

The Concept of Justification

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Abstract

In November of 1983, the Lutheran Council in the USA sponsored "The Martin Luther Jubilee: A Weeklong Study Conference with Commemorative Programs and Events in Celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Birth of Martin Luther," in Washington, DC. Many of the most accomplished Luther scholars of that period spoke at the conference, including Gerhard Forde with this lecture on justification. Lutheran Quarterly thanks Bradley C. Jenson of Duluth, Minnesota, for supplying a transcription of Forde's speech and Gerhard's son, Timothy, for granting us permission to publish it.

People think that I can talk about nothing else but justification. However, I am rarely asked ever to speak on anything else. I can talk about a number of other things, but no one seems to be interested. So, my theme is justification by faith. I would like to say almost that my *song* is justification by faith, since this will be something of an unabashed, perhaps oversimple, and perhaps entirely too *unwissenschaftliche* [unscholarly] attempt to follow or listen for the song that Martin Luther was trying to sing, however imperfectly, 500 years ago. I have thought I might do this because it seems to me that sometimes songs are more appropriate for a birthday celebration than various other kinds of communication. As such, it will be an attempt to look at justification by faith as a proposal for an alternative vision of human life, a new way of looking at things, a new song, a new birth for the world. This will involve going over what is, in many instances, very familiar ground, but looking perhaps for hints, indications, puzzling turns of phrases or entire passages, which might be clues for this new song, this alternative vision. One of the problems we have, I think, with figures as epoch-making as Luther, is that they have been often over-interpreted and under-understood (if such a barbarism is permissible) precisely because habits of reading and research have led us to neglect or overlook matters of prime

importance to the author in question. With that in mind, I would like simply to look at a number of passages and listen for this song.

The first that comes to mind is no doubt the most famous: Luther's account in the preface he wrote for his Latin works in 1545 about what happened when he stumbled on to the idea of justification by faith in Romans 1:16 and 17.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt I was a sinner before God, with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. And secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God and said, as if indeed it is not enough that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity, by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel. And also by the gospel, threatening us with his righteousness and wrath. Thus, I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what Saint Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words. Namely, "in it," in the gospel, "the righteousness of God is revealed as it is written. 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There 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 the 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 through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy as the work of God, that is, what God does in us. The power of God with which he makes us strong. The wisdom of God with which he makes us wise. The strength of God. The salvation of God. The glory of God. And I extolled my sweetest word with the love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word "righteousness of God." Thus, that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.¹

I suppose there is no passage that has been more interpreted in modern Luther research than this one. But it seems possible that in all the fuss and all the argument about what the statement means, the disagreement about whether it had not been said before, and the abortive attempts to determine just when it is supposed to have happened, or even where. The endless mucking about in Luther's

psyche. In all the fuss about the words, that is, we may simply have forgotten the song, not heard the music.

The song is about the gates of paradise. Luther says it finally got through to him, through the connection of the words, somewhat misleadingly translated as “context” in English, through the connection of the words that faith is our righteousness. The only excuse we have to stand before God, our only justification for living, is that such righteousness can only be and is given *gratis* by God. “I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.” It was an alternative vision. A totally other face of the entire scripture showed itself. It was not, on that account, for Luther a matter merely of isolating one image of scripture to the detriment and neglect of others. That’s a charge which is a more or less modern one, which has the effect, I suppose, of putting the song in quarantine so that it won’t do too much harm.

A totally other face of the entire scripture showed itself, Luther claims, and he ran through the scriptures from memory. He found, by analogy, the same thing to be true of all the images. Anything that is of God, like the righteousness of God, has to do with what God gives or does. The work of God is that which God does in us. The power of God, that by which he makes us strong. The wisdom of God, that by which he makes us wise. The strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God—all of it is gift-giving, God’s doing. As Martin Siles put it aptly in a paper for the Luther Congress this summer [1983], God is ultimately sheer “Gebengeschehen (giving event).” So the song about entering paradise is what Luther wanted to sing. Entering paradise through open gates. The question poses itself immediately: I suppose, is such a song possible?

