



What a Friend We Have in Martin: Forgiveness, History, and Our Relationships with the Past

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Imagine we are sitting at a table to enjoy a cup of coffee and catch up with old friends. The conversation drifts to the economy and labor markets, and our friend Martin offers his thoughts. Companies are greedy, he grants, but the real problem is with lazy workers today whining about their rights and higher wages. In a nostalgic crescendo he wistfully describes a better time, when real Christians knew that obedience was their duty and suffering their calling, and when good politicians and business leaders could crack heads to make a point. Whatever our political leanings might be, I suspect that people would slide away from the table, angry and embarrassed. Should somebody respond, calling out Martin's comments and demanding he repent of his errors? Or is it okay to excuse Martin, seeing these words as the ramblings of a man from a different time who is set in his ways?

This dramatic scene is a thinly veiled and grossly simplified reference to Martin Luther. Luther's response to the German Peasants' War (1524–1525) is frequently seen as a blemish on his career, one of several moments when his views are

What to do when you realize that an important person in your life has “feet of clay,” and they disappoint you? Always a difficult thing, made even more difficult when that person is a long-dead historical figure. But the situation is not a zero-sum game where you either completely overlook their faults or avert your eyes. Perhaps there are ways to nuance our relations with those in the past.

considered deeply offensive. Instead of closely analyzing those views, this paper asks what kind of response is called for from people today. By viewing Luther as one who has committed a wrong and stands in need of forgiveness, I believe we gain a better understanding of our moral judgments, the value of historical study, and our relationship with figures from the past. In the first section I examine whether we can even judge Luther, given historical distance and worries about anachronistic standards and unfair comparisons. I then discuss why apologies are important in the work of forgiveness, for us and for Luther, before concluding with what kind of relationship we might seek, should we forgive brother Martin and move forward in friendship.

THE RIGHT TO JUDGE LUTHER

Forgiveness arises only when someone has done something wrong and we hold them blameworthy.¹ We get frustrated at weather events but tend not to blame a snowstorm and demand the heavens repent. Things become more complicated with people; we have lower standards for those whose responsibility seems less than robust, as is the case with young children or those who could not know or do any better than they did. When the people we confront are in the past, separated from us by time and context, the cases become more difficult. We recognize that our concepts and criteria—legal, moral, or otherwise—are embedded in social and historical contexts and that we ought not simply lift them from one context and unceremoniously drop them into another. Robert Westbrook notes that historians are “particularly sensitive to anachronistic moral judgments. One of the most distressing kinds of hectoring moralism is that which evaluates the action of figures from the past by criteria foreign to them and by which they cannot therefore be expected to have abided.”²

Given these sensitivities, we could excuse Luther, dismissing blame and removing the need for forgiveness, seeing him as wrong from our standpoint even if justified from his own. Luther was a product of his time, we might say, and so we should have lower expectations for him without needing to condone or commend his actions. Distinguishing beliefs and entitlements, whether we believe that something is true or someone is justified for believing it, is an important practice we use all the time. Our ancestors were wrong about the cause of illnesses and the relationship of the earth’s orbit and the sun, but we don’t hold them morally responsible for these errors, and we can say they went with the best explanations

¹ I discuss features of forgiveness throughout this essay without offering a complete definition or theory of forgiveness. For useful works, see Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). David Konstan examines forgiveness in ancient Greco-Roman, Hebrew, and Christian texts in *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² Robert B. Westbrook, “History and Moral Inquiry,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 2 (2012): 401.

available, given their evidence and standards.³ This is one way the study of history enhances our descriptions of the past. With sufficient measures of honesty and humility, attending to the concepts and criteria available, we strive for fairness in our descriptions of past figures, explaining their beliefs and actions in ways they could potentially understand and even agree with. We disagree with their conclusions, we believe they are wrong, but we do so without dismissing them as ignorant and believing ourselves far superior in the way we make judgments and behave.

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But we can let people off the hook too quickly. When someone errs from ignorance, or is justified given the reasons they had available, we can still expect some responsibility, guilt, and an apology. If I accidentally step on your foot, it would be odd for me to refuse to apologize because it wasn't intentional and therefore wasn't my fault. Furthermore, we regularly question the reasons professed and justifications available, holding that someone could have or should have known better and acted differently. We can pose these same challenges to Luther.

