

Thomas More on Luther's *Sola Fide*: Just or Unjust?

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Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* contains a sustained, incisive polemic against Luther's doctrine *iustificatio sola fide sine operibus* or justification by faith alone without works¹. Most contemporary scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, hold that the work of the early Catholic controversialists was largely a failure in responding to both the spiritual and theological concerns of Martin Luther². One chief contention is that the controversialists failed to understand Luther correctly. This essay argues, against the consensus, that More's presentation of the Lutheran doctrine *sola fide* is substantially correct.

The *Dialogue*, composed and edited A.D. 1528-1532, is presented as More's account to Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall (who appointed More censor of heretical texts) of a lengthy set of his conversations with a certain

¹ Thomas MORE, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, rendered in Modern English by Mary Gottschalk. New York, Scepter Publishers, Inc., 2006, Part IV, §11, 428-55.

² See David V.N. BAGCHI, *Luther's Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists 1518-1525*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991, 9-14; Mark U. EDWARDS, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, 158; John M. FRYMIRE, *The Primacy of the Postils: Catholics, Protestants, and the Dissemination of Ideas in Early Modern Germany*. Leiden, Brill, 2010, 41-42; Joseph LORTZ, "Wert und Grenzen der katholischen Kontroverstheologie in der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts", in: August FRANZEN, ed., *Um Reform und Reformation: Zur Frage nach dem Wesen des "Reformatorischen" bei Martin Luther*. Münster, Aschendorff, 1968, 9-32; Id., *Reformation in Germany*, vol. 2, trans. Ronald Walls. New York, Herder and Herder, 1968, 175-223; Carl S. MEYER, "Thomas More and the Wittenberg Lutherans", in: *Concordia Theological Monthly* 39 (1968), 246-56. Remigius Bäumer, however, offered a more positive assessment of the early controversialists. See Remigius BÄUMER, "Lehramt und Theologie in der Sicht katholischer Theologen des 16. Jahrhunderts", in: R. BÄUMER (ed.), *Lehramt und Theologie im 16. Jahrhundert*. Katholisches Leben und Kirchenreform im Zeitalter der Glaubensspaltung 36. Münster-Westfalen, Aschendorff, 1976, 34-61.

“Messenger” beset by perplexity at the objections the Protestant Reformers, esp. Luther, raised against the Catholic faith. The witty Messenger desires to suspend judgment while exploring the provocative objections. This literary framework allows More to engage in vigorous debate concerning Luther’s difficulties and teachings. By today’s standards, More’s rhetoric, as that of many at the time, must be judged acerbic³.

More engages Luther’s thought on justification *sola fide* by way of recalling to the Messenger a story about a certain priest who had been covertly spreading Lutheran doctrine. Relatively well versed in Scripture, the fathers, and the books of the Protestant Reformers (including those of Wycliffe and Huss), he was apprehended by authorities and interrogated by “very astute persons” (§11, p. 430). In the recounting, More exhibits various Lutheran defenses of the *sola fide* teaching and its corollaries. At times, the Messenger suggests to More how he could embellish the priest’s arguments.

The present essay will expound and evaluate More’s analysis of Luther’s doctrine concerning justification. In order to determine whether More’s critique is applicable to Luther’s thought as a whole, I will draw broadly from Luther’s writings, using chiefly those of his works which were published before More completed his *Dialogue* but not excluding the great *Commentary on Galatians* (published A.D. 1535)⁴. The claim is not that More read most, much less all, of these texts⁵. Unlike More’s *Respon-*

³ See Constance M. FUREY, “Invective and Discernment in Martin Luther, D. Erasmus, and Thomas More”, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005), 469-488.

⁴ I will cite from the following: *Lectures on Romans* (1515-16); *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (1517); *Ninety-five Thesis* (1517); *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518); *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses* (1518); *Proceedings at Augsburg* (1518); *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (1519); *The Leipzig Debate* (1519); *Lectures on Galatians* (1519); *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520); *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520); *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* (1521); *Luther at the Diet of Worms* (1521); *Against Latomus* (1521); *Bondage of the Will* (1526); *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527-1530) – though not available until the past century; *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535).

⁵ Already in his *Responsio*, More certainly had read the following works of Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*, *Babylonian Captivity*, the account of Luther’s activity at the Diet of

sio ad Lutherum (A.D. 1523), the *Dialogue* is not a targeted refutation of specific texts⁶. Hence, the *Dialogue* does not offer copious citations. As, nonetheless, it engages a considerable field of content, I seek to establish whether or not what More puts into the mouth of the covert Lutheran squares substantially with the thought of Martin Luther himself.

Basic Structure of the Story about the Priest

If the *Dialogue* as a whole is complex at the macroscopic level⁷, perusal of this brief treatment of justification reveals microcosmic complexity. The literary and argumentative complexity calls for an outline:

Worms, the *Assertion of All the Articles*, Luther’s *Reply to Ambrosius Catharinus*, his work against King Henry VIII (*Responsio ad Lutherum, Part II: Introduction, Commentary, and Index*, ed. John M. HEADLEY, trans. St. Scholastica Mandeville, vol. 5, The Yale Edition of the *Complete Works of St. Thomas More*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1969, 784f, 802). In addition, More had considerable contact with the theologian Thomas Murner who visited London from Strassburg and who wrote numerous works against Luther (*Responsio*, pp. 786f). Murner “introduced [More] into the world of continental polemic against Luther” (John M. HEADLEY, “Thomas More and Luther’s Revolt”, in: *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 60 [1969], 152). Johann Eck also visited England and met with More (HEADLEY, “Revolt,” 152f). He was significantly influenced by Cochlaeus, considerably anti-Lutheran but not ill informed, who became More’s primary source of information on Luther (*Responsio*, 826). Finally, that More was deputed to be a censor of heretical texts gave him access to ecclesiastical sources of information concerning Luther. That he was the king’s secretary allowed him yet additional access to sources of information concerning Luther (*Responsio*, 786). Granting the charge that his reading of Luther was not copious, nonetheless, his close study of Tyndale made him appreciate “Luther’s influence on Tyndale no less than modern scholarship” (Steven W. HAAS, “Simon Fish, William Tyndale, and Sir Thomas More’s ‘Lutheran Conspiracy’”, in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 23 [1972], 127). Finally, More makes a number of references to Luther’s *Bondage of the Will* in his 1526 *Letter to Bugenhagen*. See THOMAS MORE, *Letter to Bugenhagen*, eds. Frank MANLEY - Germain MARC’HADOUR - Richard MARIUS - Clarence H. MILLER, vol. 7, The Yale Edition of the *Complete Works of St. Thomas More*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990, 69, 85f, and 97.

⁶ *Responsio ad Lutherum*, 806ff.

⁷ See Brendan BRADSHAW, “The Controversial Sir Thomas More”, in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), 535-552.

- A. (§11, pp. 431f) *Sola fide* offers a message long proven true: Trust in God and do good works.
- B. (§11, pp. 432f) *Sola fide* applies only to those who die immediately after Baptism.
- C. (§11, pp. 433-39) Faith alone justifies the person, though faith is never alone.
1. (§11, p. 433) Faith precedes good works, as a person precedes action.
 2. (§11, pp. 434f) Faith alone justifies because faith always includes hope and charity.
Exegetical Excursus Pursuing the Same Topic
 3. (§11, pp. 435f) Discussion of different interpretations of Gal 5:6 and 1 Cor 13.
 4. (§11, p. 438) "A dead faith is no faith, just as a dead man is no man".
 5. (§11, pp. 438f) In James, "faith" is said of demons by equivocation.
- D. (§11, p. 441) "Faith alone" means "faith with charity" and works.
- E. (§11, pp. 441-45): Though true faith comes with works, God rewards the faith, not the works.
1. (§11, pp. 441f) That faith is not alone, God rewards solely the faith.
 2. (§11, pp. 442f) The priest adduces several Scriptural proof texts.
 3. (§11, p. 445) In response to the interrogator's exegesis, the priest maintains his ground.
- F. [reprise of C2] (§11, p. 446): Faith cannot exist without good works.
- G. [reprise of C1] (§11, pp. 446f): The priest asks, Who would sin if he truly believed?