Is there an alternative vision, another face of scripture, or perhaps even another face of the world? There can be little doubt that for Luther, at least, since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ once for all has occurred, justification by faith alone was the only song to sing and that there was nothing left to do now but to sing it. There can be little doubt that for Luther, the song was simply the song of justification by faith alone, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*. One enters these gates only by faith alone. Nothing else counts. Nothing else qualifies. And nothing else survives to pass through. What animated him above all

was the conviction that this justification, salvation, reconciliation with God, whatever one wants to call it, was not simply a repair job, you might say, on an old scheme, new wine in old skins, a new patch on an old garment, but a new thing, a new age, a new world. In one sense, I suppose we might say it has no place here, no leverage in a fallen world where everything is for sale. No direct relevance, perhaps, to what we are about.

We can be justified, therefore, only by faith, only by catching the song, glimpsing the vision, not by works which are always more or less a sellout to this age. One could be justified only by being still and listening to the word and the music. Righteousness is of God. It is that which God gives. It works *sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus*. And it was for him the *sola* that must sound above all. When the question is raised about what is to be done for salvation, the answer is simply nothing. Just stop and listen. Listen to the word of forgiveness given by God for Jesus' sake, I suppose we might say, not even for our sakes, but for Jesus' sake. The creative word, which reduces to nothing at the same time as it creates anew out of nothing, a kind of *creatio ex nihilo*. It is a negation before it is a position. God cannot be for us unless he is first against us. It is important, I think, to see this, since we generally like to assume these days that Luther's discovery of justification is at best limited temporally and religiously applicable perhaps only to those who are despairing and troubled of conscience, perhaps those crushed by the medieval penitential system or the curious few left in the modern world who care and tremble about such things.

But that is not the case. Luther certainly knew well that the gospel of justification *sola fide* was not immediately attractive to this age, nor to the old Adam or the old Eve. It was therefore, in the first instance, the declaration of justification by faith alone itself, which has the effect of reducing everything to nothing. One can recall Luther's words from the Smalcald Articles when he is talking about repentance. "This, then, is the thunderbolt by which God, with one blow, destroys both open sinners and false saints. He allows no one to justify himself. He drives all together into terror and despair. This is the hammer of which Jeremiah speaks. 'Is not my word like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?'"²

Luther knew well, it seems, that justification was not just a cure for those who happened to be of an anxious and introspective conscience, but also a mighty attack on the presumptuous and proud. It was a two-edged sword. It brings down the mighty from their seats and it exalts them of low degree. It would, I think, certainly be no surprise to Luther that the modern world does not find the gospel so relevant for its needs.

Listen to the opening words from his commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians from 1535.

The devil cannot do otherwise than attack this doctrine vehemently with might and with craft. Nor does he rest as long as he sees even a spark of it remaining. For the gospel is a doctrine that teaches something far more sublime than the wisdom, righteousness, and religion [interesting] of the world. It leaves these things at their proper level and commends them as good creatures of God. But the world prefers these creatures to the creator. Ultimately, through them, it wants to abolish sin, to be delivered from death and to merit eternal life. This the gospel condemns. But the world cannot bear the condemnation of that which it regards as best. Therefore, it charges the gospel with being a seditious and erroneous doctrine that subverts commonwealths, principles, principalities, kingdoms, empires, and religions. It accuses the gospel of sinning against God and Caesar, of abrogating the laws, of subverting morality, of granting men the license to do with impunity whatever they please. With righteous zeal, therefore, and with the appearance of high service to God, the world persecutes this doctrine and despises its teachers and followers as the greatest plague there can be on earth. By the proclamation of this doctrine, moreover, the devil is overthrown and his kingdom is thrown down. From his hands are torn the law of sin and death. Through these powerful, invincible tyrants, he has subjugated the whole human race. In short, his prisoners are transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and liberty. Is the devil supposed to stand for this? Is it not to be expected that the father of lies will use all his wiles and power to obscure, corrupt, and eradicate this doctrine of salvation and eternal life?²³

It's interesting to note that it is the gospel in many ways, and not the law, that condemns the attempt on the part of fallen creatures to use the good gifts of creation to guarantee their own ultimate well-being and destiny. And it is ultimately the *sola fide* that carries out the final attack, and is then in turn attacked for being the trouble-maker, the source and cause of all evil, subverting commonwealths,

principalities, kingdoms, empires, religions, abrogating laws, subverting morality. I suppose we have learned in our day to add to the litany: it is the gospel that is responsible for fostering such a low estimate of human selfhood, promoting cheap grace, undermining social ethics, and so on, and so on, and so on. In countless ways it is the gospel that is finally blamed for everything so that we have to take steps to hem it in and hedge it about and qualify it so it won't do too much harm.