Luther recognized the injustice inflicted upon the peasants, so he was not ignorant of their plight, but in his rush to denounce armed rebellion he dismissed the peasants' motives as self-serving and greedy.⁴ His praise of Christian suffering, while understandable and perhaps a painfully honest reflection of the limited options and overwhelming realities the peasants faced, also encouraged Luther to avoid imagining and supporting alternative responses to the injustices he himself identified. These criticisms can be cast from our modern perspective and from Luther's context, as other reform-minded leaders of his time denounced armed rebellion while also responding differently to the peasants' pleas.⁵ Even friends

³ Jeffrey Stout provides a helpful discussion of these issues and their value for religious studies. See his "Radical Interpretation and Pragmatism: Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom on Truth," in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Nancy K. Frankenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25–52.

⁴ My comments throughout draw from Luther's well-known 1525 texts: *Admonition to Peace, Against the Murdering, Robbing Hordes of Peasants*, and *An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants*, all in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–) 46. Hereafter *LW*.

⁵ Peter Blickle notes that Urbanus Rhegius shared Luther's views against rebellion while also offering a biblical argument for the abolition of serfdom. Blickle remains critical of Rhegius's position insofar as it fails to offer clear practical options for peasants when rulers fail, while showing nevertheless that Rhegius paid closer attention to the legal and economic realities of peasant life than Luther did. See Blickle, "Serfs 'Are Not Cows and Calves': Urbanus Rhegius's Theological Effort to Legitimate Unfreedom and to Promote Personal Liberty," in *Ideas and Cultural Margins in Early Modern Germany*, ed. Marjorie Plummer and Robin Barnes (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2009), 19–30.

and allies chastised Luther for his words, an effort at fraternal correction that he vigorously resisted.⁶ Additionally, there are genuine tensions in Luther's thought, given that he criticizes domination in ecclesial affairs when papal authority is at issue but accepts these oppressive arrangements in temporal affairs, especially as he felt that the crisis before him justified his fervent endorsement of state violence.

To say we blame Luther, holding him responsible for both the wrongness of his beliefs and his reasons for holding those beliefs, moves us into the realm where forgiveness works. We often respond to wrongs committed against us with feelings of resentment or condemnation, negative attitudes and reactions that protest this misbehavior and our mistreatment.⁷ Sometimes we leave it at this, feeling resentment without expressing this to the wrongdoer or looking for an apology. This is common when the wrong was slight or, conversely, when other stakes are high. There is not much to resent or there is too much to lose through the confrontation, so we patiently endure or forbear. But when a friend believes they have to endure, when they simply can't imagine confronting the other or losing a harmful relationship with some egregious wrongdoer, we rightly worry and protest. Even as we understand their attachments and their limited choices, we find something tragic in this predicament and something wrong in this endurance.⁸

Are these the paths open to us with Luther? Should we patiently endure, or at the other end of the spectrum, do we condemn his behavior and end our relationship? If suggesting that we end our relationship with Luther strikes us as ridiculous and unimaginable, then our imaginations are impoverished and our relationship is dangerous. It is true that people connected to Lutheran churches and communities are bound to Luther in a causal historical sense, such that Luther's impact cannot be denied or erased as if he never existed. But we are under no obligation to continue this relationship, to keep it alive by investing our attention or holding Luther in a positive light. Communities that are unwilling to reexamine their judgments of, and relationships with, their founding figures are more invested in

⁶ In *An Open Letter on a Harsh Book*, Luther dismisses these criticisms. While he claimed he was being maligned and misinterpreted by enemies, complaints arose both inside and outside of Luther's circle of supporters.

⁷ The Anglican bishop Joseph Butler is often credited as one who ties forgiveness and resentment together, although his argument and his place in the history of forgiveness are contested. Pamela Hieronymi discusses resentment as a kind of protest in her "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, no. 3 (2001): 529–55. My views are deeply indebted to Hieronymi's keen insights.

