

Luther on Galatians
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Paul's letter to the Galatians exercised a special fascination for Martin Luther, a fact recognized not only by generations of Luther scholars, but also by the reformer himself. Often quoted in this connection is Luther's remark at the dinner table that he regarded himself as engaged to the "dear epistle;" regarding his own efforts at expounding the text, however, he was more ambivalent.¹ Responding (negatively) in 1538 to a proposal to reprint his collected works, Luther feared that the mere sight of so bloated a monstrosity as his commentary on Galatians would inspire nothing but disgust.² Eventually, however, Luther agreed to have the work reprinted, and by 1543 he seems to have regarded it as one of his few writings of any lasting value.³

Modern scholars have generally concurred in according a certain pride of place to Luther's exposition of Galatians (particularly his "commentary" of 1531/35) within his literary corpus, and for good reason.⁴ To begin with, Luther consistently ranked the epistle as one of the clearest distillations of the Gospel within the canon of scripture. For example, in his 1546 Preface to the New Testament, he wrote that "St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine."⁵ Of the biblical books which make up Luther's "canon within the canon," however, it was Galatians to which he continually returned, publishing more on this one text than on all the rest combined.

My goal in this essay is to trace out the distinctive features of Luther's interpretation of Paul in the letter to Galatians, beginning with an assessment of the place of this remarkable letter in Luther's career and body of work. Next, I offer analysis of Luther's exegetical methods and intentions, including a detailed discussion of his sources and interlocutors. Following this, I examine Luther's understanding of the argument and structure of the epistle, contrasting his approach with those of patristic and medieval exegetes. In the final section, I offer summary observations on three theological themes which set Luther's reading of Galatians apart from those of his predecessors. My aim in this essay is not to defend Luther's exegesis against modern biblical scholarship, but to

¹ *Epistola ad Galatas ist mein epistelcha, der ich mit vertrawet hab. Ist mein Keth von Bor.* WA TR:1.69 (No. 146).

² "I'd rather that all my books would disappear and the Holy Scriptures alone would be read. Otherwise we'll rely on such writings and let the Bible go. . . . I wonder who encourages this mania for writing! Who wants to buy such stout tomes? And if they're bought, who'll read them? And if they're read, who'll be edified by them?" WA TR:4.84-85 (No. 4025); LW 54:311-312.

³ "If my advice were taken, only the books of mine that contain doctrine would be printed, such as my Galatians, Deuteronomy, and John. The rest should be read merely for the history, in order to see how it all began, for it was not so easy at first as it is now." WA TR:5.204 (No. 5511); LW 54:440.

⁴ Landmark studies include Karin Bornkamm, "Luthers Auslegungen des Galaterbriefs von 1519 bis 1531: Ein Vergleich," in *Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte* 35 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963); Peter Manns, "Absolute and Incarnate Faith: Luther on Justification in the Galatians Commentary of 1531-35," in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. Jared Wicks (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), 121-56; Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as Seen in His "Commentaries" on Galatians* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993); Juha Mikkonen, *Luther and Calvin on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians: An Analysis and Comparison of Substantial Concepts in Luther's 1531/35 and Calvin's 1546/48 Commentaries on Galatians* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2007).

⁵ WA DB 6:11; LW 35:362.

facilitate a more fruitful engagement with his ideas by setting them in the context of the remarkably fecund period of intellectual ferment in which he lived, moved, and had his being. Luther's reading of Galatians has proven enormously influential—indeed, it is probably not much of an overstatement to suggest no other reading has loomed larger over the text in the modern world, at least within Protestantism. For this reason, it is all the more imperative that any serious attempt to assess the merits of Luther's exegesis proceed from a careful understanding of his historical context, theological aims, exegetical practices.

Luther's Exegesis of Galatians: A Syllabus

Luther was awarded the rank of *Doctor sacrae scripturae* in October 1512, the highest academic title in medieval Christendom. Luther's biographers often refer to him as a "Professor of Holy Scripture," or as a "Professor of Bible," yet this ought not to suggest that Luther was engaged in the more specialized (and modern) discipline of "biblical studies." Luther was a Professor of Theology, and he occupied the same teaching position as medieval luminaries such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas.⁶ Departing from the typical practice, however, Luther focused his teaching energies almost exclusively on the scriptures, lecturing on the Psalms (1513-15), Romans (1515-16), Galatians (1516-17), and Hebrews (1517-18) in the years leading up to his confrontation with the Roman curia over the matter of indulgences. Following the appointment of Philipp Melancthon to the more specialized post of Professor of Greek in the spring of 1518, Luther turned his focus in the classroom primarily to lecturing on the Old Testament.

Luther's lectures on Galatians from this early period survive in the form of student notes (*Nachschriften*).⁷ These have been of enormous interest to modern scholars seeking to reconstruct Luther's early theology and thereby identify the exact moment of his "Reformation breakthrough," though gaps still remain in the notes themselves.⁸ What is clear, however, is that these lectures—delivered immediately prior to the outbreak of the controversy over indulgences which inaugurated Luther's career as a reformer—served as the basis for Luther's first published commentary on Galatians in 1519.⁹ Writing to his friend and mentor Johann von Staupitz in October of that year, Luther describes his work in the following mixed terms:

⁶ Siegfried Raeder, "The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 365.

⁷ WA 57.2

⁸ Hans Volz, "Eine neue studentische Nachschrift von Luthers erster Galaterbrief-vorlesung von 1516/17," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 46 (1965/55): 72-96.

⁹ *In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas, F. Martini Lutheri Augustiniani, commentarius* (Leipzig: Melchior Lotther, 1519); WA 2:436-618; LW 27:153-410. Four years later the Wittenberg printer Johann Grüenberg issued a slightly abridged edition of the same work, the title now reflecting Luther's estrangement from his religious order: *In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas Martini Lutheri commentarius* (Wittenberg: Johann Grüenberg, 1523). There is some debate as to the exact date on which Luther renounced his cowl and with it, allegiance to the Order of Augustinian Hermits. In March of 1539, Luther recalls that "I took off my habit . . . only at last in 1523" (WA TR 4:303; No. 4414). Other evidence, however, points to a later date in the fall of 1524 (See Eric Leland Saak, *High Way to Heaven: The Augustinian Platform between Reform and Reformation, 1292-1524* [Leiden: Brill, 2002], 638).

I am sending you two copies, Reverend Father, of my foolish commentary. I am not so happy with it as I was at first, and I see that it might have been expounded more fully and clearly. But who can do everything at once? Indeed, who can manage to do very much for long? Nevertheless, I am confident that Paul is made clearer here than he has previously been by others, even though it is not yet quite to my liking.¹⁰

This remark highlights not only Luther's evolving perspective (no longer pleased with a work barely two years old), but also his aim in exposition: to clarify the mind of the apostle for a contemporary audience. In this regard, Luther's work is in keeping with the aims of many humanist scholars of his generation, including Erasmus, whose influence looms large in this volume.¹¹

Given Luther's ambivalence regarding his first effort at expounding Galatians, it comes as no surprise to find him returning to the letter once again in 1531. It is important to keep in mind, however, how much had changed for Luther in the intervening years. At the time he had given his first lectures on Galatians in 1516, Luther was an obscure friar, fresh out of graduate school, beginning his teaching career at a relatively new (and, consequently, not very prestigious) university at the margins of European political and cultural life. Twelve years later, Luther had been excommunicated by the Pope, declared an outlaw by the Emperor, hailed as a prophet by his supporters, and excoriated as a heresiarch by his detractors. He had translated the New Testament into German from the original language, and then broken publicly with Erasmus, the scholar whose retrieval of the Greek text had made this possible. And his voluminous popular writings had helped first to precipitate—and then to suppress—a small civil war. Over the course of this period, Luther and his followers had slowly shifted their stance from that of prophetic witness to apostolic mission—that is, they had gone from being loyal Catholics, calling the Church back to its most ancient and authentic traditions, to becoming the founders of an alternate ecclesial polity in the face of intransigent opposition.¹²

All these developments came to a head in 1530, when representatives from the “Lutheran” (as we must now call them) territories of the Holy Roman Empire sent representatives to the imperial diet meeting at Augsburg in hopes of persuading Charles V to side with Luther against Rome. The emperor declined, declaring instead his intention “to remain firmly faithful to the old, true, traditional Christian faith and religion, and [to] the honorable, praiseworthy ceremonies and usages which have always been performed in all the churches.” After nearly a decade of legal maneuvers following the Diet of Worms, Luther and his supporters were forced to confront the reality that the Empire would not aid in reforming the Church. Within five weeks after the end of the Diet, envoys from the Lutheran territories were meeting in the Thuringian village of Smalkalden to draft an agreement for mutual protection against their Catholic Emperor.¹³ If the Gospel were to survive, it would have to be defended by force of arms, rather than by constitutional appeals.