So the song about paradise, about new life, is certainly not without opposition. Indeed, we might say that the song arouses its own opposition. For the gate is, in its own way, narrow and the way straight. Not in the usual moralistic fashion, however, but because it is by faith alone. Luther knew that well enough, but he did not believe that the song was on that account to be stifled. It does mean, unfortunately, that it becomes more difficult to hear the song, even in Luther, through the stridency and militancy of the apologetic and the polemical situation. But if we are attentive to the nuances, I think we can hear the interesting and intriguing turns of phrases that signal this song even in the heat of battle. What saddened and angered Luther most, I suppose, was that somehow the church, too, could suddenly be arrayed against the song. That the world should be against it was no wonder. But the church? That was difficult to understand. Nevertheless, in what follows, I will try to listen for the *cantus firmus*, the song we have tended to miss as it echoes and sounds, even out of the agony and turmoil of the battle.

I suppose one of the most persistent objections to the song of justification by faith alone, without the works of the law, is that it seems to imply a kind of semi-Manichean denigration of creation and nature. Does not justification without the works of the law mean that our works are worthless, our nature hopelessly corrupt, and thus to foster, as we are wont to say these days, a depressingly low self-image? So, it might seem, perhaps.

Yet it is interesting and significant, I think, in this regard that Luther is routinely charged with virtually contradictory errors. On the one hand, he is charged with holding too low a view of the human self and on the other, with much too high an estimate, perhaps especially of his own self, vis-a-vis all earthly and ecclesiastical

authorities. On the one hand, a much too radical and pessimistic a view of human bondage and, on the other, a much too optimistic, perhaps even naive, view of the freedom and spontaneity of the Christian.

What is going on? I suppose that to the one who believes that justification is somehow by works, either with or without the help of grace, justification by faith alone will no doubt appear as an attack, a denigration of whatever ability we might claim to do works. Grace alone seems a denigration if not a blasphemy against creation. So, one always fights to preserve a little bit, at least. And anyone who manages somehow to rescue a little bit of human integrity in the face of the *sola gratia* is usually congratulated as a champion of creation or a First Article theologian, as we call them these days. Yet for Luther, it would seem that the matter was just the other way around. If we are saved by faith alone, then that means simply that there is nothing wrong with creation at all, outside of the fact that we have quite simply just lost faith in it and its creator.

It has always been intriguing to me that it is precisely in the acrimonious debate with Erasmus that one can hear the notes of that song if one pays attention. A fundamental charge against humans in the situation of bondage is simply, as Luther put it, that they do not believe in God, nor do they believe that they are God's creatures, nor anything else. They have, in effect, lost faith. And it is because they have lost faith that they have undertaken to prove their worth by means of works and that is just the bondage. Subsequently, they can defend their worth in the face of grace only by insisting on that little bit, some power, at least, to do works. One gets caught in a trap where one can supposedly preserve creation only against grace and faith alone. One ends by setting the First Article against the Second and the Third. But for Luther, that was fundamentally a hopeless situation. It means that one would always be caught in the trap and never set free. God's creation, that is, would not emerge from the darkness of its bondage.

I believe that this is at bottom the reason why Luther was so angered with Erasmus' argument. For Luther, Erasmus was the gloomy skeptic. The supposed humanist was the pessimist. He found Erasmus's words to be Christless and spiritless, chillier than very ice.

Views like those of Erasmus were skeptical because he [Luther] did not think they would let God's creation go free. They put the church in the strange position of having to hold back on its preaching of grace in order, supposedly, to keep people in check. Take the argument about compulsory confession, for instance. Erasmus had argued that even though it was neither biblical nor supportable by the tradition, it should be kept because it helped to keep people moral. Luther was enraged at such a procedure. You call that teaching theology? To hound to death souls that God never bound?