Charles Griswold argues that resenting wrongdoing is also a way of respecting the wrongdoers: "Resentment embodies the demand that the wrong-doer show the proper respect, and be accountable for not having done so. Implicitly, then, it not only expresses the view that the wrong-doer is an accountable being, but even shows a certain respect toward the wrong-doer. Forgiveness does so as well . . . it expresses that respect, and recognition of accountability, by way of a remarkable transformation on the part of the injured and injurer alike." Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 46.

⁸ We can interrogate our friend's reasons and hope to change their views on the value of this endurance, seeing it as more vicious than virtuous, and even intervene when we believe our friend's choices pose a danger to themselves and others. In all of this we can also work to change the material conditions that leave our friend, and too many others, trapped with such tragic options. These different paths are all cut off if we uncritically accept the value of suffering, patience, or endurance.

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Communities that are unwilling to reexamine their judgments of, and relationships with, their founding figures are more invested in hero worship than in issues of truth or goodness. Despite what statues and commemorative plaques suggest, our connections to past figures are not set in stone.

Nevertheless, we might conclude that we cannot ignore Luther's faults, nor do we want to excise him from our world, choosing instead to find a way for the relationship to continue. This is the path I endorse, and walking it takes us toward forgiveness. In what follows I will lay out the shape this forgiveness would take, beginning with the role of apologies and ending with the types of relationships that might be possible should forgiveness be extended.

THE NEED FOR APOLOGY

The connection between apology and forgiveness is debated, with some arguing that making apologies mandatory is unacceptable on philosophical and theological grounds. When apologies are required, the argument is that this turns forgiveness into a mere exchange or transaction.⁹ As we test the value of a currency, we are then encouraged to assess the sincerity of an apology to determine if it is worth enough to purchase forgiveness. In a Christian context, a defense of unconditioned forgiveness maintains the bond between forgiveness and gift, where prerequisites violate the undeserved and unearned nature of gifts.¹⁰ The fear of works righteousness looms large, such that any suggestion that a wrongdoer must do something is therefore rejected on its face. Without exploring all of the important arguments here, I uphold the importance of apologies by exploring the value and role they play, given our expectations about what forgiveness actually accomplishes.

If forgiveness is just a change of heart in someone who has been wronged, then we can say that an apology need not be necessary, and certainly some offer

⁹ For Jacques Derrida, in order to be pure, forgiveness must be detached from any motivation or recognition, which mirrors his claims about "pure gifts," which are given without reasons, expectations, or commensurate obligations. See his "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible," in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 21–51. Cheshire Calhoun distinguishes "minimal forgiveness," in which apologies and repentance are expected, from "aspirational forgiveness," where no such expectations exist. Calhoun's analysis looks to preserve the elective quality of forgiveness, avoiding situations where forgiveness could be demanded or seen as necessary, a respectable goal even though I believe it is achievable to redescribe just desert and obligations. See Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," *Ethics* 103, no. 1 (1992), 76–96.

¹⁰ For example, L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 135–62.

forgiveness without any explicit acknowledgment of wrongdoing by the offender. Joanna North sees things from the victim's perspective, describing forgiveness as "essentially an internal change of heart that is appropriately described in terms such as 're-acceptance,' 're-admittance,' and 'overcoming.'"¹¹ Focusing on the inner life of those who are wronged helps undermine mechanical accounts with rigid and required steps on the road to forgiveness. This focus also seems to undermine the power of the wrongdoer so that the victim is not trapped in resentment or passively waiting for an apology that may never come. Forgiveness, we might say, is a gift you give yourself.

Unfortunately, this one-sided approach overlooks what forgiveness seeks. If overcoming negative feelings were the only goal, then self-help could be had without the other, but putting the wrongdoer back into the picture complicates matters.¹² For starters, someone who thinks they've done nothing wrong does not see forgiveness as a gift. Without some acknowledgment of wrongdoing and appropriate blame, an offer of forgiveness becomes an unwelcomed and false accusation. While the victim does have a change in feelings, as happens when resentment is set aside, this change is a means to and not the goal of forgiveness. Resentment must be overcome because it points to an obstacle, the other's wrongdoing, that blocks the relationship, and it is this relationship that forgiveness seeks. The mere *offer* of forgiveness does not by itself accomplish the *work* of forgiveness. Like unaccepted gifts and unrequited loves, unacknowledged forgiveness hangs in the air like a half-finished project, started yet incomplete. While we might accept that this is all that is possible sometimes, settling for half measures is here settling for a one-sided relationship, which is, of course, no relationship at all.¹³