¹⁰ Ep. 162 (Oct. 3, 1519), WA Br 1:340.

¹¹ Johannes Kunze, *Erasmus und Luther: der Einfluss des Erasmus auf die Kommentierung des Galaterbriefes und der Psalmen durch Luther 1519-1521* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000).

¹² David C. Steinmetz, “The Catholic Luther: A Critical Reappraisal,” *Theology Today* 61, no. 2 (2004): 187-201.

¹³ Thomas A. Brady, Jr., *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400-1650* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 220.

All this serves to underscore the context in which Luther turned his attention to Paul's letter to the Galatians once more in July of 1531—and to explain the note of urgency that runs throughout his exposition. When Luther prefaced his lectures in July of 1531 with the warning that “there is a great and present danger that the devil may take away from us the pure doctrine of faith,” he may have been indulging in polemical rhetoric, but the danger to his movement was real enough.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Luther and his students worked their way through the epistle at a much more leisurely pace than in 1519, devoting six lectures to the first chapter (July 3 – July 18, 1531), five to the second (July 24 – Aug 21), eleven to the third (Aug 22 – Oct 10), six to the fourth (Oct 17 – Nov 14), six to the fifth (Nov 14 – Dec 4), and three to the sixth (Dec 5 – 12). Again, student notes formed the basis for the later printed edition, which hit the presses with two editions in 1535, followed by a corrected reprint of the same material in 1538.¹⁵ It is this “final” edition, often referred to as the “1531/35 edition,” which would establish Luther as the preeminent commentator on Galatians in the sixteenth century, and perhaps of the early modern era.¹⁶

Texts and Tools

Of what tools did Luther avail himself as he set about his work of expounding the text? What commentaries did he consult, and—above all—what text of the Bible itself? Owing in large part to his work as a translator, Luther's linguistic handling of the text has received nearly exhaustive treatment by modern scholars. Heinz Bluhm has demonstrated that Luther's translation of Galatians in the 1522 *Septembertestament* was based on the most up-to-date edition of the Greek text available in Germany at the time, Erasmus's 1519 *Novum Testamentum Omne*.¹⁷ This edition was accompanied by Erasmus's own annotations on the Greek and a fresh Latin translation, which often departed from the Vulgate in ways which would prove jarring, even controversial.¹⁸ Luther made full use of these tools, and his translation of Galatians into German gives evidence of discerning linguistic and literary judgment. This is evident, Bluhm argues, in the way Luther avoids a slavish, mechanical translation of the original, at times preferring the Vulgate's reading when it made better sense, and at times even anticipating some of the Greek readings of

¹⁴ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:39; LW 26:3.

¹⁵ *In Epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas commentarius ex praelectione D. Martini Lutheri collectus* (Wittenberg: Johannes Luft, 1535; Hagenau; Peter Brubach, 1535); *In epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas commentarius ex praelectione D. Mart. Luth. collectus. Iam denuo diligenter recognitus, castigatus etc.* (Wittenberg: Luft, 1538); WA 40.1 and 40.2. The Weimar edition tracks variations between these editions and reproduces the *Nachschriften* of Luther's student, Georg Rörer, in the upper half of the page.

¹⁶ Robert Kolb, “The Influence of Luther's Galatians Commentary of 1535 on Later Sixteenth-Century Lutheran Commentaries on Galatians,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 84 (1993): 156-184. Luther's engagement with Galatians also extended to his work as a translator and preacher. Several of his sermons on particular texts in Galatians were published during his lifetime, however the size and popularity of his massive “commentary” may explain why no series of sermons in the mode of *lectio continua* ever found its way into print.

¹⁷ Heinz Bluhm, “The Sources of Luther's *Septembertestament: Galatians*,” in *Luther for an Ecumenical Age*, ed. Carl Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 144-171.

¹⁸ Robert Coogan, *Erasmus, Lee, and the Correction of the Vulgate: The Shaking of the Foundations* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992).

the later Complutensian Polyglot, a superior text unavailable to Luther at the time of his early translation.¹⁹

There is no doubt but that Luther's exegesis of Galatians was rooted in a deep understanding of the Greek text, but what about his classroom practice? Despite his humanist conviction that sound exegesis of the New Testament must be rooted in the *graeca veritas*, and delivered to common folk in the common tongue, Luther and his colleagues maintained the use of the Vulgate in the liturgy throughout this period, even publishing a revision of the venerable Latin translation in 1529, the so-called "Wittenburg Vulgate."²⁰ This appears to have been the text to which he referred in his classroom lectures, though the Latin text of Galatians supplied in the print edition beginning in 1535 does at times differ from this text.

Finally, who were Luther's interlocutors as he worked his way through the text? In his 1519 *Commentarius*, Luther explicitly cites exegetical works by Jerome,²¹ Augustine,²² "Ambrose,"²³ Nicholas of Lyra,²⁴ Erasmus,²⁵ and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples.²⁶ In his later treatise *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther would defend himself against the charge that his biblical exegesis was conducted in willful ignorance of patristic interpretation, remarking that he had actually felt compelled to keep his enthusiasm for

¹⁹ Bluhm, "Sources," 170.

²⁰ The initial edition contained only the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, and Kings, and it was followed by an edition of the Latin New Testament later that same year. Both are available in WA Br 5. See also Bluhm, "The Nature of the Wittenberg 1529 Revision of the Vulgate: Galatians 1," *Aquila* 3 (1976):1-20.

²¹ Jerome, *Sancti Hieronymi Presbyteri Commentarii in Epistolam Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas* (CCSL 77A); ET, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Andrew Cain (FC 121)

²² Eric Plummer, ed., *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians: Introduction, Text, Translation, and Notes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²³ Luther, of course, follows universal medieval opinion in ascribing this text to the Bishop of Milan. Erasmus is widely regarded as the first scholar to reject this view, though this is not quite accurate. In 1527 he published a four-volume edition of Ambrose (*Diui Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis omnia opera. . .*) with the Basel printer, Johannes Froben. Erasmus noted his concerns in this edition that the text had been corrupted, though he never rejected Ambrose's authorship outright, and in his later *Annotationes* on Romans, he cites the commentary as the work of Ambrose without qualification. According to Hoven, the name "Ambrosiaster" was coined by the editors of the later Benedictine edition of Ambrose's *Opera* (Paris, 1686-90). René Hoven, "Saint Ambroise ou l'Ambrosiaster?" *L'antiquité classique* 38 (1969): 172-74. *Commentariae in XII epistolas beati Pauli* (CSEL 81); ET, *Commentaries on Galatians-Philemon*, trans. Gerald L. Bray (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2009).

²⁴ Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla super totam bibliam* (Strassburg: 1492; reprinted, Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1971).

²⁵ Luther draws on two exegetical tools produced by Erasmus during this period, the *Annotationes* and the *Paraphrases*. The former were a set of terse explanatory notes, mainly philological in nature, which accompanied the *Novum Instrumentum* beginning in 1516 and were subsequently expanded in 1519, 1523, 1527, and 1535. A critical edition of the Latin text has recently been published in the Amsterdam edition of Erasmus' works (ASD VI-9). Beginning with Romans in 1517, Erasmus also began publishing a set of *Paraphrases* on the New Testament. This project was motivated by "the pastoral necessity of simplifying the sacred text for less-educated Christians" (Jean-François Cottie, "Erasmus's *Paraphrases*: A 'New Kind of Commentary'?" in *The Unfolding of Words: Commentary in the Age of Erasmus*, ed. Judith Rice Henderson [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012], 28). In *epistolam Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas paraphrasis* was not published until the spring of 1519, and so was unavailable to Luther during the composition of his first commentary. A modern critical edition of this work is not yet available, but for a serviceable English translation, see CWE 42.