- H. (§11, pp. 447-451): Every last work, even the "good works" of a justified man, are sinful.
1. (§11, pp. 447f) Isaiah teaches that all our righteous deeds are sins.
 2. [reprise of A] (§11, pp. 449ff): "All our sufficiency is from God" (p. 449).
- I. (§11, p. 451) The interrogated confesses: All is determined by divine predestination alone.

After the priest puts forth a thesis, the interrogator overturns it, and the priest follows with another thesis; etc. The interrogator employs one tactic several times: If all that *sola fide* doctrine means is the benign thesis the priest suggests it means, there is no cause to rail against the Church; since the priest does rail against the Church, this must not be all the doctrine means. The argument is repeatedly deployed: (A), (B), (C2), (D), and (H2). Another tactic is the assertion of a contradiction between the priest's supposedly benign reading and the manifest declarations of Luther⁸. Finally, that the theses are not infrequently incompatible one with another manifests, for More, a dissembling that seeks to cover the relatively hidden but ultimate justification of lewd behavior – the thesis of absolute divine determination of all things.

Opening Pleas: *Sola Fide* Is a Benign Teaching

The common tactic commences in the first (A) of two arguments that the message of justification *sola fide* poses no threat to Catholic piety and faith: "Faith alone" simply teaches that one should hope in God, not in one's own works. Who could object? But if the Church ever offers precisely this pastoral advice to all, the covertly Lutheran priest ought not — as he has done — rail against the Church in private. Since he does rail in private,

⁸ See, e.g., (A), 432; (E1), 442.

this benign interpretation of “faith alone” must not be the whole truth of Lutheran doctrine. More the narrator correctly notes that Luther himself insists that his doctrine is not to be reduced to this truism (§11, p. 432).

Routed, the interrogated man adopts a new thesis (B), to be found in the early Luther⁹, that *sola fide sine operibus* applies only to those who die immediately after being justified through Baptism. These have little to no opportunity to perform good works after Baptism. Two arguments are coordinated in response. (1) If *sola fide* applied only in this way, the Protestant Reformers would have no cause to criticize the Church, which has consistently held the same position. Thus, they must mean something else as well. (2) If such were the case, the Gospel *sola fide* would pertain chiefly to infants, since most who are baptized are baptized as infants. But no infant has ears to hear the Gospel much less the use of free will to do good works. So, the statement is true for those who cannot receive it and false for those who can. If, however, *sola fide* is preached to persons who can act freely and have opportunity, “It is now a transparent cover-up” (§11, p. 432). Here we have More’s accusation of dissembling, an accusation which I must leave aside as irrelevant to an evaluation of Luther’s own doctrine¹⁰.

Classical Theological Arguments

The interrogated’s evasive strategy having been dismantled (§11, pp. 432f), he abandons it for classical theology, the meanwhile contradicting

⁹ Repentance for sins is necessary for all “possibly with the exception of a person who has just been made righteous and who does not need repentance” (Martin LUTHER, *The Leipzig Debate* [LW 31: 317]).

¹⁰ One could perhaps adduce the following citation in More’s favor: “They note the concern of Scripture that faith without works is dead, and we say the same thing. In public argument, however, we say that works are indeed necessary, but not as justifying elements. Thus anyone may privately come to the conclusion, ‘It is all the same whether I have sinned or whether I have done well.’ This is hard for the conscience to believe, that it is the same and in fact something angelic and divine”, Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17:222, comments on Is 53:5 [WA 31, pt. 2, p. 433.6-10]).

what he just said. He contends (C) that everyone who is justified is justified by faith alone apart from works, even though faith always comes with works. This new reading of the Gospel applies “not only in childhood but at any age” (§11, p. 433). Luther expresses himself in precisely this way¹¹.

The priest brings forth an axiom, very much Luther’s¹², to support the new thesis (C1): The quality of the person precedes the quality of the work (§11, pp. 433f). The axiom works by analogy: Just as one must first be a person in order to act, so one must first be a good person in order to do good works. One becomes a good person before God through faith alone. Now, just as a good tree naturally bears good fruit, so the person who is justified by faith alone necessarily does good works. He “cannot do otherwise” (§11, p. 433). In short, although faith alone justifies, “it could not but be that [the justified] would work good works” (§11, p. 434).

The interrogator peruses the thesis. He perceives several problems. (1) The axiom thus used implies determinism, for works would gush forth uncontrollably “much like a shadow that the body makes of necessity” (§11, p. 433). One who has faith *must* work, and work well; one who has not faith, *must* work, and work ill. All is determined by destiny. There is no human liberty. (2) The Lutheran conceives of the relation between person and work as static and non-reciprocal, works rendering the person neither better nor worse (§11, p. 433).

¹¹ Luther’s entire 1531 (1535) *Lectures on Galatians* is witness to this claim, but one can also mention his *Freedom of a Christian*.

¹² See Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* (LW 25:234-35 [WA 56.248.5-249.11]); *Id.*, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 31st Article (LW 32:84 [WA 7.434/435]); *Id.*, *1519 Lectures on Galatians* (LW 27:223-25 [WA 2.492.17-493.18]); *Id.*, *The Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:360-63 [WA 7.61.1-63.21]); and *Id.*, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:169 [WA 40, pt. 1, p. 287.17-23], 210f [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 339.27-340.21], and 259-64 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 407.28-414.23]). Unless I note the “1519” Lectures on Galatians, I refer to Luther’s 1531 lectures, published in 1535. It is next to impossible that More ever read the latter, one of only texts to which I refer written after More’s *Dialogue* was completed. I refer to this magnum opus to show the continuity of various lines of thought throughout the Reformer’s career. The other text, *Lectures on Isaiah*, which was not available until recently, I cite only a few times.

Each of the concerns of the interrogator is accurate with respect to Luther's doctrine. (1) Luther's manifesto on freedom, among other works, exhibits the former:

No good work helps justify or save an unbeliever. On the other hand, no evil work makes him wicked or damns him; but the unbelief which makes the person and the tree evil does the evil and damnable works. Hence when a man is good or evil, this is effected not by the works but by faith or unbelief (...) Nothing makes a man good except faith, or evil except unbelief¹³.

In his *Bondage of the Will*, he writes, "It is not men that merit the kingdom, even by God's grace, but the kingdom that merits men"¹⁴. As to the latter (2), Luther thinks a man "no better" eternally for any good works. In *Freedom*, he writes,

The Christian who is consecrated by his faith does good works, but the works do not make him holier or more Christian, for that is the work of faith alone¹⁵.

As the man is, whether a believer or an unbeliever, so also is his work — good if it was done in faith, wicked if it was done in unbelief. But the converse is not true, that the work makes the man either a believer or an unbeliever (...) A Christian has no need of any work or law in order to be saved since through faith he is free from every law and does everything out of pure liberty and freely. He seeks neither benefit nor salvation since he already abounds in all things and is saved through the grace of God because in his faith he now seeks only to please God¹⁶.

In short, Luther insists that works are non-reciprocally related to a man's "person" when "person" means status before God¹⁷.

¹³ Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:362 [WA 7.62.15-26]).

¹⁴ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:152-53 [WA 18.694.15-29]).

¹⁵ Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:360f [WA 7.61.21-23]).

¹⁶ Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:361 [WA 7.62.3-14]). See also Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* (LW 25:242 [WA 56.255.15-19]).

¹⁷ See Paul ALTHAUS, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert Schultz. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1966, 23-45 and 240. By imputation, one is totally righteous (see note

One better grasps Luther's implication of non-reciprocity in his sharp distinction between "justification", by which salvation is gained and damnation escaped, and "sanctification", by which God transforms the inner man and brings forth good works. Justification involves God's not punishing one for sin; sanctification involves God's purging sin away. Justification is not constituted by the purging but by the divine favor or grace by which God does not consider sin: "As far as its nature is concerned, sin in no way differs from itself before grace and after grace; but it is indeed different in the way it is treated (...) Now it is treated as non-existent and as expelled. Despite this, it is truly and by nature sin"¹⁸. The divine work of purging sin (sanctification) is indeed present *with* the work of acquittal — there is no forgiveness of sins without this office. Nonetheless, the former remains totally distinct from and subordinated to the latter¹⁹. Luther drew the distinction more and more sharply throughout his career. On its basis, he relegated all works to but "signs and fruits" of justification. Works can in no way serve to augment justification, for justification is exclusively binary: Man is either entirely just or entirely wicked. This remains the case throughout one's pilgrim life: One is always at the beginning²⁰.