Apologies acknowledge wrongdoing without evading blame or demanding reconciliation. In apologizing we take responsibility for the past version of ourselves that we have come to regret and hope to leave behind in our commitment to the future. As Macalester Bell puts it,

When an offender sincerely expresses remorse for his past wrongdoing, he stands against it and makes it clear that he no longer harbors the ill will, indifference and lack of respect originally expressed through the offense. What apologies change is the connection between the wrongdoer and the wrong done: once someone sincerely apologizes, we no longer have reason to believe that he currently endorses the messages sent by his past wrongdoing.¹⁴

¹¹ Joanna North, "Wrongdoing and Forgiveness," *Philosophy* 62, no. 242 (1987): 506. Lucy Allais emphasizes affective change as central to forgiveness in "Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2008): 33–68.

¹² Those who describe forgiveness as a letting go of negative emotions tend to cast resentment as corrosive or, in some cases, excessive and unwarranted. This explains the encouragement to forgive, and its genuine therapeutic value, without fully capturing the meaning of forgiveness.

¹³ Or to be more precise, two parties share a broken relationship with competing depictions of one another and conflicting views of their relationship's kind or quality.

¹⁴ Macalester Bell, "Forgiving the Dead," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 36, no. 1 (2019): 36.

If we agree on the value of and need for apologies for forgiveness, then we appear to face a challenge with Luther, whose death almost five hundred years ago makes it impossible for him to offer an apology today. Add to this Luther's agitation at the suggestion that he apologize for his writings against the peasants, and we are left in a situation of trying to forgive a man long dead who saw no need for forgiveness on this issue. In a case like this, we are left with the task of constructing an apology on Luther's behalf, a hypothetical confession that one could hope Luther would embrace given time, a clarity of vision, and a cooler temperament.¹⁵

In a case like this, we are left with the task of constructing an apology on Luther's behalf, a hypothetical confession that one could hope Luther would embrace given time, a clarity of vision, and a cooler temperament.

With Macalester Bell we can say that a constructed apology is important because our identities are bound up with our relationship to past figures like Luther. Unlike our forgiveness of the living, where our reasons for forgiveness are connected to the possibility of a reciprocal relationship, things are different with the dead. "Our reasons for forgiving the dead," writes Bell, "foreground what is distinctively important about these relationships: their power to shape our interpretations of ourselves and others."¹⁶ To the extent that we value a relationship with Luther, that his person and actions shape our identities, we will want to provide a narrative that honestly acknowledges his errors while defending an interpretation of him and ourselves that we can carry forward.

It is not possible in this space to give a fully reconstructed version of what Luther's apology would look like, but engaging Luther's writings and context, the issues he faced, and those we face allows us to pick out four important features that would be important for Luther's apology.

First, it would admit to mistakes in Luther's description of the peasants' experiences and motivations, his ignorance or mischaracterizations of their situation, and his regrettable pattern of assuming that their complaints came from base motivations like pride, greed, and self-interest. Second, it would acknowledge Luther's inability or unwillingness to interrogate the political and economic arrangements that enabled the exploitation of the peasants. While he interrogated and fought to dismantle systemic problems with ecclesial structures of authority, he failed to apply this same pattern to the systems that allowed temporal rulers to abuse their power and their subjects.¹⁷ Third, it would name Luther's tendency to

¹⁵ For this and other reasons, forgiving those who cannot respond is related to, but not identical with, the paradigmatic example of forgiveness between living, responsible parties.

¹⁶ Bell, "Forgiving the Dead," 51.