²⁶ *S. Pauli epistolae XIV ex vulgata: Adiecta intelligentia ex Graeco, cum commentariis* (Paris, 1512; repr. Stuttgart: Frommann, 1978).

the books of the fathers in check and identifying Jerome as his primary guide as he made his way through the text.²⁷ Both these recollections are born out by the pattern of Luther’s citations in the first *Commentarius* (Figure 1). Indeed, if Luther can be accused of neglecting the exegetical tradition, it could only be the medieval tradition, with which he barely interacts at all.

| <i>Commentator</i> | <i>Positive/Neutral</i> | <i>Negative</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|--------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Jerome | 68 | 37 | 105 |
| Augustine | 18 | 7 | 25 |
| Erasmus | 23 | 1 | 24 |
| “Ambrose” | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| Stapulensis | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Lyra | 0 | 1 | 1 |

Figure 1: Exegetical Citations in Luther’s 1519 *Commentarius* on Galatians²⁸

Jerome is by far the most important dialogue partner for Luther in the 1519 *Commentarius*; indeed, he cites Jerome’s commentary more than all the other “secondary sources” at his disposal combined. Luther has high regard for Jerome’s linguistic skill, and he relies heavily on “the saintly man” for a wealth of exegetical detail, from questions of historical context to textual criticism and the etymology of Greek and Hebrew words. Nevertheless, Luther is not shy in demurring from Jerome’s conclusions when he finds them objectionable on exegetical or theological grounds, as he does on several occasions: for example, on the conflict between Peter and Paul (Gal 2:11-13), on Christ’s having become a “curse” (3:13), and on the distinction between spirit and flesh (5:17).²⁹ Most significant, however, is Luther’s critique of the way in which Jerome parses Paul’s language of law, and the resulting contrast between justification by faith and that by works (on which, more anon). Luther regards this as a major blind spot in Jerome’s reading of Paul, however his esteem for Jerome is so high that in several places he explains away the latter’s misjudgment by blaming it on Origen.³⁰ Augustine is also a

²⁷ “Let them take a book of Holy Scripture and seek out the glosses of the fathers; then they will share the experience I had when I worked on the letter to the Hebrews with St. Chrysostom’s glosses, the letter to Titus and the letter to the Galatians with the help of St. Jerome, Genesis with the help of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, the Psalter with all the writers available, and so on. I have read more than they think, and have worked my way through all the books; this makes them appear impudent indeed who imagine that I did not read the fathers and who want to recommend them to me as something precious, the very thing that I was forced to devalue (*geringe halten*) twenty years ago when I read the Scriptures.” *Von den Konziliis und Küchen*; WA 50:519; LW 41:9.

²⁸ By “exegetical citations” I mean places in the text where Luther explicitly enters into dialogue with earlier interpreters in an effort to establish the basic meaning of the biblical text; thus, I exclude instances where Luther interacts with anonymous exegetical lore, as well as anecdotes or historical references for which he gives an explicit reference. By “positive/neutral,” I include those instances where Luther either clearly endorses a reading, or where he lets it stand as one possible (and, by implication, valid) reading, even if he goes on to elaborate a further meaning.

²⁹ For Luther’s take on the famous argument between Jerome and Augustine over Galatians 2:11, see Kenneth Hagen, “Did Peter Err? The Text is the Best Judge: Luther on Galatians (1519-1538),” in *Augustine, The Harvest, and Theology (1300-1650): Essays Dedicated to Heiko Augustinus Oberman in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Hagen (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 110-126.

³⁰ For example, in his exposition of Gal 3:12 (“he who does these things shall live by them”), Luther points out the error in Jerome’s reading and remarks that, “the things that kept St. Jerome from understanding

major source for Luther's theological exegesis of the letter, especially on the core (from Luther's point of view) matter of justification and the law, though Luther is well aware of his limitations as an exegete of the Greek text. For this, Luther is heavily dependent on Erasmus, "that excellent man," whom he cites with an almost boyish admiration.³¹

In the 1531/35 *Commentarius*, Luther's interaction with the exegetical literature has changed dramatically, as has his attitude to Jerome and Erasmus. Most apparently, the latter commentary reads much less like a scholarly work of textual exegesis, and something more like a set of sermons or a polemical treatise. Whereas in the 1519 edition, Luther had tethered his discussion more tightly to the lexical and syntactical details of Paul's text, considering the best of patristic and renaissance scholarship with a workmanlike consistency, his style in the 1535 edition is much more free-wheeling, with scant reference to the scholars with whose exegetical judgments he is interacting. Despite the fact that the latter edition is nearly three times the length of the former, explicit references to the works cited in 1519 are far fewer: for example, Jerome's commentary is cited 105 times in 1519, but only 20 times in 1535; Augustine's is cited 25 times in 1519, but only three times in 1535, and Ambrosiaster, Lyra, and Stauplensis are neglected entirely. Nor, so far as I can tell, does Luther interact with any new exegesis between the time of his first and second commentaries.³² Moreover, when he does refer to ancient and contemporary exegetes in the 1535 edition, it is almost always to disagree with them. Jerome, who has now become Luther's exegetical whipping boy, is cited positively only four times, and never in a way that suggests he has made any real contribution to Luther's understanding of the text. In 1519, Luther tended to maintain a respectful tone when discussing Jerome's opinions, even when he disagreed with them; in 1535, his contempt is undisguised.³³ In conversation during this period, Luther remarked that, "I cannot think of a doctor whom I have come to detest so much, and yet I have loved him and read him with the utmost ardor."³⁴ The same is true, though to a lesser degree, with Erasmus, who in 1535 is cited almost exclusively as a theological foil, not as a philological authority.

In concluding this section, a word must be said regarding the genre of Luther's writings on Galatians. Much has been made of Luther's comment in the dedication (1519) that he regarded the work as "not so much a commentary as a testimony of my faith in Christ."³⁵ Kenneth Hagen argues trenchantly against the notion that Luther

Paul in these and similar passages were his failure to recognize the works of the Law correctly and Origen's excessive allegorizing. . . . But let the prudent reader take these and other statements in such a way as to remember that these notions were brought in by St. Jerome from others." *Galatas* (1519); WA 2:515; LW 27:259.

³¹ WA 2:553; LW 27:315.

³² This despite the fact that several significant works of Pauline exegesis were published during this period: Johannes Bugenhagen (1525), Kaspar Megander (1533), Johannes Campensis (1534), and Heinrich Bullinger (1535), as well as a Latin translation by Erasmus of a commentary by John Chrysostom (1527) and the aforementioned *Paraphrases*.

³³ For example, Jerome "speaks foolishly," (WA 2:170; LW 26:92); he "made awkward and inept allegories out of the simplest statements of Scripture" (WA 2:653; LW 26:433); he "was so deceived by his precious Origen that he understood almost nothing in Paul" (WA 2:430; LW 26:275), etc.

³⁴ *Ergo nullum doctorem scie, quem aequae oderim, cum tamen ardentissime eum amaverim et legerim.* WA TR 1:194 (no. 445). See Joseph Lössl, "Martin Luther's Jerome: New Evidence for a Changing Attitude," in *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings, and Legacy*, ed. Andrew J. Cain and Josef Lössl (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009), 237-251.

³⁵ *Nec tam commentarium quam testimonium meae in Christo fidei;* WA 2:449; LW 27:159.

wrote “commentaries,” arguing instead for the Latin term *enarratio*, a word with no direct English equivalent.³⁶ Hagen’s concern is to ensure that we do not confuse Luther’s writings with the work of nineteenth century exegetes working with a subject-object dichotomy. To be sure, Luther could be quite scathing in his critique of academic exegetes who read the Bible “solely for the purpose of intellectual knowledge, as if it were a historical writing.”³⁷ But this does not imply that Luther regarded his work as an exercise in pure subjectivity, nor that he entirely collapsed the distance between past and present. On the contrary, Christian piety must be grounded in a clear apprehension of the text, for only in this way could God’s authoritative message for humanity be distinguished from the later accretions of human tradition. To put the matter in more contemporary terms, for Luther theological exegesis involves more than mere historical reconstruction, but it certainly does not involve less.³⁸ Once this point is grasped, there is no need to quibble over categories like *commentarius* and *enarratio*, terms which Luther appears to have used more or less interchangeably.³⁹ Both versions of Luther’s *Commentary* on Galatians contain the sort of rigorous grammatico-historical analysis of the biblical text we are accustomed to look for in biblical commentaries today, and both versions apply the results of that exegesis to a wide range of social, political, and theological issues confronting Luther in his day. Luther showed himself by turns both generous and

³⁶ “The term ‘enarratio’ is very old. It goes back to Augustine, to the Psalter (c. 18), and to Isaiah (c. 53)—in medieval Latin translations of the Bible. It is to set forth in the public arena praise to the glory of God.” *Luther’s Approach to Scripture*, 51.