After the interrogator airs his concerns about determinism and the non-reciprocity between works and faith, the priest takes shelter in a related thesis (C2): One is justified by faith alone because in fact it is never alone; it always comes with charity. An incisive rebuttal follows: If faith

61, p. 236). Christians are treated "as if" they obey God's law (Rom 8:4), although they still violate the law: "The beginning of the new creation and the battle against sin in the Christian in no way changes the fact that he still remains a sinner. And this means more than that he is not yet righteous: he is guilty before God" (ALTHAUS, 240).

¹⁸ Martin LUTHER, *Against Latomus* (LW 32:229 [WA 8.107.26-30]).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* (LW 32:239f [WA 8.114]). See also Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17:229-31 [WA 31, pt. 2, pp. 438.32-440.19]).

²⁰ One ought not to conceive the Christian life as one of progress. One is always at the beginning. See Jonathan TRIGG, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, no. 56, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, ed. Heiko A. OBERMAN. New York, E.J. Brill, 1994, 162-66.

always has love, then why not preach justification by “charity alone” (§11, p. 435)? Luther himself, of course, rejects the consequent and draws his crucial distinction regarding the antecedent, anticipating the need to refute the false irenicism that predominates today: “It is the same kind of dialectic to argue: ‘The Christian life is faith and love, or faith working through love. Therefore love justifies, not faith alone.’ But away with human opinions!”²¹ Again,

It is a laudable and happy thing to imitate the example of Christ in His deeds, to love one’s neighbors, to do good to those who deserve evil, to pray for one’s enemies, and to bear with patience the ingratitude of those who requite good with evil. But none of this contributes to righteousness in the sight of God²².

Luther unequivocally distinguishes faith and its justifying power from divinely infused love: “We must look at this image and take hold of it with a firm faith. He who does this has the innocence and the victory of Christ, no matter how great a sinner he is. But this cannot be grasped by loving will; it can be grasped only by reason illumined by faith. Therefore we are justified by faith alone, because faith alone grasps this victory of Christ”²³. Good works are but fruits and signs of a justification and salvation “already” procured through faith alone²⁴.

Of course, there can be a Catholic sense to Luther’s axiom that person precedes work. It is Catholic dogma, against Pelagianism, that no good works done without grace render man pleasing before God. Grace is given as a sheer gift and makes the man to be pleasing to God. Insofar as Luther

²¹ Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 27:31 [WA 40, pt. 2, p. 38.17-22]).

²² Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:247 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 389.29-390.22]); see also *ibid.* (LW 27:120f [WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 154.25-155.25]).

²³ Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:284 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 443.35-444.14]). See also, *ibid.* (LW 27:20-23 [WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 23.12-27.22], 28-31 [WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 34.8-38.22], and 67-68 [WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 85.14-86.19]).

²⁴ On the later Luther’s interesting development of thought regarding works as signs of faith, see ALTHAUS, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 448-58.

wields the axiom against Pelagianism, he is at one with Catholic tradition. However, insofar as he rejects the idea of preparation for justification, he parts from Catholic tradition²⁵. Finally, insofar as Luther conceives justification and sanctification to be of diverse essences and thus non-reciprocally related, he also parts from Catholic tradition.

The interrogator finds another fault in this doctrine. Contrary to the priest’s insistence that faith necessarily includes hope, charity, and good works, he retorts, “Those who hope that by faith alone they shall be saved without any good works (which is what Lutherans do indeed believe) have a bad hope, and a condemnable one” (§11, pp. 434f). Here and later (§11, pp. 438, 440f), More’s interrogator is thinking of the sin of theological presumption. Theological presumption is worse, contends Thomas Aquinas, than Pelagian presumption because whereas the latter exaggerates human power the former distorts divine mercy by ascribing the impossible to it out of the pride of self love²⁶.

²⁵ Luther consistently portrays only a binary opposition between man-without-grace and man-with-grace, the former being able only to rebel against grace (see, e.g., Martin LUTHER, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 6th Article [LW 32:37f {WA 7.358/359-360/361}] and 36th Article [LW 32:92-94 {444/445-450/451}]; Id., *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, 30th Thesis [LW 31:11 {WA 1.225.29-30}]; and Id., *Lectures on Galatians* [LW 27:131 {WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 167.20-168.20}]). For Luther, in being transformed from an unbeliever to a believer, man is simply passive (Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:157 {WA 18.697.7-698.9}]). The causality is solely divine, without any dispositional activity of man (Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:202 {WA 18.726.22-38}]). Scriptural commands do not imply that even a justified man can with grace obey (Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:202 {WA 18.726.22-38}]). Imperatives expose our incapacity: “Since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20), thereby fostering radical humility (see Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:61f {WA 18.632.21-633.6}, 119-21 {WA 18.672.23-674.6}, 124-38 {WA 18.675.20-684.13}, and 261-63 {WA 18.766.8-767.18}]). By contrast, Catholics speak of habitual and actual grace. Although the non-justified does not have habitual sanctifying grace, he does enjoy God’s invitation through actual graces, by which God calls him to prepare for the reception of justifying grace.

²⁶ See THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, q. 21, aa. 2 and 4. Randall ZACHMAN presents a fair description of Luther’s hope: “The gift of the Holy Spirit, which was cen-

Exegetical Excursus

After his quip about “charity alone” justifying, the interrogator begins a sudden Scriptural offensive and contends that Paul ascribes the working of good deeds to charity, not to faith, in his phrase “faith which workes by love” (Gal 5:6). Paul, moreover, teaches that a faith without charity is possible: “If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love [charity], I am nothing” (1Cor 13:3).

A lively discussion of 1Cor 13 and Ja 2:18-26 ensues, with More relating the Messenger’s suggested embellishments of the Lutheran’s exegesis. The Messenger suggests (C3) that in 1Cor 13 Paul could be speaking *per impossibile*, as he does in Gal 1:8, wherein he suggests that *if* an angel were to preach another gospel, one ought to reject his message (§11, pp. 435-36). Although it is impossible for an angel to preach against the Gospel, Paul depicts such an impossible occurrence in order to exhort his hearers to fidelity, lest they be anathema. Similarly, although in 1Cor 13 Paul speaks of the impotence of faith without charity, he does not — the Messenger suggests — thereby affirm that faith *can* exist without charity. More contradicts him: “Between those two texts from St. Paul there is a big difference” (§11, p. 436). The Galatians text suggests a manifest impossibility, since no (good) angel can preach a false faith; whereas “Faith can be severed from charity”. Again, the Galatians text urges the infallibility of faith’s truth; whereas the Corinthians text exhorts its reader to recognize that no gifts without charity avail unto salvation. The narrator concludes

tral to the Augustinian definition of grace, is no longer understood to give us the ability to love God, but is rather understood as sealing the love of God for us in Christ Jesus on our minds and hearts. This is why hope does not disappoint us... The field of tension created by hope and fear in the Augustinian reading of Paul is replaced by a bold confidence in the love of God for us in the Evangelical reading of Paul, one that will strike the Roman opponents of the Evangelicals as proud presumption”, in his “Medieval and Reformation Readings of Paul”, in: *Rereading Paul Together: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives on Justification*, ed. David E. AUNE. Grand Rapids, Baker, 2006, 183.

against the Messenger: “Whereas that man [the interrogated] said, and you seem to confirm the same, that faith cannot be idle from the working of good works, the Apostle, to show the contrary, and that all the works of faith, however good they may seem are yet actually bad if they are not wrought with charity, commends only the faith that works by charity” (§11, p. 437).

