

## Church History (26): The Theology of Martin Luther

In this lesson, we will examine the theology of Martin Luther, as it relates to the word of God, the will of man, and the sacraments.

### I. The Theology of Martin Luther

1. *The word of God.* For Luther, the word of God undergirded all that he did. It was inerrant, infallible, sufficient, authoritative, and powerful. The Reformation was a reformation of the word. "We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."<sup>1</sup> While holding to tradition as a subordinate rule or authority, Luther believed, only Scripture is our final and ultimate authority. "For it will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the holy Fathers. The rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel."<sup>2</sup> Of Scripture Luther said: "Here Paul subordinates himself, an angel from heaven, teachers on earth, and any other masters at all, to Sacred Scripture. This queen must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to, her. The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven—these should not be masters, judges, or arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture."<sup>3</sup>

For Luther, the entire Scripture is to be distinguished between law or gospel. By this Luther didn't mean Old and New Testaments. As if the Old was law and the new gospel. "When the Old Testament is read as offering the promise of Christ, it is gospel; when the New is read as demanding obedience as a basis for a relationship with God, it is law" (Trueman).<sup>4</sup> "God has two words. One is the Law, under which I am stuck and lost. The other is the Gospel, which says that whoever is tuck in sins under the Law or in death and has not satisfied the Law should call upon Christ."<sup>5</sup> In short, the law demands and the gospel provides. "By the term Law nothing else is to be understood than a word of God that is a command, that enjoins upon us what to do and what to avoid, that requires from us some work of obedience. On the other hand, the Gospel, is any doctrine or word of God that does not require works from us and does not command us to do something but bids us simply to accept as a gift the gracious forgiveness of our sins and the everlasting bliss offered us."<sup>6</sup>

We must know what the law is, and what the gospel is. The law commands and requires us to do certain things. The law is thus directed solely to our behavior and consists in making requirements. For God speaks through the law, saying, 'Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect of you.' The gospel, however, does not preach what we are to do or to avoid. It sets up no requirements but reverses the approach of the law, does the very opposite, and says, 'This is what God has done for you; he has let his Son be made flesh for you, has let him be put to death for your sake.' So, then, there are two kinds of doctrine and two kinds of works, those of God and those of men. Just as we and God are separated from one another, so also these two doctrines are widely separated from

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, 51:76-77

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles* (1537), Part 2, Article, 2:15

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 27

<sup>4</sup> Carl Trueman, *Martin Luther*, 91

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, 57:72

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, 57: 64

one another. For the gospel teaches exclusively what has been given us by God, and not—as in the case of the law—what we are to do and give to God.<sup>7</sup>

(1) The law. By law Luther meant the Ten Commandments, as a summary of God's moral standard for all men. "Luther discerned a difference between the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial law that governed Old Testament worship along with the political law that governed the Israelites. The latter two have passed away in Christ, who is the end of the law. Yet the Ten Commandments remain written in the hearts of all as natural law, even if the Sinai Covenant is only for the Jews" (Walther).<sup>8</sup> "There are two kingdoms: the temporal, which governs with the sword and is visible, and the spiritual, which governs solely with grace and with the forgiveness of sins. Between these two kingdoms still another has been placed in the middle, half spiritual and half temporal. It is constituted by the Jews, with commandments and outward ceremonies which prescribe their conduct toward God and men."<sup>9</sup> These laws (ceremonial and judicial), according to Luther, were only for the Jews, as the Mosaic Covenant was only for Israel. Thus, when Luther speaks negatively of Moses, he refers to Moses as the mediator of the Old Covenant (and not merely of the Ten Commandments). In this sense, no Christian has any dealing with Moses. "Here the law of Moses has its place. It is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel. And Israel accepted this law for itself and its descendants, while the Gentiles were excluded. To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to commit adultery or murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did."<sup>10</sup>

