

5-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Maas, Korey, "De Poenitentia et Evangelio Coming Together and Coming Clear in Luther's Theology" (1999). *Master of Sacred Theology Seminar Papers*. 6.
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De Poenitentia et Evangelio
**Coming Together and Coming Clear
in Luther's Theology**

A Seminar Paper presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Historical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

by

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May 1999

Approved by _____
Advisor

Reader

Introduction

Martin Luther's road to Reformation was neither a straight, simple, nor easily mapped route. It had its ups and downs, its detours and setbacks. And, not unlike the road Saul traveled to Damascus, it held certain unexpected revelations.¹

Perhaps the best known among these is Luther's new understanding of the righteousness of God. In words that have since become famous, he explains: "I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates..."² Likewise, some years later Luther relates the effect that his discovery of the proper distinction between law and gospel had upon him. "When I discovered the proper distinction — namely, that the law is one thing and the gospel is another — I made myself free."³

¹In the interest of offering as uncluttered a map as possible, the following abbreviations will be used throughout:

AE = *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955 -).

WA = *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883 -).

Tappert = *The Book of Concord*, edited by T.G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

BKS = *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967)

Lenker = *Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*, edited by J.N. Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995).

Quotations, unless otherwise noted, will follow available English translations.

²Martin Luther, *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* (1545), *AE* 34: 337; *WA* 54: 185, 12ff. Cf. also *AE* 54: 193-4; 308-9

³Martin Luther, *Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel* (1542-43 *Table Talk*), *AE* 54: 443; *WA Tr.* 5: 210, 15-16. This last clause, "da riß ich her durch [hindurch]," is perhaps better translated, "then I broke through." Not only is this a more literal representation of Luther's German, but it makes evident one source of the long standing discussion of Luther's evangelical "breakthrough."

Luther tells of yet a third moment of clarity. It too played a pivotal role in the formation of his mature thought, and yet it has received relatively little attention from Reformation scholars.⁴ In language similar to that used when he recalls his new understanding of God's righteousness and the proper distinction between law and gospel, Luther recounts how he came to view repentance in a new light. A letter written to Johann von Staupitz in 1518 deserves to be quoted at length.

Reverend Father: I remember that during your most delightful and helpful talks, through which the Lord Jesus wonderfully consoled me, you sometimes mentioned the word "*poenitentia*." ... I accepted you as a messenger from heaven when you said that *poenitentia* is genuine only if it begins with love for justice and for God and that what they consider to be the final stage and completion is in reality the very beginning of *poenitentia*.

Your word pierced me like a sharp arrow of the Mighty. As a result, I began to compare your statements with the passages of Scripture which speak of *poenitentia*. And behold — what a most pleasant scene! Biblical words came leaping toward me from all sides, clearly smiling and nodding assent to your statement. They so supported your opinion that while formerly almost no word in the whole Scripture was more bitter to me than *poenitentia* (although I zealously made a pretense before God and tried to express a feigned and constrained love for him), now no word sounds sweeter or more pleasant to be than *poenitentia*. The commandments of God become sweet when they are read not only in books but also in the wounds of the sweetest Savior.⁵

These three breakthroughs — the understanding of God's righteousness, law and gospel, and repentance — are not noted here arbitrarily. While the present examination is concerned primarily with tracing Luther's changing theology of repentance, we can not do so as if this doctrine existed in isolation, standing and falling on its own. Any understanding of repentance, Luther's not excepted, is intimately entwined with one's

⁴Elmore Leske is a notable exception. See his examination of Luther's changing views on repentance with particular attention paid to Luther's position in 1517 in "The Mystery of Luther's 95 Theses," *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 20:2-3 (Aug.-Nov. 1986), 81-96 and "Another Look at Luther's Indulgence Theses in the Context of a Study of Luther's Progress towards His Radical Understanding of Repentance," *And Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, edited by G.S. Krispin and J.D. Vieker (Dearborn, MI: The Nagel Festschrift Committee, 1990), 61-85.

⁵Martin Luther, *Letter to Staupitz* (1518), *AE* 48: 65-66; *WA* 1: 525, 4ff.

understanding of God's righteousness and the gospel — and most importantly, how these meet in one's conception of the person and work of Christ.

To do justice to the issues at hand we must let Luther speak for himself. This demands that we not only listen to what he says, but also to when and how he is speaking. Luther's letter of 1518 was neither the first nor the last of his words on repentance. This being so, we will examine, both topically and chronologically, the evidence Luther has left with regard to this subject, keeping the following questions in mind: How is he defining repentance? What leads him to his understanding? Does his estimation of repentance betray a break with the theology of the Roman Church? How is repentance relating to the rest of Luther's theology?

The investigation below will begin with Luther's "occasional" writings, attempting to grasp how Luther views repentance in relation to the ecclesiastical issues which he addresses.⁶ Next we will turn to the topic of repentance as it is found in Luther's exegesis, particularly that of Psalm 51, one of the penitential psalms for which Luther's interpretation was recorded repeatedly between 1513 and 1532. Finally, if we assume that one's theology can be seen most clearly in one's preaching, we may review select sermons with an eye on what they say of repentance. Before delving into Luther himself, however, the stage should be set with a short look at the doctrine of penance as confessed in the church of Luther's day.⁷

⁶Restrictions of time and length of course do not allow us to examine all of Luther's writings; concentration will be focused on those in which repentance is a central topic; other relevant citations will be footnoted.

⁷Numerous works review the theology and practice of penance through the middle ages. Certainly the most comprehensive work dealing with the Patristic and early medieval era is that of Oscar D. Watkins, *A History of Penance*, 2 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1961). Also helpful are A.H. Dirksen, *The New Testament Concept of Metanoia* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1932), 1-72, K.B. Osborn, *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 52-136, and G.J. Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition at the Council of Trent* (J.H. Kok N.V. Kampen, 1955), 17-89. For particular insight into the nominalist and late medieval theology of penance see Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durham, N.C.: The Labyrinth Press, 1983), 146-160, Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), and Anne T. Thayer, *Penitence and Preaching on the Eve of the Reformation* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis: Harvard University, 1996). See the summary of

Luther's World

The theology and practice of penance in the medieval church served a two-fold purpose.⁸ On the one hand it served, as it always had, to console the consciences of sinners with the assurance of forgiveness. It did, on the other hand, also serve a disciplinary function. To these ends penance was divided into several components, contrition (or even attrition, some would argue), confession, and satisfaction. One would make confession to a priest, be absolved of his sins, and then given penance, i.e., works of satisfaction or temporal punishments in the stead of eternal punishment.

By the late Middle Ages, however, there was growing debate concerning the entire penitential system.⁹ There was, first of all, argument about the distinction between contrition (sorrow flowing from the love of God) and attrition (sorrow flowing from the fear of God and his punishment) and which was sufficient for meriting forgiveness. Furthermore, there was the question of how one came to a state of sorrow; was this something that man himself could accomplish or was it something that did not exist without the grace of God moving man's will to such a state?

There was also dispute over when in this process of penance forgiveness actually occurred and what truly took place in the act of absolution. While there seemed to be a general shift from an emphasis on *ex opere operantis* (the work of the worker, i.e., the penitent's contrition) to *ex opere operato* (the work worked, i.e., priestly absolution) there were at the same time those who questioned this. The nominalist Gabriel Biel, following Lombard, was one of these theologians. He argued that forgiveness is joined

Luther's own views on the contemporary Roman Catholic doctrine of repentance in the *Smalcald Articles*, III.iii, *Tappert*, 304-310; *BKS*, 438-449.

⁸Tentler, 234, *passim*.