As More relates, the interrogator next refers to what Luther regarded as the “Epistle of Straw”, insisting that faith “can be utterly dead” (§11, p. 438). Thwarting this allusion, the priest insists (C4), “A dead faith is no faith, just as a dead man is no man” (§11, p. 438); further, (C5) that faith which the “demons” are said to have is but the calculated estimation of a keen intellect, not a gift of grace (§11, p. 439). He calls as witness to his exegesis “certain learned persons”. More’s interrogator identifies them: “Luther and Tyndale” (§11, p. 439). In point of fact, Luther and Tyndale would have been joined, as to his opinion that demons have only a calculated estimation and not true faith, by a host of reputable thinkers, among whom would be Thomas Aquinas²⁷. Thus, More’s defense falls short here. Notwithstanding this flaw, Aquinas, together with Peter Lombard, who cites Augustine and Bede, and Bonaventure, held that the faith which comes from above can exist in the pilgrim even without charity. On this score More and the interrogator are solidly in the Catholic doctrinal and exegetical tradition²⁸.

Once again routed, the interrogated man takes up another thesis (D): The expression *sola fide* refers precisely to that faith which is living, which includes charity and good works implicitly (§11, p. 441). One readily sees that this thesis (D) conflicts with the previous thesis (C). Now, this new thesis (D) can be read in a truly Catholic manner. Yet again, in such

²⁷ See *ST IIaIIae*, q. 5, a. 2.

²⁸ See *ST IIaIIae*, q. 4, a. 4. See PETER LOMBARD, *III Sententiae*, d. 23, chap. 4 (Grottaferata, 143ff); AUGUSTINE, *Commentary on John*, tract. 29, par. 6; BONAVENTURE, *In III Sent.*, d. 23, art. 2, q. 2 (Quaracchi, 479ff).

case, the priest has no cause for secrecy. Further, why describe justification as by faith alone if faith does not justify when it is alone?

For his part, Luther often describes faith as abounding in riches: Faith accomplishes a union with Christ, a mystical marriage, a happy exchange²⁹. Such lines of thought are deeply consonant with the Catholic tradition, at least in promise. On the other hand, as the interrogator asserts, Luther also contradicts this thesis, for he maintains that the attempt to please God by anything but faith alone is a sin. He insists that “nothing ... can damn a Christian, save only lack of belief. For all other sins (if belief and faith stand fast) are entirely engulfed and swallowed up” (§11, p. 441). Once again, More’s interrogator is on the mark. I cite again his remarks from *Freedom*: “No good work helps justify or save an unbeliever. On the other hand, no evil work makes him wicked or damns him; but the unbelief which makes the person and the tree evil does the evil and damnable works”³⁰. In the *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther writes,

Even if he would, he could not lose his salvation, however much he sinned, unless he refused to believe. For no sin can condemn him save unbelief alone. All other sins, so long as the faith in God’s promise returns or remains, are immediately blotted out through that same faith, or rather through the truth of God, because he cannot deny himself if you confess him and faithfully cling to him in his promise³¹.

The same teaching forms a key element of the 1535 *Lectures on Galatians*³². For Luther, faith’s office of justifying is required *precisely*

²⁹ Faith unites a believer with Christ in a mystical marriage (see, esp., Martin LUTHER, *Two Kinds of Righteousness* [LW 31:297-306 {WA 2.145-52}]). Through the marriage, one enjoys the happy exchange: “This is an infinite righteousness, and one that swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ. On the contrary, he who trusts in Christ exists in Christ; he is one with Christ, having the same righteousness as he. It is therefore impossible that sin should remain in him” (Martin LUTHER, *Two Kinds of Righteousness* [LW 31:298-99 {WA 2.146.12-19}]).

³⁰ Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:362).

³¹ Martin LUTHER, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (LW 36:60f).

³² See, e.g., Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:136-139 [WA 40:239-242]).

because of the ongoing failure of charity in the justified person, on account of which failure the justified person would be found guilty before God had he not the ongoing non-imputation of sin grasped through faith³³. Contrary to many recent Catholic attempts to read into Luther’s multidimensional understanding of faith a Catholic sense, Luther does not see his own praise of the mystical union with Christ as inimical to his insistence, which is manifestly contrary to Catholic tradition, that sin remains the same before and after justification, that justification is simply the non-imputation of sin (§11, p. 452), and that works do not render a man “more just”³⁴.

The covertly Lutheran priest submits yet another thesis (E): Although justifying faith must include works, yet God rewards solely the faith (§11, pp. 441f). The interrogator repeats what he had just said: Luther himself maintains that nothing but unbelief will in fact damn anyone; therefore, justifying faith cannot, according to Luther, require good works. The priest retorts that the Scripture demonstrates that only faith is rewarded. He points to Rom 4:3 and other such texts: “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”. The interrogator replies with a Catholic exegesis of such texts. This exegesis goes back as far as Mt 5:17ff and was clearly expounded by Irenaeus in his contentions against the Marcionites. The Catholic exegesis holds that that which constitutes the central commands of the Old Law, the Decalogue, remains in place whereas the Mosaic character of the Law, with all its ceremonial

³³ See Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 27:64 [WA 40:79f]).

³⁴ For Luther, a man united with Christ “has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him” (Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* [LW 31:349 {WA 7.53.28-29}]). This does not mean that through faith the believer receives the grace by which he can avoid mortal sin. As shown elsewhere, Luther holds that no one can do this. Rather, the phrase means, “A Christian (...) needs no works to make him righteous and save him” (Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* [LW 31:356 {WA 7.58.5-6}]). Later works bear the same pairing of the mystical marriage and the constant sinfulness of the believer and the non-necessity of works for salvation (see Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* [LW 27:138-42 {WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 177.12-180.30}]).

and political precepts, a law only significative and not causal of grace, has been abrogated. Again, the Catholic exegesis admits that all works are worthless without faith, that Christ died for us without merit on our part, and that initial justification is not merited (§11, pp. 443f). These and other meanings have ever been held by the Church. By contrast, none of the texts implies Luther's claim that "Faith alone will save us without good works, if we live long enough and have enough intelligence to be able to do them" (§11, p. 444).

At this point, the interrogated shows signs of panic. His next thesis (F) is a return to the already refuted one (C2) that faith is necessarily accompanied by works. He is reminded of the previous thrashing (§11, p. 446). He then reformulates another previously refuted thesis (C1): "Who would sin, said he, if they believed truly and surely that sin would bring them to hell?" (§11, p. 446). In short, how could one who is the object of God's justifying declaration (declared a just person) not go forth and serve in love (bear fruit in good deeds)? The interrogator briefly turns the tables on him: The Lutheran doctrine that no works can damn except unbelief might in fact encourage licentiousness, even if some noble souls were moved by it and refrained from sin (§11, pp. 446f). Experience shows, moreover, that even those who hold that sins other than unbelief lead to hell are not immune from deadly sin. The Scriptures attest the same. Therefore, "It is but a fiction to say that faith draws always good works with it" (§11, p. 447), as the man had maintained in (C).

Desperate Strategy

Routed by his own words, by reason, by Scripture, and by the attestation of experience, the priest attempts a global argument: All human works, even putatively good works done in grace, are sins. To this end, he calls Isaiah 64:6 to his side: All our righteous deeds are as menstrual rags (§11, pp. 447f). A Lutheran Sampson, he hereby crushes any previous defense of the

Catholicity of *sola fide*, for if all good works are truly sins, then all appeals to the necessity of good works are vacuous. More evidence of dissembling (§11, p. 448). The interrogator suggests several compatible readings of the Isaiah text each in harmony with Catholic tradition. On the other hand, Isaiah "never meant what Luther and his cohorts would have him seem to be saying: that the grace of God is in all his people so feeble of itself, and of so little force and effect, that no one can with the help of it be able to do one good, virtuous deed" (§11, pp. 448f). Far from extolling God and his grace, Luther and his followers despise it:

You, who hold all our deeds to be utterly wicked even if grace works with them, are two or three times more enemies to grace than the Pelagians were. For whereas they said we could sometimes do good without it, you say we can at no time do any good with it. And so grace, by your account, is a really worthless thing (§11, p. 449).