I say this on account of the enthusiasts. For you see and hear how they read Moses, extol him, and bring up the way he ruled the people with commandments. They try to be clever, and think they know something more than is presented in the gospel; so they minimize faith, contrive something new, and boastfully claim that it comes from the Old Testament. They desire to govern people according to the letter of the law of Moses, as if no one had ever read it before. But we will not have this sort of thing. We would rather not preach again for the rest of our life than to let Moses return and to let Christ be torn out of our hearts. We will not have Moses as ruler or lawgiver any longer. Indeed God himself will not have it either. Moses was an intermediary solely for the Jewish people. It was to them that he gave the law. We must therefore silence the mouths of those factious spirits who say, 'Thus says Moses,' etc. Here you simply reply: Moses has nothing to do with us. If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. Thus the consequence would be that if I accept Moses as master, then I must have myself circumcised, wash my clothes in the Jewish way, eat and drink and dress thus and so, and observe all that stuff. So, then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service.<sup>11</sup>

Luther understood the moral law to have two primary uses (a third would be added by Philip Melancthon and the Lutherans). This doesn't mean that Luther denied what would be called a third use of the law (as a guide for Christian living), but that he placed the stress on the first two uses (he wrote a treatise in 1539, in defense of the Decalogue entitled, *Against the Antinomians*). "We must understand

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, 35:162

<sup>8</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, lx

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, 35:162

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, 35:165

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, 35:165

that there is a double use of the law. One is civil and the other is spiritual."<sup>12</sup> "It is no small matter to understand rightly what the law is, and what is its true use and office, which is first to bridle civil transgressions, and then to reveal and to increase spiritual transgressions."<sup>13</sup> (a) Civil. "The first use of the law is to bridle wickedness. Therefore God has ordained magistrates, parents, ministers, bonds, and all civil ordinances, that if they do no more, yet, at least, they may bind the devil's hands, that he rage not in his bond-slaves, after his own lust."<sup>14</sup>

God has ordained civil law, yea, all laws to punish transgressions. Every law therefore is given to restrain sin. For in that I do not kill, or commit adultery, or steal, or in that I abstain from other sins, I do it not willingly, or for the love of virtue, but I fear the prison, the sword, and the hangman. These do bridle and restrain me that I sin not, as bonds and chains do restrain a lion, or a bear, that he tear and devour not all that he meets; therefore the restraining from sin is not righteousness, but rather a signification of unrighteousness. For, as a mad or a wild beast is bound, lest he should destroy: even so the law does bridle a man and furious man, that he sin not after his own lust. This restraint shows plainly enough that they which have need of the law (as all they have which are without Christ) are not righteous, but rather wicked and mad men, whom it is necessary so to bridle, that they sin not. Therefore the law justifies not.

(b) Spiritual. This is where Luther placed the emphasis. "The second use of the law is divine and spiritual, which is to increase transgressions, that is to say, to reveal unto a man his sin, his blindness, his misery, his iniquity, his ignorance, hatred and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the deserved wrath of God."<sup>15</sup> "As our own self-righteousness is a great and terrible monster, God sent some Hercules who might set upon it, with all force and courage, to overthrow it and utterly destroy it."<sup>16</sup> "The law is God's hammer, His fire, His mighty strong wind, and that terrible earthquake rending the mountains and breaking the rocks; that is to say, the proud and obstinate hypocrites."<sup>17</sup>

Here we hold that the Law was given by God, first, to restrain sin by threats and the dread of punishment and by the promise and offer of grace and benefit. But the chief office of force of the Law is to reveal original sin with all its fruit. It shows us how very low our nature has fallen, how we have become utterly corrupted. The Law must tell us that we have not God, that we do not care for God, and that we worship other gods—something we would not have believed before and without the Law. In this way, we become terrified, humbled, depressed. We despair and anxiously want help, but see no escape. We begin to be an enemy of God and to complain, and so on (Rom.4:15; 5:20; 7:7).<sup>18</sup>

It's in this way, the law functions as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. "The law is a glass that shows unto a man himself, that he is a sinner, guilty of death, and worthy of God's judgment and wrath. To what end serves this humbling and bruising? To the end that we have an entrance into grace. So then the law is a minister that prepares the way to grace. For God is the God of the humble, the afflicted, the oppressed, and of those who are brought even to nothing."<sup>19</sup> "Therefore after the law has humbled

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 189

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 192

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 189

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 189

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 189-190

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 190

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles* (1537), Part 3, Article 2:15

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 194

thee, and utterly beaten thee down, see that thou learn to use it rightly: for the office and use of it is not only to reveal sin, and convict us of it, but also to drive men to Christ. This is the true and best use of the law, when it drives men to Christ."<sup>20</sup>