⁹See Melanchthon's comment in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, XII: "All good men of all classes, even the theologians, admit that before Luther's writing the doctrine of penitence was very confused." *Tappert*, 183; *BKS*, 253.

not to the office of the keys, but to the act of contrition. That is, absolution does not itself forgive sins; it merely signifies and increases the grace bestowed in contrition.¹⁰

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the eventual debate surrounding Luther's views, there was confusion regarding the role of satisfaction in the penitential process. For all the discussion of contrition, attrition, and absolution, it was widely agreed that forgiveness, whenever and however it took place, granted a remission of the guilt [*culpa*] of sin only; it did not remit the punishment [*poena*] due for sin. For this man must make satisfaction either on earth or in purgatory.¹¹ But there were certain churchmen even before Luther who called for a shift away from the emphasis on satisfaction. Jean Gerson, of whom Luther often spoke highly, chastised those penitents who put more trust in their own work than in that of the priest.¹² And Wessel Gansfort is quoted as saying quite bluntly, "Every sentence of obligatory punishment after the remission of guilt is stupid."¹³

When one turns to the early writings of Luther it becomes readily apparent how deeply the late medieval confusion surrounding penance and forgiveness affected him.¹⁴

¹⁰Spykman, 86-87. Biel does not, however, deny the need for confession and absolution; rather, he claims that since the church demands priestly absolution and satisfaction, and since God has ordered his power in the church, one must still submit to ecclesiastical penance. For comment on Lombard's view see Osborne, 109.

¹¹Luther quotes the general confession of the church in his day as saying, "Prolong my life, Lord God, until I make satisfaction for my sins..." *Smalcald Articles*, III.iii, *Tappert*, 305; *BKS*, 441.

¹²Tentler, 299.

¹³*Ibid.*, 339. Mention is made here of Gerson and Gansfort, not because they typified medieval thinking on penance (they did not), but due to their minor influence on Luther, who often quotes them favorably. He even says of Gansfort, in the preface to his own edition of Gansfort's works that, "If I had earlier read Wessel, my enemies might have said that I had borrowed all my teachings from him, his spirit is so in accord with mine." Quoted in E.W. Miller, "The Relation of Wessel Gansvoort to the Reformation," *Papers of the American Society of Church History*, Series II, vol. IV, edited by W.W. Rockwell, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1914), 126.

¹⁴Luther was not the only one affected; Oberman calls the confessional distress of the late middle ages both widespread and grave. Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New York: Image Books, 1992), 177. Cf. Luther's comment on confession's "complications and confusions," *A Discussion on How Confession Should be Made* (1520), *AE* 39: 27; *WA* 6: 157, 5-9.

During the middle ages the sacrament of penance had become *the* sacrament of the church, often overshadowing even the Holy Supper. Thus, these debates were not inconsequential scholastic exercises; they held important theological and practical ramifications.¹⁵ The pious received penance and did penance with the hope of thereby receiving forgiveness of sins. It can be said without exaggeration that Martin Luther's early theological crisis was the result of his questioning the grounds on which this hope rested. That is, how can one be certain of forgiveness? What role does penance or repentance play in one's forgiveness? What indeed is proper repentance?

Luther's Writings

The above questions are those which Luther's confessor, Johann von Staupitz, attempted to answer during Luther's early years in the monastery.¹⁶ It was Staupitz who taught Luther that genuine repentance "begins with a love of righteousness and God." It was Staupitz who assured Luther that, although perfect repentance was impossible, trust was the most important thing in confession.¹⁷ It was this confessor who directed the young monk to seek certainty "in the wounds of the sweetest Savior." The above quoted letter of 1518 is testimony to the influence that Staupitz had on Luther's early views of

¹⁵Oberman calls penance a "central issue of religious life" because it was indeed a major concern of the church's preaching and ministry. Oberman, *Luther*, 164.

¹⁶David Steinmetz provides a detailed investigation of Staupitz' theology in *Misericordia Dei: The Theology of Johannes von Staupitz in its Late Medieval Setting* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968). A number of works also attempt to outline the relationship between the theology of Staupitz and that of Luther. See especially Ernst Wolf's *Staupitz und Luther: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Johannes von Staupitz und deren Bedeutung für Luthers theologischen Werdegang* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers, 1927) and David Steinmetz' *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1980). For brief discussions see also Richard Wetzell, "Staupitz und Luther," *Martin Luther: Probleme seiner Zeit*, edited by Volker Press and Dieter Stievermann (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986), 75-87, Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 54-55, 69, 125-26 and Oberman, *Luther*, 179-185.

¹⁷Uuras Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel: New Light Upon Luther's Way from Medieval Catholicism to Evangelical Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), 23-24.

repentance. But what exactly were those views? And did they change over the course of time? Here we must begin to let Luther speak for himself.

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”¹⁸ This, the first of Luther’s ninety-five theses on the power and efficacy of indulgences, is often cited not only as the beginning of the Reformation, but also as evidence of Luther’s new theology of repentance.¹⁹ Others, however, claim that in 1517 Luther’s talk of penance was wholly compatible with that of the Roman Church.²⁰ What do the theses themselves suggest?

It must be remembered that it was in the context of the indulgence controversy that Luther wrote his 95 theses. He was protesting a practice which, he felt, undermined the proper understanding and practice of repentance.²¹ His intentions at least do not differ from the host of moral reformers who had preceded him, and who had remained within the Roman church. Likewise, when the first thesis is examined in light of the three that follow it becomes clear that Luther’s conclusions hardly go farther than those reformers before him. He explains that when Christ calls men to repent he refers to inner contrition and outward mortifications of the flesh. This mortification, Luther insists, is undermined by penitence that allows for indulgences. Here then is the essence of Luther’s protest: The works of satisfaction so essential to the medieval doctrine of

¹⁸Martin Luther, *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517), *AE* 31: 25; *WA* 1: 233, 10-11.

¹⁹See for example Spykman, 91: “his [Luther’s] convictions concerning the doctrine of penitence had already materialized and become quite mature,” and 93: “Throughout the course of his development in Reformatory thinking the core of his penitence theology remained essentially unaltered.”

²⁰Harry McSorley, “Luther and Trent on the Faith needed for the Sacrament of Penance,” *Sacramental Reconciliation*, ed., Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 90, argues that Luther’s 1517 view contradicted neither the theology of the middle ages nor even that of the Council of Trent. Cf. Leske, *The Mystery*; Leske, *Another Look*.

²¹It is also important to realize that Luther was not the first to do so. Already in 1452 Gottschalk Hollen would say that “Repentance is better than indulgences.” See Oberman, *Luther*, 75.

penance were being ignored. Hence, Luther's theses on repentance must be called a defense of Roman doctrine rather than a protest against it.²²

The theology of the 95 theses was expanded in Luther's *Explanations* of 1518. While the content had not significantly changed, Luther emphasized more forcefully the necessity of self-hatred, mortifications, and crosses:

If a person's whole life is one of repentance and a cross of Christ, not only in voluntary afflictions but also in temptations of the devil, the world, and the flesh, and more especially also in persecutions and sufferings, as is clear from what has been said previously, and from the whole of Scripture and from examples of the saint of saints himself and all the martyrs, then it is evident that the cross continues until death and thereby to entrance into the kingdom.²³

We hear in this statement the "theology of the cross" which is often portrayed as a distinctly Lutheran theology.²⁴ Christ, in this theology, is an *exemplum*, one to be imitated in suffering, and one whose sufferings are a paradigm for how God acts in and for his people.²⁵ That is, God is most merciful when he allows man to suffer afflictions, temptations, and persecutions.

²²Leske, *The Mystery*, 86, suggests also that "Luther's contrast is not between Roman Catholic theology and the newly-founded Lutheran theology, but rather between Roman Catholic practice... and Roman Catholic theology." Cf. Leske, *Another Look*, 70.