The argument constantly takes interesting and characteristic flip flops in which suddenly it's Luther who argues for human freedom and dignity. And that is quite consistent, I think. Only if one can ever be torn away from the temptation to believe that justification is all wrapped up in one's own accomplishments would creation ever emerge. It is because we have lost faith, and faith alone, that we must be driven to try to improve by our works. In the real sense, it is what we are always trying to add to creation that is the trouble. Therefore, faith alone could restore creation to it, to us. Give it back as a sheer gift. The word of justification by faith alone, for Christ's sake, simply because it cuts away all our additions, puts an end to our temptations, reveals and restores creation to us.

The word of justification is, therefore, the redemption of creation, the cutting away of all metaphysical overgrowth and ecclesiastical undergrowth to allow creation to emerge. The song about the gates of paradise was, therefore, also a song about the morning star of creation itself. To feel the shock of justification by faith alone was to feel the shock of creation, the divine word which calls into being that which is from that which is not, and suddenly, like turning on the current in a circuit that had gone dead.

The song about the morning star of creation is repeated again and again throughout Luther's writings and utterances if one takes care to look for it. In the Table Talk, for instance, he can say:

We are just beginning, just beginning, to recapture the knowledge of the creatures which we lost through Adam's fall. We have a deeper insight into the created world than we had under the papacy. Erasmus doesn't understand how the fruit grows in the womb. He doesn't know about marriage. But by the grace

of God, we are beginning to understand God's great works and his goodness in the study of a single flower.⁴

Even if he had an apocalyptic expectation about the impending end of the world, this did not seem to alter his belief in creation at all, but rather, intensified it. There are well-known stories about what he would do if he knew that the world were going to end, that he would go out into his garden and plant a tree.

And his interesting remarks about his marriage, as well as his understanding of the vocation of the Christian, bear eloquent testimony to that. He got married, he said, because he thought that when the good Lord returned, one should be found doing that for which we are created. Taking care of the garden. Taking care of creation. Not doing works of pious sublimation. He said he thought his marriage, in spite of the uproar it caused in the midst of the reform movement in 1525 when all hell was breaking loose and everybody, including his friends, was shocked that he was going to wreck the cause, he said he thought it would make the angels laugh and the devils weep. The tragedy, I suppose, for Luther, was that the world seemed more inclined to weep with the devils than to laugh with the angels. They couldn't hear the song. They fled from this morning star, he said, yes, this sun, as if their lives depended on it. For they were in the grip of their own carnal ideas and thought it absurd.

Luther, it seems, had the crazy notion that through the word, the song of justification *sola gratia*, human beings could actually be redeemed, that the will, though desperately bound in the grip of its own carnal ideas, could be changed, could be set free and, therefore, could be let go. He believed that we could, using mystical language, be rapt to Christ with the sweetest rapture through the Holy Spirit. And that belief, I suppose, is the source of his so-called naive optimism.

That is the reason, I suppose, for his much-criticized belief in the spontaneity of good works. He was foolish enough to believe that human beings could be set free. And that grasped by the justifying word, they might begin, at least, spontaneously to do what they were created for. Actually, to love God and, believe it or not, to begin to hate sin, actually to hate sin, and to love the neighbor from the heart.

He says that when God works in us, “the will is changed under the sweet influence of the Spirit of God. It desires and acts not of compulsion, but of its own desire and spontaneous inclination.”⁵

We all know the words from the preface to the Romans. Again, a familiar passage:

Faith, however, is a divine work in us, which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different in heart and spirit and mind and powers and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done. But before the question is asked, it has already done them and is constantly doing them. Faith is the living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything out of love and to praise God who has shown him this grace. Thus, it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.⁶

Well, it’s pretty hard in those words, I suppose, to miss the song. Confidence in God’s grace makes people glad and bold and happy. The Holy Spirit performs this work in us in faith without compulsion. The person is ready, ready to do good, to serve, to suffer out of love and praise to God. Yet, I suppose, ever since, the world, somewhat astounded, has asked, if not laughed up its sleeve like Sarah: Is this really true? We all, of course, know better than that. Luther has consistently, from within the Protestant camp as well as from without, been criticized for a rather naive view, indeed an overly optimistic view on how good works come about. Is it not really, when it gets right down to it, a matter of discipline, of gritting your teeth and being obedient? Beating the drums to the skies and taking up arms against immorality? And so on and so on. Isn’t that really the way it is? There may be indeed, I suppose, a place for such gloomy business. But first and foremost, it is important, I think, in understanding Luther simply to listen for the song. It was a part of the *cantus firmus*, which sounded from the beginning to the end of his work. The law of the letter kills, but the Spirit does indeed give life.