³⁷ (Brecht, 84)

³⁸ “While grammatical and historical study formed the basis of an edifying interpretation of the text, Luther was unwilling to make the sharp distinction encouraged by modern criticism between what the text meant and what it means. He did not ignore this distinction and could leave the meaning of a text at the level of historical or theological analysis. At the same time, he often utilized personal experience and his diagnosis of the contemporary church to make the text speak immediately to his own day and thus to reveal its meaning.” Scott H. Hendrix, “Luther against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation,” *Interpretation* 37, no. 3 (1983): 229-239; 238.

³⁹ Hagen states pointedly that “the word that Luther used instead of ‘commentary’ is the verb ‘enarrare’ or the noun ‘enarratio’” (50), but the texts he cites do not support this conclusion—indeed the reverse. In the 1519 *Commentarius*, Luther explains (with the help of Erasmus) a figure of speech in Gal 1:9 by means of a Latin analogue: *Virgilium lego, Hieronymum enarro* (“I read Vergil; I comment on Jerome”); WA 2:463; LW 27:179. Here Luther is obviously using the term in the more restrictive, or “academic” sense, rather than in the sense elaborated by Hagen. In the 1535 *Commentarius*, Luther simply quotes the Vulgate text of Ps 18 (19):1: *coeli enarrant gloriam Dei*. In neither context does he make any reference to the genre of his own writing. Nor is it the case that Luther “distinguished his work from the ‘Commentaries’ of Erasmus” on this basis, as Hagen claims. In the dedication of 1519, Luther offers a sort of apology for publishing “this slight thing,” remarking that he “would certainly have preferred to wait for the commentaries (*commentarios*) promised long ago by Erasmus, a man preeminent in theology and impervious to envy. But since he is postponing this (God grant that it may not be for long), the situation which you see forces me to come before the public” (WA 2:450; LW 27:159-60). This hardly seems like an attempt to introduce a distinction between his own work and that of Erasmus by appealing to a difference in genre. To be sure, Luther begins his lectures (and the printed edition of his commentary in 1535) with the words, *Suscipimus denuo enarrare in nomine Domini epistolam Pauli ad Galatas* (WA 40.1:39), but it is also the case that each of the successive works Luther published on Galatians was titled *commentarius*, not *enarratio*. Hagen rightly points out that sixteenth-century titles were often supplied by publishers, but I find it hard to imagine that so forceful a personality as Luther—particularly later in his career—could not have carried the point if it really mattered to him. The fact that he was willing to let successive editions of his *Commentary* on Galatians proceed so titled ought rather to alert us to the breadth of this genre in the sixteenth century. For more on this last point, see the helpful discussion in Cottie, “Erasmus’s *Paraphrases*: A ‘New Kind of Commentary?’”

scathing with earlier interpreters, but he never pulled his punches: when advances in textual, linguistic, and historical understanding discomfited traditional readings, Luther showed no hesitation in setting aside the views of Jerome, Erasmus, or even Augustine. If we take him at his word, there is no reason to think he would not expect the same handling from modern exegetes today.

Argument and Structure

Luther follows patristic and medieval custom by prefacing his commentary with a summary of what he takes to be the *argumentum* of the epistle as a whole, and here his departure from traditional exegesis is apparent, even in the earliest edition.

For Jerome, Paul's letter to the Galatians (like the letter to the Romans) is concerned especially with establishing the "cessation of the old Law and the introduction of the new Law."⁴⁰ Here, the relationship is clearly one of promise and fulfillment, whereby the fullness of evangelical grace renders obsolete the burdens of Jewish custom.⁴¹ The uniqueness of Galatians lies in the fact that Paul is not, as in Romans, addressing Jewish believers who were still clinging to the rites of their forefathers, but Gentile converts who had been intimidated into observing Jewish practices by the authority of "certain people who claimed that Peter, James, and all the churches of Judea were conflating the Gospel of Christ with the old law." In response to this crisis, "Paul proceeds cautiously, steering a middle course between two extremes so as neither to betray the grace of the Gospel . . . nor to detract from his [Jewish] forefathers in his preaching of grace."⁴² For Jerome, therefore, the letter to the Galatians must be read as addressing a very specific historical context, and Paul's rhetoric must be interpreted accordingly. The letter does not set out a straightforward description of universal theological themes in the manner of a philosophical treatise; rather, it "makes a stealthy approach, as if going by a secret passageway."⁴³ This allows Jerome explain (away) the apparent conflict between Peter and Paul, a source of some embarrassment for Christian intellectuals ever since the publication of Porphyry's *Adversus Christianos* and a major worry for Jerome.⁴⁴

For Augustine, Galatians is ultimately concerned not with a contrast between old law and new law, between Jewish customs and evangelical grace, but with the nature of grace itself. The reality of the grace revealed in the Gospel has not yet dawned on some,

⁴⁰ *In his autem duabus, ut dixi, epistolis, specialiter antiquae legis cessatio, et nouae introductio continetur.* PL 26:334; FC 121:59.

⁴¹ "In everything that the Apostle wrote or said in person, he tirelessly taught that the burdensome obligations [*onera deposita*] of the old Law have been abolished and that everything that had preceded in types and symbols [*typis et imaginibus*] (the Sabbath rest, injurious circumcision, the recurring cycle of new moons and of the three annual feasts, the dietary laws, and the daily ablution, after which one would become defiled again) ceased to have validity with the arrival of evangelical grace, which is fulfilled by the faith of the believing soul [*fides animae credentis impletur*] and not by the blood of animal sacrifices." PL 26:334; FC 121:58-59.

⁴² *Quamobrem ita caute inter utrumque et medius incedit, ut nec euangelii prodat gratiam, pressus pondere et auctoritate maiorum, nec praecessoribus faciat iniuriam, dum assertor est gratiae.* PL 26:334; FC 121:59.

⁴³ *Oblique uero et quasi per cuniculos latenter incedens.* PL 26:334; FC 121:59.

⁴⁴ See Robert M. Grant, "Porphyry among the Early Christians," in *Romanitas et Christianitas: Studia Iano Henrico Waszink oblata*, ed. den Boer, et al (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1973), 181-87.

and Paul writes to make explicit the underlying logic of grace, a logic which makes sense of both the law and faith:

The reason the Apostle writes to the Galatians is so they may understand what it is that God's grace accomplishes for them: they are no longer under the law. For though the grace of the gospel had been preached to them, there were some from the circumcision who still did not grasp the real benefit of grace. Despite being called Christians, they still wanted to be under the burdens of the law—burdens that the Lord God had imposed not on those serving righteousness but on those serving sin. That is, he had given a righteous law to unrighteous people to point out their sins, not take them away. He takes away sins only by the grace of faith, which works through love (Gal. 5:6).⁴⁵

“Law,” for Augustine, is not limited to the ceremonial functions regarded by Jerome as mere “types and symbols.” Rather, law in this context is a comprehensive category embracing all the commands of God revealed under the old dispensation—what in the later tradition would be distinguished under the tripartite headings of “moral,” “ceremonial,” and “civil” law.⁴⁶ While Augustine agrees with Jerome that many of the typological functions of the Mosaic law have been fulfilled, and therefore rendered non-binding for Christians—though he never goes so far as Jerome in regarding them as “abolished”—the primary contrast is not between Jewish law and Christian grace, but between law and faith as complementary movements within God's overarching economy of grace. Formulating the issue with striking clarity during the early stages of the Pelagian controversy, Augustine would write in his treatise *On the Spirit and the Letter* that “by the law of works God says: Do what I command! By the law of faith we say to God: Give what you command!”⁴⁷ Faith, for Augustine, thus provides the power for fulfillment of the law's moral demands, not the abrogation of those demands.