²³Martin Luther, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (1518), *AE* 31: 89; *WA* 1: 533, 40 - 534, 4.

²⁴On the theology of the cross, see esp. Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 148-181. McGrath considers the theology of the cross to be "the very essence of his Reformation thought;" 178. More recently, Gerhard Forde has said much the same in *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997). Shorter examinations of this theme can be found in E. Gordon Rupp, "Luther's Ninety-five Theses and the Theology of the Cross," *Luther for an Ecumenical Age*, edited by Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 67-81 and Heino O. Kadai's "Luther's Theology of the Cross," *Accents in Luther's Theology*, edited by Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 230-272. The term "theology of the cross" is perhaps used unwisely when referring to the thought found in those works penned before 1518, when Luther himself first uses the label. This has, however, become quite common and will therefore be followed in this paper.

²⁵A very insightful examination of Luther's use of *exemplum* is to be found in Norman Nagel's "Sacramentum et exemplum in Luther's Understanding of Christ," *Luther for an Ecumenical Age* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 172-199.

The question must be asked again; is this a theology which pushes Luther beyond Catholic tradition? The imitation of Christ is certainly not a novel idea at the end of the Middle Ages.²⁶ Nor is meditation upon the crucifix, the sufferings of Christ, the “wounds of the sweetest Savior.” Even the idea that the Christian’s own sufferings and persecutions were signs of God’s favor was forwarded by more than one late medieval author.²⁷ We must then look beyond this theology of the cross if we are to find something new in Luther.

In the explanation of his first thesis, and again in a letter to Staupitz which was enclosed with the *Explanations*, Luther tells of a new understanding of the term *metanoieite*.²⁸

...the Greek word *metanoieite* itself...means “repent” and could be translated more exactly by the Latin *transmentamini*, which means “assume another mind and feeling, recover one’s senses, make a transition from one state of mind to another, have a change of spirit...”²⁹

After this it happened that I learned — thanks to the work and talent of the most learned men who teach us Greek and Hebrew with such great devotion — that the word *poenitentia* means *metanoia* in Greek; it is derived from *meta* and *noun*, that is, from “afterward” and “mind.” *Poenitentia* or *metanoia*, therefore, means coming to one’s right mind and a comprehension of one’s own evil after one has accepted the damage and recognized the error...

Then I progressed further and saw that *metanoia* could be understood as a composite not only of “afterward” and “mind,” but also of the [prefix] “trans” and “mind” (although this may of course be a forced interpretation), so that *metanoia*

²⁶It is no coincidence that one of this era’s most popular pieces of devotional literature carried the very title of *The Imitation of Christ*.

²⁷See especially the Rhineland mystics who had a certain early influence on Luther (for example, Henry Suso’s *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, ch. 2-3). Cf. also Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, II, 11-12 and III, 56.

²⁸Again, Luther is not the first to make this “discovery;” Lorenzo Valla had suggested the Latin translation *resipiscentia* in place of *poenitentia*, and Erasmus’ New Testament does in fact translate *metanoiein* with *resipiscere* at least sixteen times. See Dirksen, *The New Testament*, 71-72.

²⁹Luther, *Explanations*, AE 31: 84; WA 1: 530, 19-22.

could mean the transformation of one's mind and disposition. Yet it seemed to express not only the actual change of disposition but also the way by which this change is accomplished, that is, the grace of God. Such transition of the mind, that is, the most true *poenitentia*, is found very frequently in Holy Scripture.

Continuing this line of reasoning, I became so bold as to believe that they were wrong who attributed so much to penitential works that they left us hardly anything of *poenitentia*, except some trivial satisfactions on the one hand and a most laborious confession on the other. It is evident that they were misled by the Latin term, because the expression *poenitentiam agere* suggests more an action than a change in disposition; and in no way does this do justice to the Greek *metanoein*.³⁰

This does indeed sound like a breakthrough; by going back *ad fontes* Luther learns that repentance is essentially an attitude rather than an action. This changed mind or recovery of senses is, however, immediately referred back to the theology of humility, crosses, and sufferings. This *transmentamini* or *resipiscentia* marks a change only in thinking about oneself; Luther calls it a hatred of sin and self,³¹ that is, the attitude which prompts man to mortify the flesh.³² This particular emphasis on attitude seems to indicate that Luther's departure here from the teaching of his contemporaries may not necessarily be a new "Lutheran" theology; rather, it may well be a return to an older Catholic theology, a return to the earlier medieval focus on proper contrition, on *ex opere operantis*. But even this "new" focus did not hold Luther's attention for long.

When Luther was called to Augsburg in 1518 for a hearing on his writings he continued to insist that indulgences served no good since they remitted a deserved punishment; but he also shows signs of yet another shift in his thinking about penance, even about contrition itself. In a letter to Cardinal Cajetan, written immediately after their meeting, Luther places a dramatic new emphasis upon the roles of faith and the word of Christ in the sacrament of penance. This faith he describes not as a general belief

³⁰Luther, *Letter to Staupitz*, AE 48: 66-68; WA 1: 525, 24-526, 14.

³¹Luther, *Explanations*, AE 31: 84; WA 1: 530, 25.

³²See the third of Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* and the *Explanation* in AE 31: 86-88; WA 1: 532-33.

but as “special” or “particular” faith.³³ It is “nothing else than believing what God promises and reveals.”³⁴ And concerning this word of promise he says, “without the word there can be no faith.”³⁵

This faith-talk is itself nothing new in Luther. Even in his earliest writings faith holds a prominent place. But this particular emphasis, an emphasis on faith not in one’s contrition, nor solely in the words of a priest, but in the very word of Christ himself, virtually supplants and dismisses earlier praise of that attitude which prompts hatred of self and mortification of the flesh. While not totally rejecting his “theology of the cross” Luther is able to write:

Through *no attitude on your part* will you become worthy, through no works will you be prepared for the sacrament, but through faith alone, for only faith in the word of Christ justifies, makes a person alive, worthy, and well prepared. Without faith all other things are acts of presumption and desperation. The just person lives *not by his attitude* but by faith.³⁶

By the end of 1518 Luther had come to the point of saying that neither attitude nor works, contrition nor satisfaction, make a man worthy of forgiveness. Both remain necessary in Luther’s estimation, but only faith in the word makes one worthy.

Luther would expand on this new understanding when, less than a year later, he was again called upon to defend his writings. The location this time was to be Leipzig, and his opponent, Johannes Eck. The place of penance in the Leipzig disputation is of particular interest because, as Brecht notes, “in matters of faith, there was a genuine difference between Luther and Eck only on the subject of repentance, while on other matters — indulgences, purgatory, and the power of the pope — the controversy dealt

³³Martin Luther, *Proceedings at Augsburg* (1518), *AE* 31: 272, 273; *WA* 2: 14, 16 and 15, 2.

³⁴*Ibid.*, *AE* 31: 270-71; *WA* 2: 13, 18-19.

³⁵*Ibid.*, *AE* 31: 271; *WA* 2: 13, 20-21.

³⁶*Ibid.*, *AE* 31: 271; *WA* 2: 14, 5-9 (emphasis added).

only with human opinions.”³⁷ It is indeed strange then that the issue of the papacy (much to Luther’s annoyance) overwhelmed the debate, leaving only two days for disputation on repentance.³⁸

Luther, seeming to know that the issue of the pope’s power would hold sway, prepared himself with intense study of the fathers and the decretals of the church. What he found in these sources were inconsistencies and contradictions that strengthened his conviction that “in a controversy we must go back to the true and proper meaning of Scripture, which can stand the test in a debate.”³⁹ This return to Scripture not only shed new light on the papacy, but also upon the office of the keys and confession. Here it became evident that Peter and those who follow him, popes as well as priests, are *servants* of the keys. That is, their power was not given in order that they might act as lords over subjects but that they might speak the word of Christ to his people. It is this word that the penitent lays hold of; as Luther declares in his seventh thesis, man is justified “by faith alone in the word.”⁴⁰ This *sola fide verbi* emphasis allows Luther to then state that “when the priest makes a judgment and absolves you, that is as much as to say: Your sins are forgiven; you have a gracious God.”⁴¹ Likewise, “A thousand-fold more depends on your firmly believing the judgment of the priest than your being worthy

³⁷Brecht, *Road*, 327.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 322. Cf. Heinrich Boehmer, *Road to Reformation: Martin Luther to the Year 1521* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946), 287.