A bold claim indeed, yet one proven accurate throughout Luther's works. Luther maintains that everyone sins in every act. In a rather early work, Luther wrote,

Whoever does less than he ought, sins. But every righteous person in doing good does less than he ought. Well, then, I shall prove the minor premise in the following way: Whoever does not do good out of complete and perfect love of God does less than he ought. But every righteous man is that kind of a person. I shall prove the major premise through the commandment: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul, and all your might' etc. [Deut. 6:5], of which the Lord says in Matt. 5 [:18], 'Not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.' Therefore we must love God with all our might, or we sin³⁵.

³⁵ Martin LUTHER, *Heidelberg Disputations*, Explanation to Thesis 6 (LW 31:61-62, but see the entire discussion, pp. 58-62 [WA 1.368.9-20]); see *Id.*, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 27:63-65 [WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 79.22-81.25]). See also *Id.*, *Heidelberg Disputations*, Explanation to Thesis 6 (LW 31:62 [WA 1.368.24-28]). See also Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 58th Thesis (LW 31:213 [WA 1.606.25-27]). See also Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:152-54 [WA 18.693.38-695.22]).

Elsewhere, he writes, "Not even in grace is it possible to fulfill the law perfectly"³⁶. Again, "No saint has adequately fulfilled God's commandments in this life"³⁷. A fortiori is this true of unbelievers: "If human nature is so evil that in those born anew of the Spirit it not only does not endeavor after the good but actually strives and fights against it, how should it endeavor after the good in those who are not yet born anew but are still 'in the old man' and in bondage to Satan?"³⁸

Of course, there are certain intrinsically mitigating lines of thought in Luther's works³⁹. However, none of these effectively and consistently mitigates his fundamental thesis. Certainly for the mature Luther, but also for the early Luther, all sins are intrinsically mortal, though for believers they become, through a judicial pronouncement of God who decides not to impute

³⁶ Martin LUTHER, *Disputation Against Scholasticism*, 65th Thesis (LW 31:14 [WA 1.227.20]).

³⁷ Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 58th Thesis (LW 31:213 [WA 1.606.12-13]). Granted, Luther sometimes makes it out as though by God's grace one can observe the Ten Commandments (see, for example, Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:148-49 {WA 18.691.20-39}]). The Law is "fulfilled" before one even works (Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* [LW 31:352f {WA 7.55.37-56.14}]).

³⁸ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:288 [WA 18.783.6-9]).

³⁹ It may be that some of these intrinsically contradict other, more crucial theses in Luther. At any rate, we may note some here. First, an early remark labels the sins of the justified "venial" (Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 17th Thesis [LW 31:136 {WA 1.561.39-42}] and 58th Thesis [LW 31:216 {WA 1.608.4-16}]). Of course, this contradicts his opinion that it may be impossible for any work of any non-justified person to be anything but a mortal sin (*Heidelberg Disputations*, 10th Thesis [LW 31:47f {WA 1.359.3-16}]). Second, Luther distinguishes between desire and consent. This may parallel a Catholic distinction between concupiscence and the act of the will (see, e.g., Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* [LW 25:390-91 {WA 56.401.7-28}]; Id., *Lectures on Galatians* [LW 27:80-82 {WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 100.28-104.17}]). At the same time, no Catholic moralist would describe David's adultery and murder as mere "desire", whereas Luther does (see Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* [LW 27:80 {WA 40, pt. 2, p. 101.19-31}]). Similarly, no Catholic moralist would claim that concupiscence as such renders one damnably guilty, whereas Luther does (see Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* [LW 25:357 {WA 56.367.22-30}]). Third, Luther notes that the devil can exaggerate sin (see Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* [LW 27:78 {WA 40, pt. 2, p. 98.31-33}]). On the other hand, he still contends that all sins are deadly (see *ibid.*, p. 86 [WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 107.33-108.11]).

them, only "venial"⁴⁰. If even the works of believers are sinful, much more so are the works of unbelievers⁴¹. Either way, everyone sins mortally in every act: "To deny that man sins even when doing good; that venial sin is pardonable, not according to its nature, but by the mercy of God; or that sin remains in the child after baptism; that is equivalent to crushing Paul and Christ under foot"⁴². Therefore, no one merits anything but eternal death, since the law is fulfilled only if its always-guaranteed non-fulfillment is "forgiven"⁴³.

An Olive Branch Offered and Refused

At this point, the interrogation takes a noteworthy turn. The interrogator agrees with the Pauline statement, "all our sufficiency is from God". Nor

⁴⁰ See Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* (LW 25:257-68 [WA 56.268.26-281.21] and 276f [WA 56.289.14-32]). Again, "Thus you say, 'How do we fulfill the law of God?' I answer, Because we do not fulfil it, therefore we are sinners and disobedient to God. Nor is this a venial sin according to its essence and nature, for nothing impure will enter the kingdom of heaven [Rev. 21:27]. For this reason damnation is demanded for every sin..." (Martin LUTHER, *Heidelberg Disputations*, Explanation to Thesis 6, Part 2, Corollary [LW 31:62 {WA 1.369.11-14}]). See Id., *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 8th Article and 9th Article (LW 32:43-44 [WA 7.368/369 and 370/371]; 31st Article and 32nd Article (LW 32:83-87 [WA 7.432/433-438/439]); and 35th Article (LW 32:91 [WA 7.444/445]).

⁴¹ Martin LUTHER, *Heidelberg Disputations*, 3rd Thesis (LW 31:43f [WA 1.356.15-31]).

⁴² Martin LUTHER, *The Leipzig Debate*, 2nd Thesis (LW 31:317 [WA 2.160.33-35]).

⁴³ The interrogated man appeals to Rom 5:1; Gal 3:24; Rom 3:24; Rom 4:2, 3; and Mk 16:16. Martin Luther lucidly articulates this position in his magnum opus *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:259-68 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 407.28-419.21]), but he also expresses it quite early: The law is adequately "fulfilled" in us "[more by being forgiven through the mercy of God than by being carried out by human] righteousness" (*Heidelberg Disputation*, Explanation to Thesis 6 [LW 31:63 {WA 1.369.17-18}]). Here, Luther is relying on Augustine (AUGUSTINE, *Retractions* I, 18). Augustine's point in this remark, however, is that without special divine help, no justified person is without all sin. Augustine hardly means that every justified person is guilty of damnable sin, for justification is the divine transformation of the heart of stone into a heart of flesh. Luther should have noted that in the *Retractions*, Augustine also calls to mind his book *On Faith and Works*, in which he condemns the view that faith can save apart from works (see *Retractions* II, 64 and *On Faith and Works*, I.1-6.8). By contrast, for Luther, the work of a believer is "accepted" precisely in that it is pardoned (*Heidelberg Disputation*, Explanation to Thesis 6 [LW 31:62-64 {WA 1.368-71}]). See also Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 58th Thesis (LW 31:214 [WA 1.606.34-607.16]).

could any Christian not agree. This statement in itself indicates an appeal to the primacy of divine causality and merciful divine initiative, points of common ground between Luther and the Catholic tradition. Interestingly, More's interrogator exegetes the statement in accordance with one particular school of Catholic thought, the Scotist school, which differs notably from the Thomist school: No gift of grace and good deeds resulting therefrom and from free will could ever have any claim to the divine reward except by the Almighty God's extrinsic acceptance of them (§11, pp. 450f). That is, they are only "accepted" as worthy but have no intrinsic worth before God apart from that acceptance. Not even faith itself has any value except because God has ordained to accept it as worthy⁴⁴. So, how could the covertly Lutheran priest disagree? In some sense this final appeal to the extrinsic divine acceptance may be an olive branch. At any rate, the priest turns it down. If he accepted it, he would have no cause to rail against the Church and to appeal to faith over against works as though either had any worth apart from God's sufficiency. The dissembling character has again been unmasked, so the priest can divulge his darkest secret. I shall return to that in a moment.

But first, More's interrogator had dropped a surprising little bomb before launching into the Scotistic reading of merit: "And therefore, among many foolish statements, as foolish as any heretic ever made, Luther never made a crazier one than what he says about God having need of our faith. For he says that God has no need of our good works, but that he does have need of our faith, and has need for us to believe in him" (§11, p. 450). There is a foundation in Luther for an accusation such as this. The *Babylonian Captivity* stresses the absolute requirement of faith, since faith is acceptance of a promise, and since a promise has no effect without acceptance⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ This option for a Scotistic account of merit correlates with another option, a reading of human freedom as less causally subject to the divine power and predestination than that presented in the common view of the Thomists. More remarks in his *Letter to Bugenhagen* that he would prefer Pelagius ten times over Luther (see HEADLEY, "Revolt", 158).