¹⁷ I explicate some positive features of Luther's approach to negotiation and collective responsibility in my "Reconciling Rapacious Wolves and Misguided Sheep: Law and Responsibility in Martin Luther's Response to the German Peasants' War," *Political Theology* 19, no. 4 (2018): 264–81.

limit the places and ways in which he described God's action. Specifically, Luther grants that God is stirring up the peasants because of princely injustice, but does not give a positive assessment of God working constructively in and through the peasants to initiate worthwhile reforms, nor does he address the role that rulers might have in resisting the injustice legally sanctioned by their princely peers.¹⁸

Finally, this apology would own up to Luther's own mixed motivations in his response to the peasants. While accusing them of having self-serving motives, Luther did not seem to recognize the self-defensiveness in his own efforts. He distanced himself from the peasants' cause and the princes' response, playing down the way his writings inspired both calls for freedom and opportunities for violence.¹⁹ Part of taking responsibility involves claiming the unintended and unanticipated effects of our actions.²⁰ Even granting Luther's right to clarify his meaning and his understandable worries about protecting the burgeoning reform movement, he is not so easily disconnected from the different sides of the conflict.

Through this brief reconstructed apology, we see how forgiveness exposes the descriptive and evaluative work of historical study. This might seem more vulnerable and invested than our expectations for historical study that is neutral and ostensibly objective, but the lines are often less clear and the borders more porous than we imagine. Historical descriptions can be unadorned, plain accountings of figures and events. But even bare information is shaped by our choices of topics, events, and how best to explain actors behind the actions. And our choice for bare evaluations is just that, a choice, which might be mistaken in some situations. Where moral or ethical issues are under discussion, Elizabeth Anderson says it would be "absurd" to try to describe history without thick evaluative

¹⁸ We can imagine a statement as powerful as Luther's *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520) in *LW* 44:115–219) that explicitly addressed systemic political, economic, and legal issues of the day. While Luther's leveling of the divide between laity and clergy in that work can be exaggerated in some interpretations of the "priesthood of all believers," Luther does remove the hierarchical distinction in standing between the spiritual and temporal estates, between clergy and laity. He also appeals to the obligations that come from the roles people occupy, claiming that through their malfeasance the spiritual authorities are no longer due obedience, imploring lay rulers to intervene and correct the system. For more, see James Estes, *Peace, Order, and the Glory of God: Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melancthon, 1518–1559* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

There is an important discussion among legal and political theorists today as to whether the oppressed have a duty to obey legal codes in an unjust system and, conversely, whether the privileged have obligations to resist these laws and systems. An example is the recent work of Ekow Yankah on policing and racism. See his "Whose Burden to Bear? Privilege, Lawbreaking and Race," in *Criminal Law and Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2022): 1–16.

¹⁹ Luther says his instructions were only for "pious lords" and that he bears no responsibility for what tyrants and the bloodthirsty do. While on its face this is a reasonable distinction, it too easily blurs the complexity of the situation by constructing a neat binary that disavows Luther's complicity. One can see a similar dynamic at work in politicians who apologize for being "misunderstood" or for others "taking offense," which takes the fact that misunderstandings do happen and uses this to blame others instead of taking responsibility for one's own words and actions.

²⁰ Elinor Mason defends this approach to "taking responsibility" in *Ways to Be Blameworthy: Rightness, Wrongness, and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

descriptions.²¹ Overly thin descriptions can feign neutrality while obscuring the events and the very evaluations offered by the historical figures themselves. And so the thick evaluative language and the vulnerability that comes from talk of forgiveness have a proper place in our discussions about the past. I will conclude by discussing what this means if we choose to use this approach and talk about life with Luther after forgiveness.

FORGIVING AND BEFRIENDING LUTHER

There is both freedom and obligation in forgiveness. It feels wrong to say that a person “must” forgive, while at the same time those who do forgive often feel as if they could do no other. We should not conflate these subjective emotions and moral requirements, but rightly understood, this feeling of obligation is instructive. As we’ve seen with the examination of blame and apology above, there are reasons for forgiveness. In reacting against wrongdoing, we protest mistreatment and mark our claim that things should have been, and need to be, otherwise. By apologizing, the wrongdoer agrees. Victim and perpetrator come to a shared understanding, and to the shared work of forgiveness in making a better relationship possible. But there are varieties of relationships where forgiveness operates, and which type we use to model our relationship with Luther matters. Should we choose an intimate relationship, like that between romantic partners, or a more distant one, as is the case with fellow members of a political community? I want to suggest that friendship provides a helpful model for considering our relationship and what forgiveness might seek.