³⁹Quoted from the proceedings of the debate in W.H.T. Dau, *The Leipzig Debate in 1519* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1919), 146. Cf. Luther’s statement in the preface to his *Lectures on Galatians* (1519), where he says, “That even so many decretals are inconsistent with the sense of the Gospel is clearer than light, so that actual necessity itself compels us to flee to the most solid rock of Divine Scripture;” *AE* 27: 156; *WA* 2: 447, 9-11.

⁴⁰Martin Luther, *The Leipzig Debate* (1519), thesis 7, *AE* 31: 317; *WA* 2: 161.

⁴¹Martin Luther, *Sermon Preached in the Castle at Leipzig* (1519), *AE* 51:59; *WA* 2: 249, 16-17. This sermon was preached only two days before Luther entered the Leipzig debate.

and doing sufficient works.”⁴² Since the priest, as a servant of the keys, speaks no more than the word of Christ, the faithful have certainty in their absolution. One need not question whether he is worthily contrite or able to make proper satisfaction; instead, one puts one’s faith in the word of Christ, the very word that creates faith.

We see here that Luther returns to a theme that came to the fore at Augsburg, faith alone in Christ’s word. But he has not made a complete break from earlier views. Although he proclaims that a priest “must absolve a penitent from punishment and guilt,”⁴³ he is unwilling to deny that punishment remains a part of penitence. He still insists that the problem with indulgences is that they are a “hindrance to good works,”⁴⁴ and, likewise, that “God changes an eternal punishment into a temporal one, that is, the punishment of carrying the cross.”⁴⁵ This theology of the cross is evident also in the sermon Luther preached at Leipzig only a few days before entering the debate. Here he proclaims that faith, besides grabbing hold of the word of Christ, also “helps you make a proper satisfaction;” it allows man to carry “the sweet burden of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶ By the middle of 1519 Luther was able to confidently proclaim the importance of Christ’s word alone, but he has yet to speak so confidently of Christ’s cross alone. The cross remains something that both man and Christ share.⁴⁷

⁴²*Ibid.*, *AE* 51: 60; *WA* 2: 249, 28-30.

⁴³Luther, *The Leipzig Debate*, thesis 5, *AE* 31: 317; *WA* 2: 161.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, thesis 11, *AE* 31: 318; *WA* 2: 161.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, thesis 4, *AE* 31: 317; *WA* 2: 161.

⁴⁶Luther, *Sermon at Leipzig*, *AE* 51: 60; *WA* 2: 249, 30-31 and 36-37.

⁴⁷Also disconcerting for any who would assume that Luther has, by this time, clarified the theology that forms his mature thought are the facts that he still speaks of grace in terms of *gratia infusa*, his respect for the doctrines of purgatory and the merits of the saints still remains great, and, in his sermon especially, he speaks of justification in terms of God making man “more than man;” he “gives him the form of God and deifies him.” *AE* 51: 58; *WA* 2: 248, 1-3.

The events of the Leipzig debate had, however, served to push some of Luther's new ideas to their logical conclusions. Eck had cornered him into asserting that both popes and councils had erred, after which he was quickly labeled a Hussite. Although he vehemently denied this charge Luther could read the handwriting on the wall — Rome would brand him a heretic.⁴⁸ This realization, however, had its benefits. Feeling certain that further defense of his indulgence theses would be fruitless, he could turn his attention to other issues, or rather, the same issues in a different context. Removing the subject of repentance from the rather narrow confines of the indulgence controversy seems to have allowed Luther to express his views with new vocabulary, vocabulary which both sharpened and altered his focus yet again.⁴⁹

During the years 1520 and 1521 Luther produced three short works, all practical and pastoral guides for the penitent.⁵⁰ The first, titled *A Discussion on How Confession Should Be Made*, reveals how dramatically Luther's vocabulary had been refined.⁵¹ In the first two paragraphs alone the word "promise" appears fifteen times, referenced each time to the promise of God, the promise of forgiveness. This opening section is concerned with explaining what confession is and how one should make confession. The content of Luther's thought is summed up in the following:

⁴⁸Luther revealed as much when he wrote, "I almost wish that notorious raging bull against my teaching would come from Rome." *Letter to Spalatin* (1520), *WA Br* 2: 137, 6-7; quoted in Brecht, *Road*, 348.

⁴⁹For an insightful examination of Luther's "crisis of vocabulary" see Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 81-101.

⁵⁰Martin Luther, *A Discussion on How Confession Should Be Made* (1520), *AE* 39: 23-47; *WA* 6: 157-169. Martin Luther, *An Instruction to Penitents Concerning the Forbidden Books of Dr. M. Luther* (1521), *AE* 44: 219-229; *WA* 7: 290-297. Martin Luther, *Von der Beicht, ob die der Papst Macht habe zu gebeiten* (1521), *WA* 8: 129-185.

⁵¹Although Luther had never been careless with his choice of vocabulary, it is worth noting the particular attention he pays to the language of this tract, since he is "well aware of how my friends watch every single syllable of mine." Luther, *A Discussion*, *AE* 39: 27; *WA* 6: 157, 16.

[The penitent] should put his trust in the most merciful promise of God alone, with complete faith and with certainty that he who promised the forgiveness of sins to the person about to confess them will most faithfully fulfill his promise.⁵²

Confession itself is nothing without this trustworthy promise.

After this introduction Luther takes up the topic of contrition. While still stressing the importance of one's good intention in approaching the confessional, Luther insists that "it is utterly useless to strive to create good intention."⁵³ How is this tension resolved? By God himself. Luther exhorts the penitent to call upon God, saying, "I do not have what I should have, and I cannot do it. Grant what you command and command what you will."⁵⁴ Luther had earlier stressed that it is God, the one who promises and the one who creates faith in the promise, who is alone responsible for man's absolution; now he also points to God as the one who even effects contrition.⁵⁵

Luther continues in this vein throughout 1520 and into 1521, speaking of God as the source of both grace and contrition,⁵⁶ pointing out the necessity of preaching faith whenever preaching repentance,⁵⁷ insisting that contrition without the promise of God is fruitless.⁵⁸ Luther's quest for certainty in matters of forgiveness had led him to

⁵²*Ibid.*, *AE* 39: 28; *WA* 6: 158, 9-12.

⁵³*Ibid.*, *AE* 39: 32; *WA* 6: 160, 36-37. Cf. Luther's statement, "if there is anyone who does not find himself seriously affected by good intention, I am not sure if it is safe for him to make confession," *AE* 39: 30; *WA* 6: 159, 36-37.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, *AE* 39: 32; *WA* 6: 160, 25-27. Luther borrows this plea from Augustine; cf. his *Confessions*, 10.29.

⁵⁵Cf. Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520). Here Luther says the same, dividing God's word into two words, one of "threat," and one of "promise," the first working contrition, the other consolation. *AE* 36: 84; *WA* 6: 545, 1-2.

⁵⁶Martin Luther, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* (1521), *AE* 32:35, *WA* 7: 355, 32-34: "They cannot possibly change their hearts by the power of their own nature without the grace of God, for, of himself, man can do nothing good, but only evil."

