

Introduction to Volume 2

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Martin Luther was an angst-driven theologian of the Bible with a pastoral heart and expansive horizons. He was immersed in the affairs of the world and cared deeply for the health of his church and the spiritual well-being of his fellow Christians. He was fundamentally enthralled with the Scriptures, the proper interpretation of which he sought and defended throughout his tumultuous career. He was shaped by deeply disturbing personal spiritual struggles that led to his understanding of the power of the word and justification by faith. His nearly obsessive sense of responsibility and his combative will, combined with his tireless engagement in a seemingly endless stream of ecclesial and theological issues, made the originally lonely religious rebel an international leader beyond Wittenberg where he lived and taught.^a

^a On Luther's emergence and evolution as a reformer, see *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 1: *Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). For a thorough treatment of Luther as a theologian and a reformer, see Martin Brecht's three-volume biography, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521–1532* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); and *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532–1546* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), all translated from German by James L. Schaaf.

Luther sought to define a particular “Christian” way of living. The young monk’s relentless pursuit of the gracious God transformed him into a talented university teacher enthused with the uninhibited study of the Scriptures. With the help of St. Paul and his letters to the Romans and Galatians, and a reexamination of the book of Psalms, Luther found his ground of being in the gospel about Jesus Christ and the meaning of his life and death for humanity. Luther’s approach to life and theology became uncompromisingly Christocentric. He found himself challenging the central teachings and practices of his church and spearheading sweeping reforms throughout Europe.^b Early on he lost control of the actions others had taken in response to his broadly published theology and ongoing proclamation from the pulpit.^c Regardless of the many issues that required Luther’s attention, the persistent interest for him remained in the existential questions and theological convictions about God’s grace for the sinner.

Luther’s vast list of publications demonstrates the depth and breadth of his involvement in the affairs of the church and society in his day. The reformer’s works are peculiarly situational or audience-specific as his theological expositions were often prompted by a request or demanded by a situation. In the turmoil of an extraordinarily busy life, Luther made some efforts to offer his confession of faith in a single document. None of these succeeded in becoming an obvious *summa* of Luther’s theology fitting for all constituencies, even if some works have arisen as clear favorites.

^b For an in-depth look, see, e.g., Heiko A. Obermann, *Martin Luther: Man between God and Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); and Hans-Martin Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

^c For contextualizing Luther in the larger picture of the Reformations, helpful resources in English include: Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Protestant Reformation* (New York: Perennial, 2009); Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2d ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2012); Denis Janz, *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); and Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2008).

WORD-CENTERED THEOLOGY OF FAITH

This volume presents works featuring some of Luther's most original and consistent theological assertions. The texts representing different genres are from different stages of Luther's career, spanning the period 1519–1538. Both his theological orientation and his modus of theological argumentation are visible. Studied together, the distinct pillars and idiosyncratic “system” of Luther's theology can be detected and appreciated.¹ That is, the works illustrate several clearly defined pieces in Luther's theology and also prove that his “formula” remains persistent: his starting and ending point is always how he understands the word about Christ, and his lens in interpreting his main source, the Scriptures, is always the meaning of Christ.

The title of the volume, *Word and Faith*, indicates the central nerves in Luther's theology: his radical faith perspective, and his absolute reliance on the word. This volume is explicitly devoted to Luther's theological voice and vision around the arguments he makes with his fundamental understanding of the saving word and justifying faith. It is through the working of the word that Luther explains the active presence of God in human life. His word-centered theology points to faith as the connector between divine and human realities. It is faith that makes one right with God, and the mechanisms of this relationship are revealed by the word. On the foundation of how and what the word works, one's most proper approach in life is that of faith that holds God at the center. With his wide-ranging interpretation of the Scriptures, as the *solus* source, Luther targets the manifold presence and action of God's word—in the world, in the church and its sacraments, and, most importantly, in all of human life's aspects. These discoveries are, he readily admits, a matter of faith.

When explaining the effect of the word, Luther makes the persistent argument about the saving faith, offered as the new orientation in spiritual life. Luther extrapolates the meaning of faith that connects one with God and brings about forgiveness. Far from a theoretical matter of a right “belief,” Luther strives to communicate the transformative impact of the word-induced renewal of the God-human relationship that hangs on faith “gifted” by Christ and sustained by God's own Spirit. Not only

1. For a theology that developed through controversy and that entails academic work, debate, and proclamation, the word *systematic* hardly does justice. That said, Luther's theological method is systematically biblically oriented, always centering on the meaning of the word. He does systematically and exhaustively elaborate on the key concepts of faith and grace, and, related, the working of the law and gospel in the life of a sinner-saint. In a way, Luther's whole theological work could be characterized as his effort of systematizing his view of justification, and from a paradoxical premise.

forgiven but transformed, and as if born again (or regenerated) with Christ, Christians so redeemed are called to a life of repentance and renewed love for one's neighbor.

Justification, the key word for Luther, unfolds from two standpoints, both of which are essential. On the one side, the gift is received passively as an alien righteousness in the immediate God relationship (*coram Deo*); on the other, it is the way of life expressed externally as a human being's "own" proper righteousness in relation to other creatures (*coram hominibus*). For Luther these are not theoretical but reality-altering matters, for both individual and communal life. His challenge was, then, to translate this experience and vision through preaching, teaching, and writing in order to illumine and invite all to encounter the word for themselves.