(2) The gospel. "The gospel is a light which lightens, quickens, comforts, and raises up fearful consciences. For it shows that God, for Christ's sake, is merciful to sinners, yea, and to such as are most unworthy, if they believe that by His death they are delivered from the curse, that is to say, from sin and everlasting death; and that through His victory, the blessing is freely given unto them, that is to say, grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and everlasting life."<sup>21</sup> For Luther, God communicates the grace of the gospel through a number of ways. "The gospel does not give us counsel and aid against sin in only one way. God is superabundantly generous in His grace: through the spoken Word, by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world, through baptism and the Lord's Supper, and through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren."<sup>22</sup>

2. *The will of man.* In December of 1525, Luther wrote his treatise entitled, *The Bondage of the Will*. It was in response to an earlier treatise, written in September of 1524, by Erasmus called, *The Freedom of the Will*. "Erasmus wrote this work in response to shorter writings and sermons of Luther. Consequently, when we read *The Bondage of the Will*, we are listening in on a debate between two of the most prominent intellectuals of the sixteenth century" (Nichols).<sup>23</sup> Most people, even Luther himself, recognized his response to Erasmus as his most important work. "J.I. Packer said, "*The Bondage of the Will* is the greatest piece of theological writing that ever came from Luther's pen,"<sup>24</sup> and B.B. Warfield said, "It is in a true sense the manifesto of the Reformation."<sup>25</sup> In 1537, Luther himself said: "Regarding the plan to collect my writings in volumes, I am quite cool and not at all eager about it because, I would rather see them all devoured. For I acknowledge none of them to be really a book of mine, except perhaps the one *On the Bondage of the Will* and the *Catechism*."<sup>26</sup> Luther ended the treatise by saying to Erasmus: "You alone have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like—trifles, rather than issues—in respect of which almost all to date have sought my blood (without success); you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot. For that I heartily thank you; for it is more gratifying to me to deal with this issue, insofar as time and leisure permit me to do so."<sup>27</sup>

Luther begins by underscoring the practical importance of the subject. "This is the hinge on which our discussion turns, the crucial issue between us; our aim is, simply, to investigate what ability 'free-will' has, in what respect it is the subject of Divine action and how it stands related to the grace of God. If we know nothing of these things, we shall know nothing whatsoever of Christianity, and shall be in a worse place than any people on earth."<sup>28</sup> Luther then makes a necessary distinction concerning the will. "The will, whether it be God's or man's, does what it does, good or bad, under no compulsion, but just as it wants or pleases, as if totally free."<sup>29</sup> In this sense, man's will is free. That is, free to act as it wills

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 195

<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 193

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles* (1537), Part 3, Article 4

<sup>23</sup> Steven Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of his Life and Thought*, 103

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 40

<sup>25</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Works*, 9:471

<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, 50:172–173

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 319

<sup>28</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 78

<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 81

or desires. No man ever acts contrary to his will. He is never forced to act. He always acts in accord to his nature.

A man without the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though he were taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged into it, like a thief or footpad being dragged off against his will to punishment; but he does it spontaneously and voluntarily. And this willingness or volition is something which he cannot in his own strength eliminate, restrain or alter. He goes on willing and desiring to do evil; and if external pressure forces him to act otherwise, nevertheless his will within remains averse to so doing and chafes under such constraint and opposition. But it would not thus chafe were it being changed, and were it yielding to constraint willingly. This is what we mean by *necessity of immutability*: that the will cannot change itself, nor give itself another bent, but, rather, is the more provoked to crave the more it is opposed, as its chafing proves; for this would not occur, were it free or had 'free-will.' On the other hand: when God works in us, the will is changed under the sweet influence of the Spirit of God. Once more it desires and acts, not of compulsion, but of its own desire and spontaneous inclination. Its bent still cannot be altered by any opposition; it cannot be mastered or prevailed upon even by the gates of hell; but it goes on willing, desiring and loving good, just as once it willed, desired and loved evil.<sup>30</sup>