⁵⁷Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), *AE* 31: 363; *WA* 7: 34, 9-11: "although it is good to preach and write about penitence, confession, and satisfaction, our teaching is unquestionably deceitful and diabolical if we stop with that and do not go on to teach about faith."

⁵⁸Luther, *Defense*, *AE* 32: 4; *WA* 7: 375, 3-4: "No contrition is sufficient in God's sight. Forgiveness is the result of the sheer mercy of God." *AE* 32: 53; *WA* 7: 385, 30-34: "I know that I will not be found truly

continually stress the work of God alone. It is God who creates faith. Faith's object is the promise. The promise is that of God. Man's certainty ultimately rests on faith in the promise of God. This is gospel talk, but is it talk of *the* gospel? The promise of which Luther speaks, God's promise of forgiveness, has thus far been consistently referenced to the future. It is a promise to be fulfilled.⁵⁹ God has promised forgiveness; therefore we trust that he *will* forgive, for God can not lie. But is this as far as Luther goes?

Toward the middle of 1521 Luther was yet again drawn into the indulgence controversy, this time in response to the Louvain theologian Jacobus Masson [Latomus]. The theology evident in Luther's response is, in many ways, the culmination of his previous thoughts on the issues of repentance, faith, and grace;⁶⁰ it summarizes his previous ideas and, indeed, sets in place the capstone which will hold his new theology together. Still emphasizing the connections between grace, faith, and Christ,⁶¹ Luther's Christology reveals itself in a new light. Christ is not only the one who promises and who will fulfill his promise; he is the one who *has fulfilled* his promise. Seen in this new light, Holy Absolution not only offers God's promise but delivers the fulfillment of that promise. That is, the fulfillment of the promise is referenced to a past event; forgiveness has been accomplished. It has been accomplished on the cross of Christ, and in his cross

contrite before thy judgment, and that there is still much evil lust in me which hinders true contrition, yet, because thou hast promised grace, I flee from thy judgment, and because my contrition is nothing in thy sight, I put my trust and my hope upon thy promise in this sacrament."

⁵⁹Cf. *The Babylonian Captivity*, where Luther comments that absolution should "follow on the completion of satisfaction." *AE* 36: 90; *WA* 6: 549, 8-14.

⁶⁰Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521-1532* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 7, rightly calls this document "one of the most consistent and clearly systematized expositions of the central Reformation doctrine of grace and human nature to appear before *The Bondage of the Will*." See also James Atkinson (ed.), *Luther: Early Theological Works* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 13, who says much the same thing. He also identifies this work as a "watershed" in Luther's early theological writing, 309.

⁶¹Martin Luther, *Against Latomus* (1521), *AE* 32: 133-260; *WA* 8: 43-128. See especially Luther's statement, "the life-giving Spirit is the *grace* in *faith* on *Christ*." *AE* 32: 178; *WA* 8: 71, 12-13. (emphasis added).

alone; there is no longer room for both man and Christ to share in its sufferings and punishments. Thus, Luther can write confidently:

[O]ur sins have truly been taken from us and placed upon him, so that everyone who believes on him really has no sins, because they have been transferred to Christ and swallowed up by him, for they no longer condemn.⁶²

For this reason Luther can not only insist that Holy Absolution absolves both the *culpa* and the *poena* of sin, but he can question the very use of such distinctions.⁶³ Sin is sin. But this sin and its consequences have been placed on Christ, and done away with on *his* cross. The words of absolution deliver this forgiveness; sin, in its totality, is vanquished.⁶⁴ The issue no longer revolves around the idea that indulgences prevent one from making proper satisfaction; satisfaction need not be made at all. It too has been made once and for all on the cross of Christ.

Here we indeed see something new in Luther, something we might call distinctly “Lutheran.” In reviewing the medieval doctrine of penance we saw a general, if not universal, shift from an emphasis on the work of man in both contrition and satisfaction to an emphasis on the work of the priest. For some years Luther himself vacillated between these two emphases. But by the middle of 1521 he moves beyond both. The certainty of forgiveness can be found in neither the works of the penitent nor the work of his priest, but only in the work and word of Christ himself. Faith in this work of Christ can be sure and certain because it rests not only on a promise, but on a promise which

⁶²*Ibid.*, *AE* 32: 200; *WA* 8: 87, 7-10. Cf. *AE* 32: 213; *WA* 8: 46, 8-9: “We believe that the remission of all sins has been without doubt accomplished.”

⁶³*Ibid.*, *AE* 32: 224; *WA* 8: 104, 22ff.

⁶⁴It is not insignificant that, in this treatise, Luther speaks of baptism in the same terms as he speaks of absolution. In both baptism and absolution God delivers the total forgiveness that was won on the cross; sin is “arrested, judged, and wholly incapacitated,” it is “appointed to complete annihilation.” *AE* 32: 206; *WA* 8: 91, 24ff. It is this connection, now made explicit, that allows Luther to realize the full import of what he had said even earlier, that “when we rise from our sins or repent, we are merely returning to the power and faith of baptism.” See *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* (1519), *AE* 35: 38.

has been fulfilled on the cross and delivered in absolution. Christ has removed guilt and punishment through his cross, his own sufferings and death; there is nothing one can or must do to supplement this forgiveness. In short, Luther finally arrives at an understanding of penance in which purification, a present and future process, is displaced by forgiveness, won in the past and delivered in the present.

These insights become even more evident in Luther's *Personal Prayer Book* of the next year. Although based on medieval handbooks of prayer and penitence, Luther completely revises the content and focus, and therefore the theology, of such devotionals. Gone is the lengthy catalogue of sins; in its place are the ten commandments.⁶⁵ While these commandments bring the penitent to a realization of his own sinfulness, the creed outlines the content of the gospel. Commenting on the second article Luther takes great care to relate Christ's work in the past to absolution in the present. His conception was "for my welfare," his birth "for my sake," his suffering "for my sin," his death "to put my sin to death," his descent into hell "for me," and his resurrection "to give a new life to me."⁶⁶ And the office of the keys has been given to the Church to proclaim this forgiveness, to deliver these gifts, to the penitent.⁶⁷

This idea finds its fullest expression in Luther's writing, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, which was completed in 1525. Although he speaks primarily of the sacrament of Holy Communion, his emphasis certainly mirrors that placed on Holy Absolution. That is, forgiveness is discussed in two ways, how it was achieved and how it is

⁶⁵Though by no means the norm, there was some precedent for including the commandments in penitential manuals. For a discussion of the matter see Johannes Geffcken's *Der Bildercatechismus des fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts und die catechetischen Hauptstücke in dieser Zeit bis auf Luther* (Leipzig: T.O. Weigel, 1855), especially chapter four on "Die Schriften über die zehn Gebote für weise und gelehrte Beichväter."

⁶⁶Martin Luther, *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), *AE* 43: 26-27; *WA* 10^{II}: 391-392.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, *AE* 43: 28-29; *WA* 10^{II}: 394, 12ff.

delivered.⁶⁸ Christ has won forgiveness on his cross; but this is delivered in the sacrament. Thus, Luther can explain:

If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ... in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross.⁶⁹

Here we see what can properly be called Luther's mature theology of repentance, or, quite simply, his mature theology. But before analyzing Luther's development further it may prove beneficial to briefly survey and compare two other sources that shed light on his theology of penance throughout this period.

Luther's Lectures

At the recommendation of Staupitz, Luther joined the Wittenberg faculty in 1512 for the purpose of lecturing on Scripture. This he began in 1513 with his first series of lectures on Psalms. Of special interest for our investigation are Luther's interpretations of the penitential psalms, with particular attention below being given to Psalm 51. The form of Luther's early lectures certainly stood firmly in the medieval tradition, including gloss, scholia, and exposition according to the fourfold sense of Scripture. Luther also follows the medieval tradition of placing the psalms in the mouth of Christ himself. The content of the psalms refer to Christ; they also, however, address the faithful. What then, in Luther's view, is the relation between Christ and the faithful?