As I have already shown, Luther's primary interlocutors in his exegesis of Galatians were patristic commentators and humanist scholars, with scant heed paid to the roughly thousand years of interpretive tradition between. Nevertheless, it will be helpful briefly to sketch out the approach of at least one medieval interpreter with whom Luther was *not* in explicit dialogue, in order to further highlight the distinctiveness of Luther's own approach. Thomas Aquinas is typical of many medieval interpreters in that he seeks to synthesize patristic opinion, rather than pit one source against another. Thus, it is unsurprising that we see themes from both Jerome and Augustine harmonized without any sense that his sources might be in tension. Although modern scholars have consistently demonstrated Thomas's profound debts to Augustine, particularly on the questions of grace, faith, and works so central to Galatians,⁴⁸ when it came to making sense of Galatians on its own terms, Thomas's work bears a much heavier impress from

⁴⁵ Plummer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians*, 125.

⁴⁶ On the development of this typology in Thomas Aquinas, see the discussion in Matthew Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation according to Thomas Aquinas* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 22-30.

⁴⁷ *Spir. et litt.* 22, CSEL 60:174; WSA I.23:164. Cf. *Conf.* 10.31.45: “Give what you command, and command what you will.” According to Duval, it was Pelagius' angry reaction to this passage in *Confessiones* in the presence of Bishop Paulinus of Nola which precipitated his conflict with Augustine. Yves-Marie Duval, “La date du « De natura » de Pélage. Les premières étapes de la controverse sur la nature de la grâce,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 36, no. 2 (1990): 257-83.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Daniel A. Keating, “Justification, Sanctification, and Divinization in Thomas Aquinas,” in *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Thomas Weinandy, et al (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 139-58.

Jerome. Taking Lev 26:1 as an epigram for the entire epistle (“The new coming on, you shall cast away the old”), Thomas explains that

The Apostle writes the Galatians this epistle in which he shows that with the coming of the grace of the New Testament, the Old Testament should be cast out, so that with the fulfillment of the truth, the figure may be abandoned, and with the attainment of these two, namely, grace and truth, one may arrive at the truth of justice [*iustitiae*] and glory.⁴⁹ According to Thomas, all the other books of the Pauline corpus treat grace as it exists in the Church in light of the “newness of the doctrine of Christ,” but Galatians is concerned with refuting “oldness.” This *vetustas* is fourfold: 1) the “oldness of error” (Is 26:3); 2) the “oldness of figure” (Heb 8:8); 3) the “oldness of guilt” (Ps 31:3); 4) the “oldness of punishment” (Lam 3:4).⁵⁰ This oldness, Thomas argues, stands in sharp contrast to the newness of grace made manifest in Christ.

So far as the structure of the epistle is concerned, Thomas provides a detailed analysis of the flow of Paul’s argument. After a brief *salutatio* (1:1-1:5), the rest of the letter is taken up with the *narratio epistularis*, which consists of two parts: first Paul refutes the Galatians’ error on the authority of the Gospel (1:6-2:21) and on that of the Old Testament (3:1-4:31); second, he admonishes them with regard to doctrine and morals (5:1-6:18). The first part of the *admonitio (quantum ad divina)* is thus for Thomas the climax of the letter, with its twofold charge to “stand firm” and “do not submit to a yoke of slavery” (5:1). This twofold construction is reiterated in 5:6, where Thomas focuses on the contrast between circumcision as a sign of the “oldness” that enslaves, and “faith working through love” as the empowering “newness” that saves. For Thomas, therefore, faith is at the center of Paul’s argument in Galatians, but understood here in the Augustinian sense as the power which liberates the will to perform works of love. Thus construed, Galatians becomes a key text for reconciling the theology of Paul with that of James.

Luther is having none of this. His exposition of Galatians departs radically from his predecessors both in his apprehension of the epistle’s argument and its structure. In his summary of the epistle’s *argumentum*, Luther sets out as clearly as anywhere else in his corpus his distinctive understanding of the *iustitia Dei* so central to his mature theology.⁵¹ At the heart of this insight is the sharp distinction Luther draws between active and passive righteousness, a “breakthrough” he would later describe as the turning point in his understanding of the Christian Gospel.⁵² In 1519, the distinction is implicit:

⁴⁹ *Scribit ergo apostolus Galatis hanc epistolam, in qua ostendit, quod, veniente gratia novi testamenti, debet proici vetus testamentum, ut impleta veritate deseratur figura, quibus duabus, scilicet gratia et veritate, adeptis, perveniatur ad veritatem iustitiae et gloriae. Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura, vol. 1: Super Epistolam ad Galatas lectura, ed. Busa (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt: Frommann-Hoolzbog, 1980), 181.*

⁵⁰ *Super Epistola ad Galatas*, 181.

⁵¹ The secondary literature on this subject is massive, but for a basic overview of Luther’s development during this period, see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 85-95, 258-66.

⁵² See the famous account in the *Vorrede zum ersten Bande der Gesamtausgaben seiner lateinischen Schriften* (1545), WA 54:185-86; LW 34:336-338. Scholars continue to disagree about the dating and theological significance of Luther’s so-called “Reformation Discovery.” I have examined the issues in some detail in Chapter 4 of my doctoral dissertation, “Divided by Faith: The Protestant Doctrine of Justification and the Confessionalization of Biblical Exegesis,” (Duke University, 2010). Luther was clearly using the language of *iustitia passiva* as early as his lectures on Romans in 1515, though I argue that the revolutionary implications of this terminological shift dawned on Luther’s consciousness much more gradually than his own later account suggests. See also the recent scholarly biography of Luther by Volker Leppin, *Martin Luther* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006).

“Although the Galatians had first been taught . . . to trust in Jesus Christ alone, not in their own righteousneses [*iusticias*] or in those of the Law, later on they were again turned away by the false apostles and led to trust in works of legalistic righteousness [*legalis iusticiae*].”⁵³ Here careful attention to Luther’s language is critical: the plural *iusticias* points to what would become a characteristically Lutheran way of speaking of the various types of human righteousness, against which is set the righteousness of God (*iustitia Dei*). In 1535, he picks up this term and unpacks it more fully: “The argument is this: Paul wants to establish the doctrine of faith, grace, the forgiveness of sins or Christian righteousness, so that we may have a perfect knowledge and know the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness.”⁵⁴ In contrast with this *Iustitia Christiana*, Luther enumerates a sweeping range of *iustitiae*: *iustitia politica*, “which the emperor, the princes of the world, philosophers, and lawyers consider.” So also, there is *iustitia ceremonialis*, a righteousness grounded in “human traditions,” ranging from the traditions of the pope to practices of moral discipline employed by parents. Finally there is *iustitia legalis seu decalogi*, taught by Moses. It is important to point out here that despite the similarity in terms, Luther is not referring to the well-known distinction in Western theology between civil, ceremonial, and moral law. This distinction was developed in order to parse the various dimensions of the law given by God to the Jews under the Mosaic dispensation. Luther’s terminology, however, is much broader, embracing laws of both human and divine origin.

Luther argues that the primary aim of Paul’s letter to the Galatians is to contrast these various forms of active righteousness with the passive righteousness of the Gospel. His description of this contrast is well-known, but worth quoting here at length:

Over and above all these there is the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, which is to be distinguished most carefully from all the others. For they are all contrary to this righteousness, both because they proceed from the laws of emperors, the traditions of the pope, and the commandments of God, and because they consist in our works and can be achieved by us with “purely natural endowments” [*ex puris naturalibus*] as the scholastics teach, or from a gift of God. For these kinds of the righteousness of works, too, are gifts of God, as are all the things we have. But this most excellent righteousness, the righteousness of faith, which God imputes to us through Christ without works, is neither political nor ceremonial nor legal nor work-righteousness but is quite the opposite; it is a merely passive righteousness, while all the others, listed above, are active. For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness “passive.” This is a righteousness hidden in a mystery, which the world does not understand.⁵⁵

This passage signals not only a break with the “semi-Pelagianism” of late medieval theologians, such as Gabriel Biel, who taught that human beings could merit the gift of

⁵³ *Galatae primum ab Apostolo sanam fidem, id est in solum Iesum Christum, non in suas aut legis iusticias fidere, docti post per pseudoapostolos rursum deturbati sunt in fiduciam operum legalis iustitiae. . . . Galatas* (1519), WA 2:451; LW 27:161.