Forgiveness does seek reconciliation, but putting it this way risks potential confusion. The language of reconciliation can point backwards, with a sense that we repair some relational damage and return to the way things were. But this is not always true. Sometimes we forgive friends without necessarily sustaining the friendship, and even if we do continue the friendship, its intensity or importance after forgiveness may be completely different. Forgiveness has happened, resentment is set aside, so we don’t wish them ill or reduce the person to their past misdeed. Nevertheless, either the pain inflicted or the character revealed through this experience can lead us to go our separate ways.²² This might mean that we forgive Martin, see him as a flawed but valued old friend, treasuring memories and sustaining our appreciation for past accomplishments, while letting go of the friendship.

²¹ Elizabeth Anderson, “Pragmatism, Science, and Moral Inquiry,” in *In the Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center, 1998), 10–39. Anderson assesses how best to describe the National Socialists in Germany, arguing that thin descriptions (1) are morally monstrous and (2) fail to properly describe and critique the motives and actions that the Nazis themselves held; thus, the attempt at neutrality fails in multiple ways.

²² As also happens in romantic partnerships when wrongdoing has been forgiven and the people involved decide that separation or divorce is the best path forward.

In contrast, we can also decide to sustain a friendship, or even find it strengthened, on the other side of forgiveness. Our reasons here are as complex as our varieties of experiences with friends. Friendships can be valued for instrumental reasons, and we might say that Luther's theological insights and even his instructive missteps remain important for our commitments and ongoing projects together. Perhaps we find friendship with Luther pleasurable, and even with his flaws we still believe that his coarse humor and fiery passion move and attract us, even inspiring us to go and do likewise. Finally, even noting Luther's imperfections, we could still forgive and befriend him because there are virtues in his life and we hold him to be of enduring value to our lives. This would be what Alasdair MacIntyre has called an "enduring friendship," one where the other is a constitutive part of our lives and our own good.²³

Others can always disagree with us when we forgive. They question our reasoning and draw different conclusions, and with Luther, they can question his value as a figure in history and as a potential friend in the present. If they disagree with our forgiveness, they might also question our motives and judgments, perhaps seeing our forgiveness as a wrong that stands in need of apology and forgiveness from *them*. Sticking with Luther could make it hard to stick with others. This is part of the burden we always face in making claims or claiming friends. It would be wrong to expect another to forgive Luther because we have, worse still to demand or coerce them into compliance. The best we can do is offer our reasons, respond to criticisms, and hope that others find them moving. In the meantime, there will be resentment, with the same possibilities of tolerant forbearance or painful separation.

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Studying history requires honesty, and the same is true of describing friends. The idea that studying the past is intrinsically worthwhile is dubious if for no other reason than the fact that we are so often invested in the subjects we study. We do not study history in order to entice others, making our subject matter secondary to our primary goal of popularity. And yet there is a reasonable disappointment when others disagree, when they see the figures and events we treasure as insignificant or wrong. Similarly, we hope others will come to appreciate our friends as we do, without making our case by presenting distorted images that hide their flaws and exaggerate their beauty. Friends who lie by flattering us reveal their tenuous

²³ Alasdair MacIntyre, "What Both the Bad and the Good Bring to Friendships in Their Strange Variety," in *Amor amicitiae: On the Love That Is Friendship*, ed. Thomas A. F. Kelly (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004), 255.

grasp on friendship, as good friends speak honestly because the truth is for our best. Good historians, I would wager, do likewise.

Offering praise and blame, congratulations and critique, to not turn the other into an exemplar of some imagined traits but instead to identify and respond to the particular person as they are—this is difficult to do with ourselves, our friends in the present, and figures in the past. As MacIntyre observes, this work is important, given that “the quality of our friendships and the quality of our moral lives are inseparable.”²⁴ Whether we are doomed to repeat the past, or blessed by this repetition, is an open question, but engaging the past teaches us ways to keep the process of interpretation and meaning alive. If we err in our judgments and in the relationships we keep, in our blaming and forgiving a figure like Luther, we can only hope that those who come after will offer us forgiveness as well. ⊕

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²⁴ MacIntyre, “What Both the Bad and the Good Bring to Friendships,” 255.