Especially in Psalm 51 we see Luther emphasizing the Christian's place under the word of God; this word, however, differs radically from the "word of promise" or "word

⁶⁸Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1524-1525), *AE* 40: 213; *WA* 18: 203, 27ff.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, *AE* 40: 214; *WA* 18: 203, 39ff. To realize the extent to which Luther's thought has developed, one need only compare this quote to Luther's explanation of Christ's suffering in 1518. See especially the quotation referenced in note 23 above.

of absolution” which becomes prominent in later writings. God’s word here is primarily a word of judgment and condemnation.⁷⁰ Man’s relation to this word, and therefore to God himself, rests on his acceptance or denial of its judgment.

He who justifies himself condemns God, who through Scripture states that he is a sinner ... He who judges himself and confesses his sin justifies God and affirms his truthfulness, because he is saying about himself what God is saying about him.⁷¹

True penance then is a matter of self-accusation. Even more telling is how Luther uses this self-accusation to define man’s righteousness before God: “God says what is true and righteous [i.e., that man is a sinner], and he says the same. Therefore he, too, is righteous and truthful together with God.”⁷²

This approach to the topic of penitence is very much a part of Luther’s early theology of humility and conformity to Christ by way of sufferings and crosses. Realization of sinfulness, self-accusation, and humiliation make one “most attractive in the sight of God.”⁷³ But this attractiveness or righteousness before God offers the penitent no comfort; to the contrary, God sends upon him “scourges and crosses.”⁷⁴ While Luther does not explicitly relate his exegesis to the sacrament of penance, the

⁷⁰Brecht, *Road*, 134, rightly explains Luther’s understanding at this time by saying that the function of God’s word is to “destroy our righteousness.”

⁷¹Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms* (1513-1515), *AE* 10: 238; *WA* 3: 289, 31ff.

⁷²*Ibid.* Cf. *AE* 10: 236; *WA* 3: 288, 31: “For the righteous man is, first of all, one who is the accuser and condemner and judge of himself.”

⁷³*Ibid.*, *AE* 10: 239; *WA* 3: 290, 33. Cf. *AE* 10: 241; *WA* 3: 292, 1-2: “God cannot be praised, justified, glorified, magnified, admired, etc., unless we ourselves are at the same time, and beforehand, disparaged, accused, and put to shame.”

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, *AE* 10: 242; *WA* 3: 292, 29. The thoughts briefly mentioned here are summed up with the later comment on Psalm 84: “Just as he was offered on the cross, so we must likewise be offered on the cross... The cross and sufferings of Christ, which are those things that are mean and worthless in the world, humility, reproach, offscouring, perplexity, etc... [O]n them and in them we are offered to God. As Christ was offered on the cross, so we, too, are offered on them. They are our crosses and our sufferings and our altars, on which we present our bodies as a living sacrifice.” *AE* 11: 141-142; *WA* 3: 646, 22ff.

implications are clear. Contrition, that is, man's act of self-judgment, is of utmost importance. Not only is absolution overshadowed, but it goes virtually unmentioned. Satisfaction, while not called such, also remains an essential part of repentance and forgiveness as one suffers under "scourges and crosses."

Only one year after completing his first lectures on Psalms, Spalatin approached Luther with the request that these lectures be published. The degree to which Luther's theology had already begun to change is evident in his response to this request. Rather than publish these lectures, which he already considered "a useless product which deserved to be wiped out with a sponge," he offered instead to write a short work on the seven penitential psalms.⁷⁵

Comparing Luther's new interpretation of Psalm 51 with his earlier work reveals that, while many previous themes are carried forward, they are considerably revised.⁷⁶ This is notable in his approach to the subject of self-accusation. Luther still holds that the penitent heart sees nothing but its own sin,⁷⁷ and that God can not be praised without at the same time "rebuking and defaming" oneself;⁷⁸ but the nature of this self-condemnation is now quite different. Commenting on verse 7, Luther parallels this hatred of self with looking away from oneself.⁷⁹ It is no longer simply an inward focus, but signifies the beginning, at least, of an emphasis on true righteousness being found only outside of self. This is partially evident even in the opening paragraph, where Luther

⁷⁵Brecht, *Road*, 143.

⁷⁶It should be noted that, due to the devotional character of this particular work, one might expect certain changes in emphasis even if there were no substantial theological shift. However, the radical new direction obvious in this work can certainly not be attributed wholly, or even primarily, to the intended audience.

⁷⁷Martin Luther, *Die sieben Bußpsalmen. Erste Bearbeitung* (1517), *WA* 1: 185, 37 [translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own].

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, *WA* 1: 193, 7.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, *WA* 1: 189, 4ff.

explains the first line of the psalm, saying that “You alone, who are God and eternal, can help me.”⁸⁰ More so, however, this exterior emphasis is plain in comments on verse 5:

All Scripture and God’s word point to Christ’s suffering, as he himself testifies at the end of Luke, that the Scripture holds nothing other than promises of grace and forgiveness of sins through Christ’s suffering.⁸¹

While humility remains central to contrition, it alone avails nothing. The humble heart does not create righteousness, nor does it even attribute righteousness to God; it “gives nothing to God, but only receives from him.”⁸² As in his earlier lectures, Luther’s definition of true repentance here follows that of true righteousness. The words of true repentance are those spoken by the psalmist when he cries out, “According to your abundant mercy blot out my sins.”⁸³

Noting what has been said above, and also noting that Luther’s revision of this short work in 1525 changed relatively little, it would seem that there may be some merit to the claim that Luther’s theology of repentance grew to maturity quite early. Before concluding that this is indeed the case, however, we will want to examine not only what was changed in the 1525 edition, but we will also want ask if that which remained still carried the same meaning. In his work of 1517 Luther speaks of righteousness in terms of a “first grace” followed by a continual process of washing and cleansing,⁸⁴ which, it has been pointed out, is saying no more than what Augustine and a good many others had

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, *WA* 1: 186, 4-5. It is noteworthy, however, that Luther is here quick to differentiate between God’s spiritual help and his mercy shown to man physically; this differentiation becomes less obvious in his revision of 1525 as his theology of humility and suffering fades.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, *WA* 1: 187, 29ff.

⁸²*Ibid.*, *WA* 1: 193, 30.

⁸³*Ibid.*, *WA* 1: 186, 9ff. Cf. pp. 189-90 where Luther proclaims that the conscience remains terrified until it hears, “your sins are forgiven.”

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, *WA* 1: 186, 18ff.

already said.⁸⁵ God may be the one who is acting in and for man, but this action is still progressive, and still *in* man. The problem with merely noting that this is typical of the young Luther, however, lies in the fact that this discussion is one of those which Luther allowed to remain in his (presumably more mature) revised edition printed eight years later. Is he still, in 1525, defining justification as a process of progressive cleansing? It may be argued that, although the words remain the same, the content of Luther's vocabulary has radically changed.⁸⁶ Both a "first grace" and continual washing remain a part of the Christian life; but while both were previously spoken of under the heading of justification, each is now considered in its own sphere, the one being justification and the other sanctification or renewal.⁸⁷

Perhaps that which says the most about the change in Luther's thinking concerning repentance is that which did not get carried forward to 1525. A number of short sentences or phrases were either removed, revised, or replaced; but the greatest alteration is that concerned with verse 15 and the subject of "bloodguiltiness." In 1525 Luther simply calls bloodguilt the guilt of sin, states that sin deserves death, and then briefly mentions the particular sins that most likely weighed heavy on the psalmist's mind.⁸⁸ This is quite different from his emphasis of 1517. In this earlier work bloodguiltiness does not simply refer to all sinners, but especially to the proud.