⁵⁴ *Est autem hoc argumentum: Paulus vult stabilire doctrinam illam fidei, Gratiae, Remissionis peccatorum seu Iustitiae Christianae, ut habeamus perfectam cognitionem et differentiam interiustitiam Christianam et omnes alias Iustitias. Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:40; LW 26:4. The Latin word *iustitia* is notoriously difficult to translate into English, carrying with it a much richer set of associations than either of the terms most frequently used, “righteousness” and “justice.” For this reason, I have opted to retain the Latin in the text whenever possible.

⁵⁵ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:40-41; LW 26:4.

grace *ex puris naturalibus*, but also with the broader Augustinian tradition, which saw God's gift of inner grace as the transformative power which freed the *viator* from sin and empowered her to fulfill the righteous demands of the law.⁵⁶ As Augustine himself put it, in a dictum which had become axiomatic in Western theology, "when God crowns our merits, he does nothing but reward his own gifts."⁵⁷ Luther, of course, does not deny the transformative power of this inner grace. Like the legislation of a wise prince, the rites of a holy pontiff, or the moral injunctions of divine law, this inner habit of grace is a gift of God. But like all these gifts, it is a *human activity*, something we do in response to the more fundamental gift of God's creative word, which stands prior to all else.

For Luther, Paul's letter addresses a concrete historical situation, and it must be read in light of that situation: the Galatian Christians, a predominantly gentile group, have responded in faith to the preaching of Paul's Gospel, but after a promising beginning, they have lapsed back into a sub-Christian faith, putting their confidence in "works of legalistic righteousness."⁵⁸ The problem, as Luther sees it, is not that these works are obsolete, as Jerome had thought, or that they are impotent, as Augustine had thought. The problem is that the Galatians have failed to recognize the gratuitous nature of the *iustitia Dei* as the gift that stands prior to all human response. This failure jeopardizes the Galatians' very identity in Christ, and thus calls forth Paul's most strenuous response.

Luther's exposition of Galatians differs from modern biblical commentaries in that he does not offer an explicit outline of the text. In this, he differs also from many of his medieval predecessors, who often provided careful analyses of rhetorical and dialectical structure. Luther seems to have had little use for such interpretive tools, but this does not mean that he paid no attention to the structure of the argument, as is seen from several key passages in the commentary itself. Because Luther recognizes in Paul a fellow warrior of the Gospel, his attention is riveted by Paul's polemical rhetoric to the near exclusion of any explicit analysis of the flow of Paul's thought within the epistle or of the place of the epistle within the apostle's wider corpus. In fact, it is not till the end of Chapter 4—at the close of what Luther regards as the positive argument of the epistle—that a rough sketch of its structure is given, and this only in passing.

As he enters on his treatment of the allegory of Sarah and Hagar beginning at 4:24, Luther notes that Paul had already proven his central argument, the righteousness of faith against that of works, by arguments based on experience (chapters 1-2), on the story of Abraham (3:1-9), on the evidence of Scripture (3:10-22), and by a series of analogies (3:23-4:7). The story of Abraham's two sons is then added as "a kind of ornament."⁵⁹ Thus, the substance of Paul's positive argument ends at 4:7 with the declaration, "so through God you are no longer a slave but a son." Then, in 4:8-9, when Paul asks the Galatians how it is that they could abandon such benefits and return in

⁵⁶ On Biel's theology, see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 47-48. Luther opposed this notion from as early as 1515, when he lectured on Paul's epistle to the Romans (WA 56:360).

⁵⁷ *Cum Deus coronat merita nostra, nihil aliud coronat quam munera sua*. In *Ep.* 194.5; CSEL 57:190.

⁵⁸ *Galatas* (1519), WA 2:451; LW 27:161.

⁵⁹ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:657; LW 26:436.

slavery to “weak and beggarly elements,” Luther discerns the conclusion of Paul’s main line of thought.⁶⁰

For Luther, therefore, the core of Paul’s argument in Galatians is front-loaded in the first two chapters of the epistle; everything else merely expands upon this central point and reinforces it. The “scolding” and moral admonition that come in the final two chapters of the letter represent not the climax of Paul’s argumentation, as it is for Thomas, but a set of derivative considerations flowing from the *argumentum*. For Thomas, the central thrust of the epistle reaches its climax with “faith working through love;” for Luther, this is simply an outworking of the more fundamental insight that “a man is not justified by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.” This shift in how the argument and structure of the epistle are construed has important theological consequences, three of which I will now highlight.

Theological Themes

Anti-Asceticism

Luther’s rejection of all forms of *iustitia activa*, as he describes it in the *argumentum*, carries radical consequences for how he views “religion.” In commenting on Gal 1:4, Luther regards Paul’s statement that Christ delivers us “from the present evil world” as a summary statement of the epistle as a whole. “Paul is correct in calling it the evil world; for when it is at its best, then it is at its worst. The world is at its best in men who are religious, wise, and learned; yet in them it is actually evil twice over.”⁶¹ In medieval Latin, the term *religio* had come to refer very narrowly to life in the monastery—that is, life governed by a *regula*, a “rule,” and this is clearly the meaning Luther has primarily in mind.⁶² And yet, more broadly, Luther equates “religion” not so much with the institutional form of monasticism itself, but rather with the mindset of *askesis*, the notion that human beings are transformed through practice “from the outside in,” and that this transformative process can ultimately issue in salvation.⁶³ This notion, as it developed in early Christianity, rested on an essentially optimistic assessment of the human condition

⁶⁰ *Haec conclusio est disputationis Paulinae. Deiceps usque ad finem Epistolae non multum disputabit, sed praecepta de moribus tradet. Obiurgat prius tamen Galatas, indignissime ferens, hanc divinam coelestem doctrinam habetis doctores, qui redigere vos volunt in servitum legis. Galatas (1535), WA 40.1:600; LW 26:394.*

⁶¹ *Ideo Paulus recte vocat mundum Nequam, quia tunc est pessimus, cum est optimus. In religiosis, sapientibus et doctis hominibus mundus est optimus, et ibi vere dupliciter malus est. Galatas (1535), WA 40.1:95; LW 26:40.*

⁶² John Bossy, “Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim,” *Past and Present* 95 (May 1982): 4. The student notes on this text record his words as follows: *In monachis est optimus, in ingeniosis hominibus, sapientibus, philosophis, et ibi dupliciter malus, Invidiam, avaritiam, furtum, wie gisstig die leut sind, vides. WA 40.1:95.*

⁶³ Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 180. Despite widespread scholarly consensus that “asceticism” is virtually universal in all human cultures, the term has proven notoriously difficult to define. Walter Kaelber’s definition in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* attempts to give a generalized description capable of cross-cultural application: “a voluntary, sustained, and at least partially systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which immediate, sensual, or profane gratifications are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state or a more thorough absorption in the sacred.” For my purposes here, the two key elements are self-discipline/self-denial and its goal—that is, disciplined practice aimed at achieving salvation.