⁴⁵ See LW 36, *passim*, but esp. 42f.

Earlier, Luther had written, "The remission of sin and the gift of grace are not enough; one must also believe that one's sin has been remitted"⁴⁶. Luther is suggesting that although in a "metaphysical" sense "remission of guilt takes place through the infusion of grace"⁴⁷ (note that this is an early text, exceptional for its Catholicity), yet the experiential need of a sinner, motivated by a "terrified conscience"⁴⁸, requires faith in God's acceptance. "If even Christ and God himself were to pronounce the absolution, without faith it would be of no avail"⁴⁹. The heart of the matter is the subjective condition of the terrified conscience: "Hell, purgatory, and heaven seem to differ the same as despair, fear, and assurance of salvation"⁵⁰.

Luther's sacramental theory lays similar stress on faith, not the sacrament, as the instrumental agent of justification. In the *Babylonian Captivity*, he writes,

[The whole efficacy of our sacraments], therefore, consists in faith itself, not in the doing of a work. Whoever believes them, fulfils them, even if he should not do a single work. This is the origin of the saying: 'Not the sacrament, but the faith of the sacrament, justifies.' (...) Thus it is not baptism that justifies or benefits anyone, but it is faith in that word of promise to which baptism is added. This faith justifies, and fulfils that which baptism signifies⁵¹.

Catholic sacramentalists long recognized that those with the use of reason cannot validly, much less fruitfully, receive the sacrament without

⁴⁶ Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 7th Thesis (LW 31:104f [WA 1.543.23-24]).

⁴⁷ Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 7th Thesis (LW 31:101 [WA 1.541.16-17]). See also *ibid.*, 18th Thesis (LW 31:136-39 [WA 1.562-64]).

⁴⁸ "It was fear for his salvation that had driven him. He wanted to achieve eternal life and was filled with 'fear and trembling'" (Heiko OBERMAN, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Shwarzbart. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989, 127).

⁴⁹ Martin LUTHER, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* (LW 32:50 [WA 7.381.17-18]).

⁵⁰ Martin LUTHER, *Ninety-Five Theses*, 16th Thesis (of the First Set) (LW 31:27 [WA 1.234.7-8]).

⁵¹ Martin LUTHER, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (LW 36:65f).

a personal act of faith. In an early work, Luther turns this *condition* for valid and fruitful reception into the instrument mediating God's grace to the recipient:

It is impossible to proffer the sacrament in a salutary manner except to those who already believe and are just and worthy. The one who approaches the sacrament must believe [Heb. 11:6]. Therefore it is not the sacrament, but faith in the sacrament, that justifies. No matter what these arrogant sophists may chatter, it is much more plausible to say that the priest of the new law only declares and confirms the absolution of God, that is, points it out, and by this pointing out of his and by his judgment calms the conscience of the sinner⁵².

Catholics sympathetic with Reformation concerns may be surprised, given that the notion of sacramental efficacy *ex opere operato* in an important way frees the recipient from the burden of concern about the minister's worthiness and even about excessive concern about his own worthiness. Here, Luther surprises. Were a priest to perform the sacrament "in a spirit of levity", he contends, faith alone would suffice since faith, not the sacrament, is what causes forgiveness⁵³. The burden in the blessings of the sacraments seems to have shifted. If this dispute about the necessity of faith were only a matter of sacramental mediation, perhaps the reader would not be terribly surprised. In fact, the matter goes deeper. Luther applies the same analysis to Jesus' pardoning of a sinful woman in Lk 7:50: "Christ himself does not ascribe the forgiveness of her sins to his absolution, nor to his keys, nor to his power, but to her faith"⁵⁴.

⁵² Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 7th Thesis (LW 31:107 [WA 1.544.39-41]). See *Id.*, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 1st Article (LW 32:14 [WA 7.320/321]).

⁵³ Martin LUTHER, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 12th Article (LW 32:49-50 [WA 7.378/379]).

⁵⁴ Martin LUTHER, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 10th Article (LW 32:46 [WA 7.375.4-6]).

In defense of his claim on faith's importance, Luther cites Augustine's commentary on Jn 15:3: "Not the sacrament but the faith in the sacrament makes righteous and saves"⁵⁵. Luther's use of Augustine is diametrically opposed to Augustine's obvious teaching, as even cursory examination shows. Augustine first notes that the bare water has no cleansing power in itself. What must be added is the words of the baptismal formula. But even these words have no value in themselves; they are only sounds. What is needed is also faith. What Augustine has done is point out what later theologians call the matter — form distinction in the sacraments. The matter becomes sacramental when it is wedded with the form. Luther reads Augustine to be teaching that the faith of the recipient is the instrumental agent of grace. Thus, Luther is hereby denying sacramental agency. But Augustine was not speaking of the recipient's faith but of the faith of the Church, the *fides ecclesiae*. The faith of the Church has genuine causal efficacy (albeit instrumental), contrary to Luther's thesis. Whereas Augustine ascribes causal efficacy not to physical elements as such but indeed to the sacramental event performed by the believing Church, Luther takes Augustine to mean that the grace of the sacrament is obtained solely by the faith of the recipient. Luther's reading is shown false by Augustine's own remarks about infant baptism in this very passage:

This word of faith possesses such virtue in the Church of God, that through the medium of him who in faith presents, and blesses, and sprinkles it, He cleanseth even the tiny infant, although itself unable as yet with the heart to believe unto righteousness, and to make confession with the mouth unto salvation⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ See AUGUSTINE, *Commentary on John*, Tractate LXXX (CCL 36, p. 529) and Martin LUTHER, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 1st Article (LW 32:17 [WA 7.324/325]).

⁵⁶ AUGUSTINE, *Commentary on John*, Tractate LXXX, in: *Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, vol. 7, ed. Philip SCHAFF, 345.

The faith Augustine refers to is the faith of the Church, which accomplishes the feat of baptismal cleansing even for infants who cannot make acts of faith. Although Luther himself recognizes an “alien” faith for such infants, he does not allow that insight consistently to inform his reading of Augustine on this matter. For Augustine, affirmation of sacramental efficacy is not replaced by recognition of the condition for valid the reception of sacraments.

After turning down the olive branch and having had his penultimate defense torn from him, the priest candidly confesses that

God alone works everything in every person, good works and bad. However, those whom he foreknows to be damned, no works of any kind are profitable to them. For God takes them for bad, no matter how good they are. But, on the other hand, for those whom he has chosen from the beginning and predestinated to glory, all works are good enough. For God accepts them as being quite all right with him, be they as bad as can be (§11, p. 452).

Or perhaps the priest runs with the olive branch of divine acceptance in a direction the Catholic tradition rejected: That God should accept even evil as good and reject even good as evil. The priest continues, claiming that “all the works of a just person (...) turn him to good, no matter how bad they are” (§11, p. 452). More relates the interrogator’s ultimate condemnation:

[Their ultimate position is] that everything depends only upon destiny, and that the liberty of the human will serves absolutely no purpose, nor do people’s deeds, good or bad, make any difference before God, but in his chosen people nothing displeases him, be it no matter how bad, and in the other group nothing pleases him, be it no matter how good — the very worst and most harmful heresy that ever was thought up; and, on top of that, the most insane (§11, p. 453).

More undoubtedly has Luther’s response to Erasmus’s *Diatribes* in mind, *The Bondage of the Will* (A.D. 1527). More does get Luther right here, although matters are rather complicated.

Luther scores a number of points against Erasmus’s *Diatribes* but in doing so betrays his own conviction that God determines everything⁵⁷. He mounts various arguments in favor of this conviction. First, on a philosophical plane, he wields the following syllogism:

The future is infallibly known by God.
Everything infallibly known by God is necessarily the way it is.
The future shall therefore necessarily be the way it shall be.