⁸⁵See Saarnivaara, 89.

⁸⁶Again, see Rupp for a helpful discussion of this matter (n. 49 above).

⁸⁷This is perhaps an unfortunate introduction of terms that do not appear in the texts themselves; but taken in the context of Luther's other writings of the period (cf. his *Sermon on Confession and the Lord's Supper*, 1524) I do not believe this interpretation does violence to the texts. (This justification/sanctification interpretation is unmistakably evident in his lectures on the same Psalm in 1531/32). I would argue that this understanding also applies to Luther's closing remarks about offering the old Adam as a sacrifice on the cross.

⁸⁸Martin Luther, *The Seven Penitential Psalms* (1525), *AE* 14: 173; *WA* 18: 505, 20-23.

The bloodguilty are the proud; those born of Adam according to the blood always struggle against this teaching and correct wisdom. And whoever teaches it must suffer persecutions and protestations. They [the proud] desire not to suffer ... They are not yet in grace, but in flesh and bloodguiltiness according to human appearances and pious pretenses ... Therefore he [the psalmist] says, O God, you who are my salvation, that is, the one who alone is my salvation, and not in me by my righteousness, nor in any other creatures, save me from the children of blood who set their salvation in their own piety and therefore struggle against this teaching, which alone converts sinners.⁸⁹

This association of pride with guilt is nothing other than a parallel to Luther's continued association of humility with righteousness. That "which alone converts sinners" is the rejection of pride and the acceptance of humility, the acceptance even of humiliation in persecutions and protests. It is this emphasis on humility and sufferings in 1517 that leads to the conclusion that, despite some radical theological changes, Luther's overall focus still "has more to do with the destruction of human self-righteousness than with the claim of the righteousness of God, more to do with the proper preconditions than with grace itself."⁹⁰ The absence of any such emphasis on humility and sufferings is what is most notably lacking in Luther's revised edition of 1525. This absence of man's sufferings and crosses serves then to highlight the focus on the singular, all sufficient work of Christ's suffering and cross which permeates Luther's mature theology.⁹¹

Although Luther said a great deal about repentance in both his writings and his lectures, these are by no means the only places he did so. Nor, perhaps, are they even the most important. As noted earlier, the subject of penance was never merely an academic dispute; it held important consequences for the church as a whole and for each believer individually. This fact was never lost on Luther, who addressed the topic of repentance in more than a few sermons. Realizing both the proclamatory and pedagogical roles of the

⁸⁹Luther, *Die sieben Bußpsalmen*, WA 1: 192, 15ff.

⁹⁰Brecht, *Road*, 144.

⁹¹See the quote concerning "forgiveness of sins through Christ's suffering," which appears in both the 1517 and 1525 editions, on p. 22 above.

sermon, and appreciating that one's theology "meets the road," so to speak, in one's preaching, it will serve us well to look briefly at a sample of Luther's sermons.

Luther's Sermons

Even before the posting of the 95 theses Martin Luther had addressed the subject of indulgences, and with it the topic of repentance. In a sermon preached on St. Matthew's Day, 1517, as with his work on the penitential psalms written in the same year, there are at first glance a number of ideas that suggest a mature theology of repentance. He proclaims that true virtue is to be found outside of man and only in Christ.⁹² He also argues that once sin is taken away, punishment is also removed.⁹³ But looking again at this sermon it becomes clear that Luther is primarily concerned with attacking indulgences on the basis that they lead the Christian to fear and avoid punishment.⁹⁴ In the same manner, the contrast between sinful pride and saintly humility,⁹⁵ the latter exemplified by embracing the burden of the cross, punishments, and sufferings, is fully outlined.⁹⁶

By way of contrast, a 1519 sermon on penance shows a notable change in what Luther says with regard to this sacrament. He here distinguishes between penance and the sacrament of penance, the former being the system of contrition, confession, and satisfaction required by the papacy, and the latter including only absolution, the grace promised therein, and the faith which lays hold of this promise.⁹⁷ Luther builds his case

⁹²Martin Luther, *Sermon on St. Matthew's Day* (1517), *AE* 51: 28; *WA* 1: 139, 35.

⁹³*Ibid.*, *AE* 51: 30; *WA* 1: 141, 17-19.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, *AE* 51: 31; *WA* 1: 141, 22-24.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, *AE* 51: 26; *WA* 1: 138, 12ff.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, *AE* 51: 30-31; *WA* 1: 141, 11ff.

⁹⁷Martin Luther, *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), *AE* 35: 11; *WA* 2: 715, 21ff. Cf. *AE* 35: 19; *WA* 2:

for the Christian's confidence in forgiveness not upon contrition, but upon the penitent's faith in "the sure words of Christ," who can not lie.⁹⁸ Contrition is something that can never be sufficient for forgiveness; God's mercy alone is sufficient.⁹⁹ Likewise, satisfaction, whether punishments suffered or crosses carried, no longer receives such emphasis. But even with Luther's new emphasis on the promise of Christ he has yet to fully expound on the content and basis of that promise. The crosses of the penitent are no longer emphasized, but as of yet the cross of Christ also lacks emphasis.¹⁰⁰

A sermon preached on Reminiscere Sunday in March of 1522 may engage our interest for several reasons.¹⁰¹ First, there is the broad context of Luther's dealings with those who were attempting to institute radical reform measures in Wittenberg. He is now forced to defend his view of penance against both pope and radicals, insisting on the one hand that private confession must not be demanded and, on the other, that it must not be denied. Second, there is the narrower context of his seven preceding sermons regarding the sacraments, and the manner in which Luther carries these sacramental themes into his theology of repentance. After discussing the absolution received in private confession he goes on to say that "we must have many absolutions."¹⁰² This particular focus on absolution follows his earlier emphasis on Christ's promise spoken by the confessor; but

721, 8-11.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, *AE* 35: 12; *WA* 2: 716, 6, *passim*. This emphasis on God not lying is paralleled in Luther's declaring that whoever has no faith in Christ's word makes God a liar. See *AE* 35: 13; *WA* 2: 717, 16-17, *passim*.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, *AE* 35: 14-16; *WA* 2: 718-719.

¹⁰⁰It is also worth noting that Luther still speaks of forgiveness in two kinds, that of guilt and that of punishment. See *AE* 35: 9; *WA* 2: 714, 3-5. In the same manner he questions but does not yet dismiss the division of sins into mortal and venial categories. See *AE* 35: 20; *WA* 2: 721, 24ff.

¹⁰¹In addition to what is mentioned in the text above, this sermon is notable because Luther distinguishes three types of confession. This appears again in the 1529 edition of his *Large Catechism*. See *Tappert*, 458; *BKS*, 727.

¹⁰²Martin Luther, *Eight Sermons at Wittenberg* (1522), *AE* 51: 99; *WA* 10^{III}: 62, 9.

it is now situated in the wider context of all of God's means of grace, the promises of Scripture, the absolution of Baptism, and the forgiveness of the Lord's Supper.¹⁰³ Finally, Luther here explicitly distinguishes between self-accusation and righteousness, which he had once used synonymously.¹⁰⁴

Two years later, in a sermon on *Confession and the Lord's Supper*, Luther reiterates the primacy of absolution, saying, "hold fast to the absolution alone and not to your confession."¹⁰⁵ This follows from his precise definition of the gospel as nothing other than the forgiveness of sins.¹⁰⁶ This forgiveness or absolution is again immediately referenced also to the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

In 1523, preaching on Luke 24, Luther had also defined the gospel within the context of a penitential sermon. The gospel is specifically called "the preaching of repentance and remission of sins;"¹⁰⁷ it is "a message and a testimony [*predig*], which declares how the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, that he might remove sin, death and all evil from all who believe on him."¹⁰⁸ Christ's death and resurrection have conquered sin and death so that the Christian is now set in a state "where there is forgiveness that never ends,"¹⁰⁹ where "God not only forgives the former sins you have

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, *AE* 51: 99; *WA* 10^{III}: 63-64.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, *AE* 51: 98; *WA* 10^{III}: 60-61.