(despite its spectacular austerities): “men and women are not slaves to the habitual, but can cultivate extraordinary forms of human existence.”⁶⁴

Luther attacks this notion relentlessly throughout both commentaries, arguing that ascetic practice makes Christ useless. The problem, for Luther, is not the intensity of the discipline. Despite caricatures which have persisted since his own lifetime, Luther was not a libertine: he is clear that the Christian life is arduous, and not for the faint of heart.⁶⁵ The problem is rather the orientation of means to ends, of practice in relation to soteriology. Commenting on Gal 5:2, Luther reads Paul’s objection to the circumcision of gentile converts as a summary rejection of all ascetic practice:

this passage is a terrible thunderbolt against the entire kingdom of the pope. To speak only of the best among them, all the priests, monks, and hermits did not trust in Christ, . . . they trusted in their own works, righteousnesses, vows, and merits. Hence they hear their judgment in this passage, namely, that Christ is of no use to them. For if they are able to abolish sins and to merit the forgiveness of sins and eternal life by their own righteousness and ascetic life (*austeritate vitae*), what good does it do them that Christ was born, suffered, shed His blood, was raised, conquered sin, death, and the devil, when they themselves can overcome these monsters by their own powers?⁶⁶

Luther rejects this more optimistic anthropology, but what makes his polemic so extraordinary is the way in which he identifies this ascetic impulse with the essence of religion itself. The Gospel, for Luther, is something that stands in opposition to “religion.”⁶⁷ To be sure, Luther is not entirely consistent with his language: at times he uses the term *religio* in a positive sense (i.e., *religio vera* vs. *religio falsa*), but even in these instances it is clear that what is in view is the proclamation of the Word (received passively by faith), over against human wisdom and practice (active righteousness). By equating *religio* (or at least *religio falsa*) with *iustitia activa*, therefore, it would seem that Luther is very close to Durkheim’s insight that asceticism is one of the “elementary forms” of religious life.⁶⁸ This explains the ease with which Luther can lump together all forms of religious practice in opposition to the *iustitia Dei*: “those in the world who do not teach it are either Jews or Turks or papists or sectarians.”⁶⁹

In one sense, Luther pays a certain backhanded tribute, both to the Jews and to the monks, when he equates them with one another: both represent the very best of what human beings are capable of achieving through *askesis*. The problem, for Luther, is not that the virtues produced thereby are not real.⁷⁰ The problem is that human beings seem driven by a psychological necessity to regard these virtues as currency in an economy of divine exchange. When this happens, the good becomes the enemy of the perfect, and

⁶⁴ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 17.

⁶⁵ In his comments on Gal 5:7, for example, he remarks that “the life of the devout is strenuous running.” *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.2:39; LW 27:32.

⁶⁶ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.2:10; LW 27:10.

⁶⁷ In his comments on the very first verse of the epistle, for example, he writes that “the Gospel is a doctrine that teaches something far more sublime than the wisdom, righteousness and religion of the world” (WA 40.1:52; LW 26:13). See also his comments (1535) on Gal 1:10, 2:16, 2:21, 3:1, 4:9, 4:14, 6:14.

⁶⁸ According to Durkheim, “asceticism is not a rare, exceptional and nearly abnormal fruit of the religious life, as some have supposed it to be; on the contrary, it is one of its essential elements.” In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph W. Swain (New York: Free Press, 1947), 311.

⁶⁹ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:48; LW 26:9.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Luther’s remarks on the virtues of “noble Pagans,” such as Cicero and Pomponius in WA 40.1:219.

“all the gifts of body and mind that you enjoy—wisdom, righteousness, holiness, eloquence, power, beauty, or wealth—are only the instruments of the devil’s infernal tyranny.”⁷¹ For of course, the devil himself is a saint.⁷²

Law and the “Presumption of Religion”

Luther would also have agreed with Durkheim’s judgment that the source of ascetic practice is law, since all religious practice is grounded in a “system of interdicts.” More recently, Geoffrey Harpham has argued that asceticism is a “subideological” category, common to all cultures. The point is obvious, he argues once we consider that “all cultures are ethical cultures; for the idea of ethics is inescapably ascetical.”⁷³ Luther is not operating with the generalized categories of a social theorist, but with the biblical categories of law and gospel: all human beings have some access to natural law, however dimly discerned, and all human religions are attempts to respond to the law’s demands in ways deemed appropriate to human reason.⁷⁴ The real purpose of the Mosaic law, in Luther’s view, is not to replace or even to supplement the law of nature, but to make it explicit—to make the subideological ideological, we might say—with the aim of unmasking the ascetic impulse for the presumption he takes it to be:

To curb and crush this monster and raging beast, that is, the presumption of religion (*opinionem scilicet religionis*), God is obliged, on Mt. Sinai, to give a new Law with such pomp and with such an awesome spectacle that the entire people is crushed with fear. For since reason becomes haughty with this human presumption of righteousness and imagines that on account of this it is pleasing to God, therefore God has to send some Hercules, namely, the Law, to attack, subdue, and destroy this monster with full force. Therefore the Law is intent only on this beast, not on any other.⁷⁵

The law of Moses (i.e., Sinai) is not aimed at destroying sin *per se*, but the human presumption, implicit in ascetic practice (and thus, by extension, in all religious activity), that any human activity can do so.

The problem, as Luther sees it, stems not from the form of the law but from its content: the law commands that we love God with all our heart and love our neighbors as ourselves. “But from this it does not follow: ‘this is written, and therefore it is done; the

⁷¹ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:95; LW 26:40.

⁷² *Cur ergo, O perversum in modum, Sancte Satan, vis me facere Sanctum et a me exigere iustitias. . . ? Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:88.

⁷³ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xi.

⁷⁴ Luther writes in another context, “all by nature have a certain knowledge of the law, though it is very weak and hazy. Hence it was and is necessary to hand on to them that knowledge of the law so that they may recognize the magnitude of their sin, the wrath of God, etc.” *1. Antinomerdisputation* (1537), WA 39.1:361; quoted in Lohse, 273.

⁷⁵ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:219; LW 26:123. In WA, the sentence is rendered thus: *Ut ergo Deus compescat et contundat monstrum et bestiam istam furentem, Opinionem scilicet religionis, coactus est ferre in monte Syna novam legem tanta pompa et tam horribili specie, ut totus populus pavore concussus sit etc.* The 1538 printed version, however, reads as follows: *Ut autem compescat & contundat Deus monstrum & bestiam illam furentem (opinionem iusticiae seu religionis) quae naturaliter instat & superbire facit homines, ut putent propter eam se placere Deo, oportuit eum mittere aliquem Herculem, qui monstrum istud toto impetu adoriretur, prosterneret & conficeret, ho est, coactus est ferre in monte Syna legem, tanta pompa & tam horribili specie, ut totus populus pavore concussus sit.* This reading makes even more explicit Luther’s equation of “religion” with the “presumption of righteousness.”

Law commands love, and therefore we love.”⁷⁶ Augustine had solved this problem with his distinction between the letter and the spirit: the former demands that we love God and neighbor, the latter enables us to do so. For Luther, however, this solution overlooks the plain fact (or so he regards it) that nobody actually does: “You cannot produce anyone on earth who loves God and his neighbor as the Law requires.” In the life to come, Luther explains, we will be fully empowered to love God in the manner commanded by the Law, but in the meantime “such purity is hindered by our flesh, to which sin will cling as long as we live.”⁷⁷ Faith *does* empower us to respond to God and our neighbor in love, but never so as to stand as the basis for our acceptance into fellowship with God—either at the beginning of the Christian life, or at its end.

Faith, Love, and the Gift

Luther’s mature theology of justification cannot be explained away in terms of his psychology or his personal “quest for a merciful God.” It is a serious attempt to grapple with the great commandment of scripture: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).⁷⁸ Medieval theologians, building on Augustine’s central distinction between the letter and the spirit in his anti-Pelagian writings, had reconciled Paul’s language of justification by faith with the love command of Christ by a metaphysical distinction in causation. Faith was seen as the material cause of salvation, love as the formal cause. This love, infused by God’s grace, is thus the *forma*, the divine reality which “(in-)forms” faith, giving it tangible reality. Love thus changes faith from a “dead,” formless void to something living and active, a “colorful” knowing. This understanding was summarized by the expression “faith formed by love” (*fides charitate formata*).⁷⁹

To say that Luther rejects this notion would be an understatement: he regards it as a “wicked and destructive gloss” and a “hellish poison.”⁸⁰ The reason for this is apparent once we recall the biblical insistence that love itself is the content of the law: to say that faith is dead unless “formed” or “colored” by love is, from Luther’s point of view, simply another way of saying that faith is dead unless formed by the law, since love is what the law commands. Thus is Christ made into a lawgiver, a charge Luther hurls at his Catholic opponents with relentless fury throughout the commentary.

⁷⁶ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.2:79; LW 27:63.

⁷⁷ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.2:79; LW 27:64.

⁷⁸ Simo Peura, “What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation,” in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 76.

⁷⁹ Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 24. Or, as Thomas Aquinas put it in his comments on Gal 5:6: “Hence [Paul] says, ‘For in Christ Jesus,’ that is, in those who live in the faith of Christ, ‘neither circumcision nor uncircumcision mean anything,’ that is, they are indifferent; ‘but faith,’ not unformed [*informis*], but the kind ‘that works by love’ (cf., Jas. 2:26, ‘Faith without works is dead’). For faith is a knowledge of the word of God (cf., Eph. 3:17, ‘That Christ may dwell by faith in your hearts. . .’), which word is not perfectly possessed or perfectly known unless the love which it hopes for is possessed. *Ad Gal.* 5.2.