LUTHER'S TEXTS IN THIS VOLUME

The works in this volume are introduced and annotated by an international group of scholars and feature Luther's central theological principles and his unique theological arguments. One can embrace them as a teaching or a preaching tool, as a source for spiritual formation, and as a guide for ongoing scholarship.

Two Kinds of Righteousness^d from 1519 is a short early sermon that offers one of the most succinct explications of Luther's doctrine of justification. Luther distinguishes between the two dimensions of righteousness: the alien righteousness as a gift from Christ and complete in the *coram Deo* reality, and proper righteousness as one's own growing in the following of Christ *coram hominibus*. Using bridal imagery, Luther explains the nature and fruits of the intimate faith union between the justified sinner and the gracious God.

Another text that originated as a sermon, *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for in the Gospels*^e from 1522, illustrates Luther's major discovery about the ongoing paradox between law and

^d LW 31:297–306.

gospel: Christ the crucified annihilates the condemning law. At the heart of the mystery of justification, says Luther, is the “happy exchange” wherein Christ assumes human sin, while humans receive all that is Christ’s. Luther identifies the gospel message as the key to the interpretation of the entire Scriptures, including the Old Testament’s law.

A sermon from just a few years later returns to the topic that would continue to require Luther’s extended attention: law in the life of a Christian. In his *How Christians Should Regard Moses* from 1525, Luther delineates the distinction between law and gospel, making a case about Moses being dead for Christians whose hope rests in Christ only. At the same time, he defends the place of the Old Testament and its faith examples for Christians, whose reinterpretation of the texts takes place in light of the gospel, in order to stay clear from “works righteousness” (Catholic tradition) or law-based religiosity—all of which Christ has made futile.

From the same period (1525) comes the feisty *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*.⁸ Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and his followers, whom Luther dubbed the “heavenly prophets,” had opposed Luther on the question of the actual implementation of reform and the meaning of the sacraments. Luther felt obligated to attack the “spiritualists,” who were, in his opinion, a threat to the unity of the growing reform movement. Here Luther addresses the challenge in two parts: the first section deals with the topic of images, and the second with the sacrament of the altar. Offering also an incisive explanation of the relation of law and freedom, Luther accuses Karlstadt of having lapsed into works righteousness and argues vigorously for Christian freedom.

^e LW 35:[115–16] 117–24.

^f LW 35:161–74.



The title page of *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*. Luther urged Elector John Frederick to institute a systematic church visitation of Saxony (see the introduction to the *Large Catechism*, p. 279). Melanchthon wrote most of the document, but Luther contributed some passages, including the preface.

One of the most famous works of Luther, and one he was not displeased with himself, is the *Bondage of the Will*^h from 1525. The main argument in this verbose, milestone document is simple yet radical: human beings are not free to make right choices in relation to God. Even more so, human beings in their condition of bondage to sin are actually born enemies of God. Thus the depravity with sin is so deep that only God can rescue human beings from the abyss of self-induced damnation. Luther never compromised on this point, the reason being a christological argument: if human beings were able to save themselves, Christ would have died in vain, and that would be a terrible tragedy.

Luther's "Confession of Faith"ⁱ is part of a larger *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* from 1528, a text deemed and intended as a *summa* of Luther's theology. Embracing the Apostles' Creed, Luther gives a prototype for a "good confession" at the time of death, along with an evangelical statement of central faith articles. Underscoring salvation out of God's grace alone, Luther's focal point is the working of the word that creates life and enables salvation.

*The Large Catechism*² from 1529 uses a pedagogical format to explicate the basics of faith. Luther proceeds in the *Large Catechism* with a deliberate and distinct theological rationale: the Ten Commandments express God's expectations, the Creed proclaims God's promise, the Lord's Prayer translates law and gospel into a personal discourse with God, and the sacraments offer tangible expressions of God's grace and signs to lean on in faith. Through all these pieces, Luther follows the tracks of the Holy Spirit as the overarching enabler.

*The Smalcald Articles*³ was deliberately written as a confession to unite. Its spirited tone makes it a battle call and a poignant reminder of Luther's original reformation urgencies. The text gives an animated rationale for needed reforms in religious practice, from the Mass to calling on the saints, and offers a step-by-step summation of the central arguments in evangelical theology. A shift in theological orientation is argued on the basis of Luther's discovery of the chief doctrine on which everything stands: Christ's redeeming work. A matter of faith, one

2. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Timothy Wengert and Robert Kolb, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 379–480.

3. *Ibid.*, 297–328.

g LW 40:79–223.

h LW 33:15–295.

relies on the manifold work of the gospel that reaches people through preaching, sacraments, community, and mutual consolation of Christians.

This volume is offered as an invitation and a tool for a critical and compassionate study of Luther's theology in new contexts, with diverse frameworks and languages, and with global conversation partners. While the historical-theological prospects for further study with each text are endless, equally manifold are the existential and spiritual questions at stake.^j

i LW 37:360–72.

j See, e.g., Christine Helmer, ed., *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).