¹⁰⁵Martin Luther, *Confession and the Lord's Supper* (1524), *Lenker*, 201; *WA* 15: 489, 29-30.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, *Lenker*, 198; *WA* 15: 485, 28-31.

¹⁰⁷Martin Luther, *Sermon on Easter Tuesday* (1523), *Lenker*, 314; *WA* 12: 514, 6-7.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, *Lenker*, 303; *WA* 12: 507, 12ff. Cf. *Lenker*, 304; *WA* 12: 508, 5ff.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, *Lenker*, 318; *WA* 12: 516, 34-35.

committed; but looks through his fingers and forgives the sins you will yet commit.”¹¹⁰
 Put quite simply, “he gives himself to us with all his gifts.”¹¹¹

A later Easter sermon, based upon the same text, clarifies Luther’s complete break with the Roman doctrine of penance.

You may refer the repentance which may be called our own work, namely our sorrow, confession, and satisfaction, to the schools of the lawyers, or to the children’s schools, where it may serve for discipline and outward training; but you must keep it clearly apart from the true spiritual repentance wrought by God’s Word...¹¹²

A true understanding of repentance had been confused because Rome did not properly understand sin. A focus on the confession of actual offenses had displaced the recognition of total, original sin; confession became a matter of admitting that one had committed sins, rather than that one was a sinner.¹¹³ Only once this was realized could one proclaim:

[N]o one, not even an angel of heaven, could make restitution for the infinite and irreparable injury and appease the eternal wrath of God which we had merited by our sins; except that eternal person, the Son of God himself, and he could do it only by taking our place, assuming our sins, and answering for them as though he himself were guilty of them. This our dear Lord and only Savior and Mediator before God, Jesus Christ, did for us by his blood and death, in which he became a sacrifice for us...¹¹⁴

In this short statement Luther reveals his mature understanding of law and gospel, total sin and total forgiveness, the basis of both contrition and absolution. Christ’s atoning death has won man’s forgiveness and the pronouncement of Holy Absolution delivers

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, Lenker, 317; WA 12: 516, 21ff.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, Lenker, 316; WA 12: 515, 36.

¹¹²Martin Luther, *Second Sermon on Easter Tuesday* (1531), Lenker, 340; WA 21: 256, 36ff.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, Lenker, 334-335; WA 21: 252, 13ff.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, Lenker, 344; WA 21: 259, 14ff.

this gift: "This now he has not only actually fulfilled, but he has done and accomplished it for the very purpose of having it preached and proclaimed to us."¹¹⁵

Conclusions

As noted in the introduction, Luther's road to Reformation was neither straight, simple, nor easily mapped. Depending on the audience for (or often against) whom he was writing, Luther often modified his emphases. But having tracked some of his thoughts on penance and repentance we are now prepared to at least offer a tentative outline of his progress.

Comparing the theology of his writings, lectures, and sermons reveals that, at any given time, Luther presented his theology of repentance quite consistently. Up to and through the year 1517 Luther consistently spoke of the theology of penance in terms of his theology of crosses and sufferings. God's word was considered a word of condemnation which the Christian accepted and restated. The penitent, rather than attempting to escape God's judgment through indulgences, must judge himself in order to be righteous; he must cling to sufferings and persecutions as proof of God's mercy.

In the years 1518-1519, laying hold of a new understanding of the word *metanoia*, Luther began to see God's word in a new light. His theology of humility had not yet disappeared but there was a new emphasis on the penitent's faith, faith which trusts in the word of absolution rather than the word of condemnation. In 1520 and early in 1521 this focus is becoming clear as Luther begins to distinguish between God's promising word and his threatening word. These words effect both man's contrition and his absolution; that is, all mention of man's work in repentance begins to fade. But God's work, according to Luther at this time, is still a work in man.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, Lenker, 344; WA 21: 259, 31-33.

It is only toward the middle of 1521 that Luther begins to explicitly refer God's work (for man, rather than in man) back to Christ's work, his suffering and death for man's sake. God's words are no longer merely doing or promising; they are delivering the benefits of that which has already been done at Calvary. Luther now understands grace to be the *favor Dei* rather than something which is infused in man. With these new *foci*, Christ's atoning work and the gift of its benefits in absolution, Luther now begins to emphasize receiving Holy Absolution rather than doing penance as a whole or even doing confession in particular.¹¹⁶ This becomes the manner in which Luther speaks consistently by 1525. This understanding of repentance, evidenced in the writings, lectures, and sermons of 1525, is that which then finds expression in Luther's mature works of the late 1520s and 1530s, those which might be called his "definitive" works.¹¹⁷

The question of how Luther finally came to his mature theology of repentance is often framed as an "either/or" proposition. That is, did this theology have its roots in the confessional or in the classroom? Was it prompted by Luther's practical and pastoral dealings or by his exegetical and theological concerns? The answer can only be "yes, and more." Luther understood quite early that theology and practice, especially that concerning penance, could not be separated. He also came to understand that the doctrine

¹¹⁶This emphasis on absolution also allows Luther to speak of Holy Absolution in the same manner as the other sacraments, even when he does not specifically call it a sacrament as such.

¹¹⁷Cf. *A Short Order of Confession Before the Priest for the Common Man*, which appeared in the 1529 edition of Luther's *Small Catechism* [AE 53: 116-118; WA 30^I: 343-45] and *How Plain People Are to Be Taught to Confess*, which replaced it in the 1531 edition [Tappert, 349-351; BKS, 517-519]. See also the *Brief Exhortation to Confession* in Luther's *Large Catechism* (1529) [Tappert, 457-461; BKS, 725-733]. Cf. also the *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony* (1528) [AE 40: 263-320; WA 26: 195-240] and *The Keys* (1530) [AE 40: 321-377; WA 30^{II}: 465-507]. Finally, cf. *The Smalcald Articles* (1536) [Tappert, 303-310; BKS, 436-449], noting not only what is confessed therein, but the place where repentance is situated, that is, between the article on the law and that on the gospel. To continue the comparisons between Luther's writings and his exegesis and preaching see esp. his 1532 lecture on Psalm 51 [AE 12: 303-410; WA 40^{II}: 315-470] and his *Easter Tuesday Sermon* of 1533 printed in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, v.2, Eugene F.A. Klug, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 32-40; WA 52: 259-266.

of penance was intimately entwined with the whole of Christian theology, and especially the central Reformation doctrine of justification.¹¹⁸ Thus, as noted in the beginning of this paper, Luther's three great "breakthroughs" — the understandings of God's righteousness, law and gospel, and repentance — can only be understood in relation to one another. And, ultimately, these can be properly understood only in relation to the person and work of Christ, the Christ who alone suffered and died for the forgiveness of sin, and the Christ whose gifts are bestowed in his Holy Absolutions.

¹¹⁸Melanchthon, in *Apology* XII, points out this intimate relation between penitence and justification when he calls the former a "most important issue, involving the chief doctrine of the Gospel," *Tappert*, 182; *BKS*, 253. The same has been noted by modern scholars: Tentler, 369, says, "The practical center of justification in medieval theology was sacramental confession," Osborne, 136, also admits that "The sacrament of penance cannot be expressed theologically unless a theology of justification is also expressed, and vice versa." This recognition allows Ulrich S. Leupold to say of Luther that "all the major emphases of his theology came to the fore in his views on private confession," *AE* 53:116.

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