For Erasmus, the commands and invitations of Scripture, argues the reality of free-will. In short, obligation to obey God and submit to His summons, implies ability. Luther's response was basically two-fold: (1) these commands are intended to show man his inability not ability. "How often do parents bid their children to come to them, or do this or that, only in order that it may appear how impotent they are, that they may be compelled to call for the help of the parent's hand?"<sup>31</sup> "Because man is corrupted and led captive, and, furthermore, proudly refuses to notice, and fails to recognize his own corruption and captivity; therefore, God uses these commands to goad and rouse him, that he may know by sure experience how unable he is to do any of them."<sup>32</sup> "By the words of the law man is admonished and taught, not what he can do, but what he ought to do; that is, that he may know his sin, not that he may believe that he has any strength."<sup>33</sup> (2) Luther distinguished between God preached and not preached, and of His revealed and secret will. "Erasmus is deceived by his own ignorance in that he makes no distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the Word of God and God Himself. God does many things which He does not show us in His Word, and He wills many things which He does not in His Word show us that He wills. Thus, He does not will the death of a sinner—that is, in His Word; but He wills it by His inscrutable will. At present, however, we must keep in view His Word and leave alone His inscrutable will; for it is by His Word, and not by His inscrutable will, that we must be guided."<sup>34</sup>

So it is right to say: 'If God does not desire our death, it must be laid to the charge of our own will if we perish'; this, I repeat, is right if you spoke of God preached. For He desires that all men should be saved, in that He comes to all by the word of salvation, and the fault is in the will which does not receive salvation, and the fault is in the will which does not receive Him; as He says in Matthew 23:37, 'How often would I have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldst not!' But why the Majesty does not

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<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102-103

<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 152

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 153

<sup>33</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 159

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 170-171

remove or change this fault of will in every man (for it is not in the power of man to do it), or why He lays this fault to the charge of the will, when man cannot avoid it, it is not lawful to ask; and though you should ask much, you would never find out; as Paul says in Romans 9:20: 'Who art thou that repliest against God?'<sup>35</sup>

3. *The Sacraments*. In his treatise *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther defended only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper (in contrast to seven sacraments taught by the Roman Catholic Church). "Every Christian also ought to have at least an ordinary, brief instruction about the Sacraments, because without them he cannot be a Christian."<sup>36</sup> (1) Baptism. Luther gave a simple explanation of his view on baptism, in his Small and Large Catechisms published in 1529. Luther taught in his Small Catechism: "What does Baptism give or profit? Answer: It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare."<sup>37</sup> Thus, Luther did not believe there was power in the water of baptism, but it was the Word of God in and with the water, along with faith, that rendered baptism effectual. "How can water do such great things? Answer: It is not the water indeed that does them, but the Word of God, which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is simple water and no baptism. But with the Word of God, it is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit."<sup>38</sup> But here's the problem: Luther also taught that the efficacy of baptism isn't dependent upon faith in the baptized adult or infant. "Further, we say that we are not very concerned to know whether the person baptized believes or not. For Baptism does not become invalid on that account. But everything depends on God's Word and command."<sup>39</sup>

(2) The Lord's Supper. While Rome believed the bread and wine transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation), Luther believed the literal body and blood of Christ dwelt with and alongside the bread and wine (consubstantiation). "What is the Sacrament of the Altar? Answer: It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, in and under the bread and wine, which we Christians are commanded by Christ's Word to eat and to drink."<sup>40</sup> "Luther preferred the phrase 'real presence,' or the 'unity of the sacrament.' He used this term to signify that Christ is in, with, and around the elements. Consequently, the communicant receives Christ's true body and blood, given for his sins" (Nichols).<sup>41</sup> Luther believed Christ is present in the Supper in both His divine and human natures. "Both natures are simply there in their entirety, and it is truly said: 'This man is God; this God is man.' Even though philosophy cannot grasp this, faith grasps it nonetheless. And the authority of God's Word is greater than the capacity of our intellect to grasp it. 'This bread is My body; this wine is My blood.' And vice versa. Thus I will understand it for the time being to the honor of the holy words of God, to which I will allow no violence to be done by petty human arguments."<sup>42</sup> "Luther argued that the union between Christ's divine and human natures was so close, that each nature communicated its properties to the other. Christ was therefore everywhere, not just as God, but as a man; He was omnipresent in His human nature. So it followed that His body and blood were present in the bread and wine of communion" (Needham).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 171

<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 4:1

<sup>37</sup> Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, 4:2

<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, 4:3

<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 4:52-53

<sup>40</sup> Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 5:9

<sup>41</sup> Steven Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of his Life and Thought*, 119

<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 151-152

<sup>43</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:157