In short, God’s foreknowledge of future events is utterly incompatible with the contingency of those events. They are contingent only insofar as God could have not willed them. On the supposition that he wills them, they happen necessarily. The argument appears throughout Luther’s response to the great linguist⁵⁸. At one point, Luther even calls the pagan belief in “fate” to his aid, no doubt to irk the humanist classicist⁵⁹.

Second, Luther contends that the impotence of the fallen will in the order of supernatural good entails its utter perversity. Since the human will can do nothing salvific without grace (a proposition most Catholic), then the will can do nothing but moral evil (a proposition not Catholic)⁶⁰. The conceptual parting from Catholic tradition begins in the definition of free choice. Luther defines it as the faculty of willing something in the order of salvation by one’s own power. So defined, Luther cannot but conclude, if he wishes to avoid Pelagianism, that this faculty is a no-thing⁶¹. The

⁵⁷ See, esp., *The Bondage of the Will*. But even ten years earlier, Luther remarked, “Does the contingency of an event [e.g., whether some man will sin or not] impede the sure predestination of God? And the answer is that with God there is simply no contingency, but it is only in our eyes” (Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* [LW 25:373]).

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:37-40, 183-89).

⁵⁹ See Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:40-41).

⁶⁰ On depravity, see Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:66, 248-256, 260, 288). To assert that any good inclination remains is to reject the need for Christ (see Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:112-17]), which is of course unacceptable (see Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:282]).

⁶¹ Initially, Luther defines free choice voluntaristically as a faculty totally unfettered by any extrinsic law (see Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:103, 118; 284-

combination of this definition and the non-Catholic inference noted above leads Luther to deny in principle that the will ever acts freely, even after having been transformed by the grace of the Spirit⁶². Still, Luther can contradict himself on this point, as the interrogator recognizes⁶³.

Third, Luther distinguishes between God revealed and preached and God hidden and almighty. God hidden reigns over all things, and moves all things, bringing them into activity by his general and universal causality⁶⁴. Given that since the fall man is simply a sinner, totally corrupted to the core and able to will nothing but evil⁶⁵, whenever he is moved by God to act, his work is necessarily evil. Luther writes, "Good as he [God] is himself he cannot help but do evil with an evil instrument"⁶⁶. On the one hand, God revealed wishes the salvation of all (1 Tim 2:4) and works to remove death and sin. On the other hand, "God hidden in his majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in all"⁶⁷.

85]). Only God can be thus unfettered; hence, God alone is free. On the other hand, he more frequently understands free will as the capacity of an intelligent being to work towards salvation by its own power (see Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:242]).

⁶² See Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:157, 202). Contradicting Erasmus, Luther retorts that a commandment does not imply human ability. By contrast, the Catholic tradition rejects the notion that one could sin were one incapable of avoiding the sin (see not only Erasmus but the champion of divine initiative, THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, q. 109, a. 8).

⁶³ See Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:150). Again, "We neither dispute nor are unaware that all the works of man can be good if they are done with the help of the grace of God, and also that there is nothing man cannot do with the help of God's grace" (Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33:207]). The remark agrees with Catholic tradition in itself. On the other hand, Luther consistently teaches that grace in man does not result in the adequate obedience of the commandments.

⁶⁴ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:176, 178).

⁶⁵ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:174-78). See the entire discussion, *ibid.*, pp. 174-82.

⁶⁶ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:178).

⁶⁷ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:140). See the entire discussion, LW 33:139-46. Consider also this remark from 1515: "In order to humble the elect and to teach them to trust in His mercy alone, to lay aside every presumption of their own will and achievement, God permits them to be desperately afflicted and to be pursued by the

More of course finds the thesis of divine predetermination repugnant to the goodness and the justice of God, who would not damn a man except for his just deserts. Luther's retorts to concerns such as these shows how strictly he wishes his reader to understand the divine predetermination: Because grace is gratuitous, therefore God elects some to heaven and some to damnation. Erasmus does not dispute that God saves freely, but he does reject the idea that God damns the innocent. Luther retorts: If God cannot damn except because of human demerits, then he cannot save except for human merits⁶⁸. Thus, all is determined by the divine predestination alone. This is what *renders* works to be "called good", so that all that the elect do is "taken as good" and all that the non-elect do is "taken as evil". Since this is done through faith, itself received but passively, one may equally say that if faith is present, all works are good and if faith is absent all works are evil⁶⁹. God has absolute power to take whatever he will as good and to take lesser acts as better than better acts⁷⁰.

What More does not bring out here is the theological link between *sola fide* and radical divine determination. More locates the link in Luther's rebellion and lust: The thesis of divine determinism "allows" Luther to exonerate himself from responsibility. This is to link the doctrine to behavior instrumentally. Notwithstanding the potential accuracy of this genetic analysis, Luther himself draws a theological connection between the doctrines. The doctrine *sola fide sine operibus* is a way of achieving certainty of salvation in the midst of terrors of conscience and against the

devil, the world, or the flesh, whom He Himself arouses against them. Indeed, in our time He has particularly often aroused the devil to drive His elect into horrible sins and to have dominion over them for a time, or at least always to impede their good intentions and to make them do things contrary to what they want to do..." (Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* [LW 25:392]).

⁶⁸ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:207).

⁶⁹ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:264, 270-71); *Id.*, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 27:5-6, esp., 75-76).

⁷⁰ Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* (LW 25:385 and 420).

uncertainty of human worthiness before God. If faith is to be absolutely certain and secure, the God whom one believes must promise salvation unconditionally *to me the concrete man*. The promise of glory can be unconditional *for me* only if my own fickleness can in no way whatsoever prejudice the outcome of the promise. Hence, the solidity of faith depends upon the thesis of absolute divine predetermination of all things:

If you doubt or disdain to know that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them? For when he promises anything, you ought to be certain that he knows and is able and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will regard him as neither truthful nor faithful, and that is impiety and a denial of the Most High God. But how will you be certain and sure unless you know that he knows and wills and will do what he promises, certainly, infallibly, immutably, and necessarily?⁷¹

How did Luther respond to Erasmus's complaint that those who hear of the divine predetermination of all things will use the concept as an excuse for licentious living? If some misuse this truth, that is no cause to remove the very Word of God!⁷² What of Erasmus's question concerning the use of all the moral imperatives of Scripture: "Thou shalt..."? The imperative exposes man's utter impotence, "since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20), thereby fostering radical humility⁷³.

Luther defends more than simply the divine *initiative* in the order of grace and forgiveness; otherwise, he would have had little cause to rail against the Church on doctrine. Instead, Luther contends that God alone is the agent of good in the elect, and the devil is the agent in those abandoned by God. Man is a beast, ridden either by God or by Satan⁷⁴.

⁷¹ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:42). See also *ibid.*, pp. 183, 185, 265-66, 288-89.

⁷² Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:54-55).

⁷³ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:61, 119-20, 124-33, 261-62).

⁷⁴ Martin LUTHER, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:65).

A Condemnable Hope?

Before concluding, I wish to register one global criticism of More's presentation. The interrogator accuses Lutherans of reducing the articles of faith to the promises, the virtue of faith to that of hope, and hope to something "condemnable" (§11, pp. 434f, 440f, and 446). The insinuation is that Lutheran doctrine involves presumption on divine mercy. This diagnosis does not strike deeply enough. It fails to grasp an authentic gem at the root of Luther's *sola fide* thesis and, consequently, fails to appreciate the precise theological causal point at which Luther parts from Catholic tradition.

Luther's corpus suggests, if the Finnish School is at all on the mark, a different genesis — namely, the desire to love God with utter purity⁷⁵. Only that love which is solely for God's sake is truly love of God. How, then, shall one render to God what is his due?⁷⁶ This good start was one reason, though not the only, that Luther rejected indulgences, since, he

⁷⁵ See Simo PEURA, "What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation", in: *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. and trans. Carl BRAATEN and Robert JENSON. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998, 76-95. This reading of Luther is by no means the exclusive achievement of the Finns. The 20th century pioneer was Anders NYGREN, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip Watson. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953. But see also such thinkers as Gerhard EBELING, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson. Philadelphia, 1970, 169-73, and Wolfhart PANNENBERG, "Luther's Contribution to Christian Spirituality", in: *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001), 284-89.