The spontaneity is part and parcel of the redemption itself. Indeed, one could say that it *is* the redemption. Luther had a tremendous amount invested in that. If there is no spontaneity, if we do not begin, at least, to hear the song, to feel the shock of creation in the word of justification, then there is little, if anything, left. If there is no spontaneity, no morning star, then there is no light at the end of the tunnel. No hope. And the darkness in which we dwell is the darkness of the tomb.

Luther well knew of the objection and the criticism; but his answer, as the words preceding the passage in the preface to the Romans indicate, is that those who object don't know what faith is.

Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith. When they see that no improvement of life and no good works follow, they fall into the error of saying that faith is not enough. One must do good works. This is due to the fact that when they hear the gospel, they get busy and by their own powers create an idea in their hearts, which says, "I believe." And then they take this to be a true faith. But as it is a human figment, an idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing comes of it either. And no improvement follows.⁷

Luther operated, apparently, on the premise that if it is true that faith without works is dead, then it is precisely the faith that must be revived. No amount of works would help. His counsel to those who wonder about the spontaneity of faith or think it naive and optimistic is simply: "Beware, therefore, of your own false notions, and of the idle talkers who imagine themselves wise enough to make decisions about faith and good works, and yet are the greatest fools. Rather, pray God that he may work faith in you."⁸

Luther knew, I think, as well as anyone, that we are sinners, and that as old beings we do not do good works spontaneously. He held that the law indeed remains and disciplines the body until the end even as Christ and the gospel reign in the conscience. He knew that if we do not do our duty spontaneously, God is not mocked. That God has other ways to protect against human folly and waywardness. That if we do not do the good spontaneously, there is always the civil authority to see that it is done, to some extent at least, whether we like it or not. There is always the police force, the judge, the jury, and the hangman. But that is a rather grim affair and not, strictly

speaking, the direct business of the church. Even though we may well protest if it is not properly done. The concern of the church is the new song, to preach the gospel, the gospel of justification by faith alone.

And that brings me to the last, perhaps most persistent question raised about this new song that I want to talk about. This question, I think we might say, is about the appropriateness of this song of justification by faith alone, given the state of the world in which we find ourselves. Is it not incredible? Is it not dangerous? Will not people get the wrong idea and misuse or abuse it? Can it not be turned all too easily into cheap grace? Will not people just continue in sin, thinking they can, after all, at the last minute, be justified by faith? In other words, will it or can it work? If not, what is to be done about it?

Well, we might, of course, bustle in at this point with all sorts of remedies to shore up what seems to be a sagging enterprise. The church and the world since the time of Luther have proposed many a remedy. For the most part, however, such remedies consist of only many and devious ways to compromise the *sola*, the faith alone. So, at least on this occasion, we might let Luther have the word once again and listen to something of his apology (if we can call it that) for the *sola fide*. It is the kind of apology which appears again and again. So perhaps all we need to do is to pick out a couple of interesting and I think typical instances.

The first is from the 1535 *Commentary on Galatians*, Galatians 3:19, where the question is raised, why then the law? And Luther says:

When reason hears this statement of Paul's, novel and unheard of in the world, that the law was given on account of transgressions, it judges as follows: Paul is abolishing the law, for he is saying that we are not justified through it. Yes, he is a blasphemer against God who gave the law, for he says that it was given on account of transgression. So let us live as the Gentiles do who do not have the law. Let us sin and abide in sin, so that grace may abound. Let us do evil, that good may come. This is what happened to the Apostle Paul.

And the same thing is happening to us today. For when the rabble hear from the gospel that righteousness comes by the sheer grace of God and by faith alone, without the law or works, they draw the same conclusion. Then let us not do any works, and they really live up to this!

What then are we to do? This evil troubles us severely, but we cannot stop it. When Christ preached, he had to hear that he was a blasphemer and a rebel.

