix, *Martin Luther: The Man and the Image* (New York: Irvington, 1983), 202. Luther’s phrase “the commandments of the Gospel” is a departure from his distinction between Law and Gospel. Rix argues: “In his present low state Luther can sacrifice a cherished position to achieve an accommodation with Scripture.” Rix’s reading, however, depends on faulty understanding of Luther’s Law-Gospel distinction, a general (and assumed) incongruence between Luther’s scriptural interpretation and the actual texts, and a pessimistic psychological reading of Luther.

Moses gave the Law; but Christ explained it, vindicated it, and fulfilled it by His obedience. The severity of the Law was so great that it drove Christ to the cross. Here, however, John is speaking about the New Testament and is referring to the commandments of the Gospel, which are not burdensome. For this reason Christ says in Matt. 11:28, 30: “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. . . . For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” Why light? Because you receive Christ, that is, the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), in faith. To have Christ is to have the Lamb who takes away our sins and pours out the Holy Spirit in order that He may give us rest and console us. Therefore let us look to Christ; let us believe in Him. Everything is contained in this word ‘believe.’ To believe is to cling to Christ with all one’s heart.⁵²

But in the midst of trial and weakness, faith is reliance solely on Christ. The motivation for good works, in 1 John, is God’s love that spills out into our own lives in faith.

While the language of the “commandments of the Gospel” may surprise, Luther’s explication of the idea is not surprising: There are “two messages of the Gospel,” Luther says, “the message of faith and the message of love.”⁵³ The faith that takes hold of Christ moves one toward the love given in Christ.⁵⁴ Faith in Christ, in John’s language, is “the victory that has overcome the world” (1 John 5:4). This phrasing brings Luther back to his warfare metaphor: “He who believes in Christ is now a warrior. ‘He overcomes,’ says John, not ‘he has overcome.’ For we are still engaged in the battle itself and are about to be victorious. Therefore we are also admonished by Christ every day. ‘Be strong in the Lord,’ He says, ‘and do battle with the old serpent.’” God has equipped us for this battle: “As weapons He has given us His Word and Spirit, and He tells us to do battle and to conduct ourselves as bold warriors under Him Himself as our Prince while He Himself looks on and is also victorious.”⁵⁵ Faith sets one to love the neighbor; and faith goes to battle against sin. But in the midst of trial and weakness, faith is reliance solely on Christ. The motivation for good works, in 1 John, is God’s love that spills out into our own lives in faith. So, Luther speaks of the “commandments of the Gospel” and the transforming and sin-defeating love of Christ, rather than point believers to the Law.⁵⁶

⁵² LW 30:309.

⁵³ LW 30:274, interpreting 1 John 2:11.

⁵⁴ Cf. LW 30:310.

⁵⁵ LW 30:311. As Paul Hinlicky notes in *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 112, “A second use of the gospel is still the gospel—of the God who gives what He commands, namely the Holy Spirit both to will and to do the will of God.”

⁵⁶ This aspect of Luther’s interpretation of 1 John is resonant with a recurring pattern in Luther’s theology, even as his form of expressing it changes. For example, one might point to the distinction between active and passive righteousness in the Galatians commentary, to the distinction between Christ as gift and example in “A Brief Instruction on What to Look For in the Gospels,” or to the paradoxical formulation of “The Freedom of a Christian” in which one is both free and a servant.

CONCLUSION

One might conclude that Luther does not avoid the tensions of 1 John: he seems to give comfort only to take it away, to make all things depend on Christ and then force necessity on us. But the patient reader of Luther and 1 John is rewarded with a rich harvest of thought.

Luther's understanding of Christian anthropology as *simul iustus et peccator* is employed well in the commentary to make sense of the ostensibly jarring statements that John makes about a Christian's relation to sin. Key to doing justice to 1 John, for Luther, is acknowledging that we do and will sin (1:8–10) but that in faith we are called to fight against sin (2:1–2). Persistent, hardened sin and faith cannot materially coexist. How do we overcome sin? We look to Christ, in whom we are made warriors (5:2–4). Absolution only comes from Christ, and this absolution is the “forge and furnace” for fighting against sin and living a life of love toward our neighbors, which is also a life of love for God. The impetus for fighting against sin is found in faith, in the Gospel itself, for the pattern of love here runs, as with 1 John 4:10–11, from being loved to loving. Sinners loved by God are set free to love. Thus, Luther's notion of the “commandments of the Gospel” has a different character than the Law, but nevertheless provide a particular shape for the Christian life in that they direct our lives toward the purpose of absolution.

By following the text of 1 John, Luther sought to take seriously both the comfort and the challenge of the text. There is indeed both comfort and challenge here, but the challenge is more of a “call to arms” because the active Christian life here flows from the Gospel and is ever dependent on meditating on the Word and holding onto Christ. Luther's interpretation of the commands and imperatives of 1 John, therefore, has a different feel than in other texts where the Law-Gospel distinction is more straightforwardly applied, with challenge belonging to the Law and comfort to the Gospel. In this way, Luther gives us resources that resist moralizing the Gospel and yet also provide concrete form to the freedom for which Christ has set us free. The challenge of 1 John in the “commandments of the Gospel” is the challenge to see new life for what it is: a life founded on Christ, the Rock that will not be snatched away.⁵⁷ ☩

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⁵⁷ LW 30:309.