⁸⁰ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:239-40; LW 26:136-37.

Luther's solution to this problem is to introduce a temporal diremption between faith (*fides*) and love (*charitas*) as a way of isolating the latter from any implication in justification or the believer's union with Christ. Faith thus because the unitive force: it "takes hold of Christ and has Him present, enclosing Him as the ring encloses a gem."⁸¹ But even though faith unites the believer to Christ, faith is distinct from love, and in fact precedes it: "Because you have taken hold of Christ by faith, through whom you are righteous, you should now go and love God and your neighbor."⁸² So insistent is Luther on distinguishing faith from love as the basis of union with Christ that adds a new twist on his spousal metaphor for justification to drive the point home:

This Bridegroom, Christ, must be alone with His bride in His private chamber, and all the family and household must be shunted away. But later on, when the Bridegroom opens the door and comes out, then let the servants return to take care of them and serve them food and drink. Then let works and love begin.⁸³

Many of Luther's most incisive critics have noted his tendency, despite the most insistent rhetoric to the contrary, to collapse love back into faith—after all, if faith is a unitive act, it is difficult to see how it can exist absent any element of desire.⁸⁴ The analogy quoted above might seem to support such a critique—can it really be that Luther is celebrating "a spousal union without spousal love"?⁸⁵ Rather than chalk this up to bad temper or Luther's "Nominalist philosophical formation," we would do well to remember that early modern notions of marriage were rather different from our own. The evangelical reformers viewed marriage as a social arrangement ordered for the promotion of mutual support, the procreation of children, and the avoidance of sexual sin.⁸⁶ There was no assumption that sexual congress was an expression of genuine love, and Luther warned against confusing the two. It was easy enough to take a wife in the heat of infatuation, but abiding love could only arise from the union of habits and character, not merely of bodies.⁸⁷ Seen in this light, Luther's conjugal analogy makes a bit more sense:

⁸¹ *Fides enim apprehendit Christum et habet eum praesentem includitque eum annulus gemmam, Et qui fuerit inventus cum tali fide apprehensi Christi in corde, illum reputat Deus iustum. Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:233; LW 26:132.

⁸² *Quia apprehendisti fide Christum per quem iustus es, nunc eas et diligas Deum et proximum. Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:234; LW 26:133.

⁸³ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:241; LW 26:137. Spousal metaphors for the believer's union with Christ do not figure especially large in Luther's commentaries on Galatians, perhaps because the imagery is not present in the biblical text itself. Luther had deployed this metaphor most famously in his 1520 treatise, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, and he returned to it frequently over the course of his long career.

⁸⁴ The most formidable of these critics remains, in my view, John Henry Newman, who pointed out the tendency in Luther and his followers to blur the line between faith and love: "at all times they have indulged in descriptions of faith as an adhering to Christ, a delighting and rejoicing in Him, and a giving oneself up to Him; all which seem to be nothing more or less than properties of love." *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification*, 3d ed. (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 9.

⁸⁵ Michael Waldstein, "The Trinitarian, Spousal, and Ecclesial Logic of Justification," in *Reading Romans with St Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 281.

⁸⁶ John Witte, Jr., *Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 201.

⁸⁷ "For that reason, when one desires to take a wife, let him be serious about it and ask our Lord God, 'Dear Lord God, if it is your divine will that I should live without a wife, then help me; if not, grant me a good, pious little maid to spend my life with, so that I love her and she loves me.' For the union of the flesh does not bring this about. There must also be a coming together of habits and character. Sexual intercourse does not make this." WA TR 5:214 (No. 5524); ET in *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, ed. Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 133.

both in the marriage union and the believer's union with Christ, genuine love arises only in the context of a relationship constituted by mutual trust and fidelity.

This spousal imagery sheds further light on a topic which has been of considerable interest to recent scholars, Luther's theology of gift/giving.⁸⁸ Although Luther's distinctive understanding of justification by faith alone has often been described in terms of a unilateral gift, allowing for no reciprocity, this must be carefully qualified. On the one hand, the dialectic between law and gospel would seem to rule out any notion of human beings offering anything to God: "Now demanding [i.e., law] and granting [i.e., gospel], receiving and offering, are exact opposites and cannot exist together. For that which is granted, I receive; but that which I grant, I do not receive but offer to someone else."⁸⁹ But even this cannot be taken as an absolute contrast, as Luther's language in this very context makes clear: "The Gospel, on the contrary, *does not demand*; it grants freely; *it commands* us to hold out our hands and to receive what is being offered."⁹⁰ For Luther, this passive reception of faith is itself the "gift" we give God in return: it is "the supreme worship, the supreme allegiance, the supreme obedience, and the supreme sacrifice." Its "omnipotent" power lies in the fact that it acknowledges God as "the Author and Donor of every good." In so doing, faith "consummates the Deity; and, if I may put it this way, it is the creator of the Deity, not in the substance of God but in us."⁹¹ As Bayer summarizes this remarkable passage, "the passivity of receiving the gift does not exclude a certain form of activity, but instead empowers and liberates us to that activity."⁹² First consummation—"then let works and love begin."

Conclusion

Luther's engagement with Galatians was, for all its creative brilliance, a product of its times. He was one of the first Western exegetes in more than a thousand years to wrestle with the text in something like its original form—that is, in Greek, rather than in Latin—and this gives his exposition a sense of freshness, of discovery. Moreover, he was writing at a time of fierce theological controversy, when the central claims of the Christian faith were being renegotiated at the most fundamental level. Luther's commentaries on Galatians represent a serious effort to reframe the grammar and vocabulary of Christian

⁸⁸ See Puera, "Christ as Favor and Gift: The Challenge of Luther's Understanding of Justification," in *Union with Christ*, 42-69; Bo Kristian Holm, "Luther's Theology of the Gift," in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen, et al (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 78-86; *Gabe und Geben bei Luther: Das Verhältnis zwischen Reziprozität und Reformatorischer Rechtfertigungslehre* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006); Oswald Bayer, "The Ethics of Gift," *Lutheran Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2010): 447-68; and the essays collected in *Word-Being-Gift: Justification-Economy-Ontology*, ed. Holm, Widmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

⁸⁹ *Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:337; LW 26:208-209.

⁹⁰ *Contra Evangelium non exigit, sed donat gratis et iubet nos porrectis manibus oblata accipere*. Ibid (emphasis mine).

⁹¹ *Et Paulus hic ex fide in Deum summum cultum, cummum obsequium, summam obedientiam et sacrificium facit ex fide in Deum. Qui Rhetor est, exaggeret hunc locum, et videbit, quod fides sit res omnipotens quodque virtus eius sit inaestimabilis et infinita. Tribuit enim Deo gloriam, qua nihil maius ei tribui potest. Tribuere autem Deo gloriam est credere ei, est reputare eum esse veracem, sapientem, iustum, misericordem, omnipotentem, in summa: agnoscere eum authorem et largitorem omnis boni. Hoc ratio non facit, sed fides. ea consummat divinitatem et, ut ita dicam, creatrix est divinitatis, non in substantia Dei, sed in nobis. Galatas* (1535), WA 40.1:360; LW 26:226-27.

⁹² "Ethics of Gift," 459.

theology more closely on the language of the Bible. In so doing, he attacked many of the dominant theological paradigms of his day and traced their errors (as he saw them) back to their patristic sources, especially Origen and Jerome. This adds a certain irony to the observation that Luther has himself come to represent an analogous interpretive orthodoxy in the minds of many biblical scholars, one which must now be displaced in order to understand Paul more fully. I'm not so sure Luther would be entirely surprised by this. In the dedication to his first commentary in 1519, Luther hopes that through his effort "those who have heard me interpreting the letters of the apostle may find Paul clearer and may happily surpass me. But even if I have not achieved this, well, I shall still have wasted this labor gladly; it remains an attempt by which I have wanted to kindle the interest of others in Paul's theology; and this no good man will charge against me as a fault."⁹³ None indeed.

⁹³ *Galatas* (1519), WA 2.449; LW 27:160.