That is, his teaching was seducing men and making them seditious against Caesar. The same thing happened to Paul and to all the apostles. No wonder the world accuses us in a similar way today. All right. Let it slander and persecute us. Still, we must not keep silence on account of their troubled consciences. But we must speak right out in order to rescue them from the snares of the devil. Nor should we pay attention to how our doctrine is abused by the wicked who cannot be cured, whether they have the law or not. On the contrary, we should pay attention to how suffering consciences are to be consoled lest they perish. If we were to keep silence, the consciences that are so inextricably captured and ensnared in laws and human traditions would have no comfort at all. I am so bitterly opposed to these people, some of whom persecute our doctrine, while others tread our liberty underfoot, that I am not willing to utter a single sound on their behalf in my whole life.⁹

What can one do about the abuse of the gospel from the point of the gospel itself? Luther's answer, in effect, is: nothing. This evil troubles us severely, but we cannot stop it. One is left quite without levers. The song is, in a real sense, without defense in this world, because the song itself is its own apology. One can only sing it. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. To back off, to compromise, would be precisely to stifle the song altogether. The world is willing to use any excuse to stifle the song. Even the idea that grace, freely given, is too cheap to command our respect. Luther knew that too. He says:

When reason hears that you cannot do anything to obtain the forgiveness of sins except only to listen to the Word of God, it immediately exclaims, "Oh no! You are making the forgiveness of sins too meagre and contemptible." Thus, the greatness of the gift is responsible for our not accepting it; because the great treasure is being offered freely, it is despised.¹⁰

The second instance of such an apology is again from the debate with Erasmus. Erasmus, of course, was terribly afraid that Luther's views would lead to moral collapse. He complained that Luther was turning the world upside down, creating turmoil, violence, and threatening war and bloodshed. But Luther said:

As for your fear that many persons of vicious inclination will abuse this liberty, this must be thought of as one of the disturbances, part of the temporal leprosy that we must bear and the malady we must endure. But it must not be held so important as to warrant the removal of the Word of God in order to restrain

their abuse of it. If not all can be saved, yet some are saved. The Word of God came for their sake and so they love it more fervently and assent to it more readily. What evil did ungodly men not do before the Word came? And what good did they ever do? Was not the world always full of war, deceit, violence, quarrelling, and iniquity of every kind—so much so that Micah compares the best among them to a thorn hedge? What do you think he would say of the others? Now that the gospel has come, men start blaming the world's wickedness onto it. And the truth is, rather, that the good gospel brings the world's wickedness to light for without the gospel the world dwelt in its own darkness. So, the uneducated blame education for the fact that as education spreads their own ignorance becomes apparent. Such are the thanks we return for the Word of life and salvation. What fear may we suppose there was when the gospel freed all men from the law of Moses? And what scope did not this great liberty appear to give to evil men? Yet the gospel was not on that account taken away. Instead, the godly were told not to use their liberty to indulge the flesh and the ungodly were left to their own devices.¹¹

In other words, Luther's apology to the question put to him is, in effect, a kind of counter question. Why blame the gospel? Whose side are we on? Shall the song be stifled for the sake of the ungodly? It is as though, I suppose, we have all of these marvelous institutions going, and the gospel is going to destroy them. Luther's plea, finally, I suppose, was just to let the song be sung, pure, clean, and true. The song about the gates of paradise, the morning star of creation, the spontaneity of faith. To change the metaphor somewhat, it was simply a plea to let the bird fly, the bird of the Spirit. Luther thought it couldn't possibly hurt anyone and that it just might save some of us at least. Thank you.

NOTES

1. *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993) 54:185–186 (hereafter cited as WA); *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 80 vols., eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1955ff.), 34:336–337 (hereafter cited as LW).

2. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, Complete New Edition, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 750/751; *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 312.

3. WA 40I:52–54; LW 26:13–14.

4. *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, *Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–1985), 1:573–574 (no. 1160).
5. WA 18:634–635; LW 33:65.
6. *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, *Die Deutsche Bibel*, 12 vols. in 15 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1906–), 7:10/11 (hereafter cited as WA DB); LW 35:370–371.
7. WA DB 7:8–10/9–11; LW 35:370.
8. WA DB 7:10/11; LW 35:371.
9. WA 40I:474–476; LW 26:305–306.
10. WA 40I:343; LW 26:213.
11. WA 18:627–628; LW 33:54–55.