⁷⁶ See Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* (LW 25:291-96 [WA 56.304.25-309.5]); *Id.*, *1519 Lectures on Galatians* (LW 27:220-22 [WA 2.490.9-491.22]); *Id.*, *The Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:349f [WA 7.53.15-33], 358f [WA 7. 59.37-60.29], and 364f [WA 7.63.34-64.37]). "Before everything else [i.e., before the removal of punishments], sin must be removed, that is, the imperfection in faith, hope, and love" (Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 17th Thesis [LW 31:132 [WA 1.559.27-37]). Luther wished to promote a chief focus on love of God and not pursuit of a reward or flight from punishment (see Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* [LW 25:220-23 {WA 56.235.25-237.18}, 226-27 {WA 56.240.20-241.25}, 350-59 {WA 56.361.4-369.5}], and 378-87 {WA 56.388.3-397.5}); *Id.*, *Defense and Explanation of all the Articles*, 24th Article [LW 32:67 {WA 7.406/407}].

impugned, no one would seek an indulgence except because of the love of self, for indulgences achieve acquittal from punishment⁷⁷.

Yet precisely here, one finds from the Catholic perspective not only Luther's promise but his primary mistake. Luther reads the Law in an excessively scrupulous manner. He sees as inimical to genuine love of God both the love of happiness and the fear of hell. Natural love and charity become, practically speaking, opposites: "To love [in the sense of true charity] is to hate oneself, to condemn oneself, and to wish the worst..."⁷⁸ Aristotle and his eudaimonia — fodder for Catholic theologians of glory enamored of the world's natural goodness — are inverted by Christ's true disciples, theologians of the cross⁷⁹. For the Catholic tradition, by contrast, the love of God and love of self are not opposed. Desire for happiness and the fear of hell are not inimical to charity. Fear of hell or servile fear is a salutary spur towards conversion for those whom God excites to prepare themselves freely for their justification⁸⁰.

⁷⁷ See Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 7th Thesis (LW 31:103 [WA 1.542.20-21]); *Id.*, 18th Thesis (LW 31:136-37 [WA 1.562]); *Id.*, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 17th Article (LW 32:63 [WA 7.400/401]). For this reason, he stressed purgatory as purificatory rather than penal (see Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 17th Thesis (LW 31:132-35 [WA 1.559-61])). Faith and love are intrinsically required for fruitful reception of the sacraments (see Martin LUTHER, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 6th Article [LW 32:35 {WA 7.354/355}]). Pure love of God "alone makes us right at heart, alone takes away iniquity" (Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* (LW 25:293 [WA 56.306.26-27])).

⁷⁸ Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* (LW 25:382 [WA 56.392.20-21]).

⁷⁹ "This theologian of glory, however, learns from Aristotle that the object of the will is the good and the good is worthy to be loved, while the evil, on the other hand, is worthy of hate. He learns that God is the highest good and exceedingly lovable" (Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 58th Thesis [LW 31:227 {WA 1.614.17-22}]). See, more recently, Wolfhart PANNENBERG, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998, 184ff.

⁸⁰ See DENZINGER-SCHÖNMETZNER 958, 964, 965; 1456, 1489, 1576, 1581, 2207, 2216, 2310, 2314, 2315, 2351-73, 2460, 2462, and 2625. More recently, John Paul II links the desire for happiness with a foundation of the moral life in his *Veritatis splendor*. Pope Benedict XVI defends the integral unity of eros and agape in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*.

Since for Luther Aristotle describes man correctly, all human works are tainted with self-love and thus sinful. Consequently, everyone stands condemned to eternal damnation before God. One could only wish to escape this situation out of love of self⁸¹. Thus, anyone who purports to wish to love God above all and for his own sake would in fact only be seeking an escape from punishment. Thus, everyone is caught in a dilemma⁸². How, then, shall God's true will ever be fulfilled?

As he Luther sees it, justification by faith alone is the divine solution to the dilemma. By faith alone, one gains eternal life and avoids everlasting death. Therefore, works are not necessary for salvation⁸³. Faith does not involve the destruction of sins. Rather, faith shelters one from the wrath of God⁸⁴. Being justified by faith alone, now and throughout life,

⁸¹ See David YEAGO, "Lutheran-Roman Catholic Consensus on Justification: The Theological Achievement of the Joint Declaration", in: *Pro Ecclesia* 7 (1998), 449-59, and Johannes SCHWANKE, "Luther on Creation," trans. John Betz, in: *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002), 11-14.

⁸² See also LOHSE, *Luthers*, 289. For a discussion of Luther's spiritual experience against the backdrop of a quasi-pelagian Nominalism, see Thomas McDONOUGH, *The Law and the Gospel in Luther: A Study of Martin Luther's Confessional Writings*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963, 29-45.

⁸³ Christian liberty "makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness and salvation" (Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* [LW 31:349f {WA 7.53.32-33}]; see *Id.*, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 12th Article [LW 32:49 {WA 7.378/379}]). Also in his mature works, we find Luther teaching that salvation hinges solely on faith and not on infused charity and good works enabled by God's grace (see Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* [LW 26:127-30 {WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 225.23-229.35}]; LW 27:17 {WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 19.22-20.15} and 138-39 {WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 177.12-178.15}]).

⁸⁴ See Martin LUTHER, *Heidelberg Disputation* (LW 31:63-64 [WA 1.369-71]); *Id.*, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 2nd Article (LW 32:21 [WA 7.330/331-332/333]) and 3rd Article (LW 32:23-30 [WA 7.336/337-346/347]); *Id.*, *Against Latomus* (LW 32:229-41 [WA 8.107-15]); *Id.*, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:234-36 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 371.26-373.17], 273-74 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 428.12-429.20], and 277-87 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 433.14-447.28]); see esp. *Id.*, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 27:34f [WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 42.19-44.13] and 63-66 [WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 78.35-83.15]). In virtue of the non-imputation, one can say there is no sin (see Martin LUTHER, *1519 Lectures on Galatians* [LW 27:230f {WA 2.496.25-497.24}]; *Id.*, *Two Kinds of Righteousness* [LW 31:299-300 {WA 2.146-47}]), yet the sins remain (see Martin LUTHER, *1519 Lectures on Galatians* [LW 27:227f

the sinful believer is set free to love God totally *gratis*⁸⁵. Thus, my benign reading of Luther, following the Finnish School. More misses this key thread in Luther's thought, though it is the pith of *Freedom of a Christian*, which he certainly read.

Nevertheless, the benign reading contains, explicitly and implicitly, a contradiction. Explicitly, the later Luther anathematizes the charity *sola fide* was meant to serve: "A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield — love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc.!"⁸⁶ (As an aside, the interrogator had charged that Luther decried as "blasphemy" any pursuit of good works in an attempt to further faith's righteousness before God [§11, p. 441]. Luther professes the equivalent here⁸⁷.) Luther even suggests that, *per impossibile*, were the Scripture itself to teach that works are required for salvation, he would resist the Scripture to its face⁸⁸. Luther suggests he would do the same if Christ its author should appear to him as judge⁸⁹. More seems to

{WA 2.494.36-495.14}). "The moment you begin to have faith you learn that all things in you are altogether blameworthy, sinful and damnable" (Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* [LW 31:346f {WA 7.51.28-29}]).

⁸⁵ Luther articulates this Christian freedom marvelously in his *The Freedom of a Christian* (*passim*).

⁸⁶ Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 27:38 [WA 40, pt. 2, p. 47.26-28]). Again, "Let that expression 'faith formed' [i.e., the Catholic doctrine of 'faith formed by charity'] be damned!" (*ibid.* [LW 26:273; {WA 40, pt. 1, p. 427.27}]). See the entire context, *ibid.* (LW 26:268-76 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 420.6-432.16]).

⁸⁷ For further references, see Martin LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:363 [WA 7.63.8-21]); *Id.*, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:179-80 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 300.23-302.15]).

⁸⁸ See Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:294-96 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 457.16-459.24]).

⁸⁹ "Christ is not so much a judge and an angry God but one who bears and carries our sins, a mediator. Away with the papists, who have set Christ before us as a terrible judge" (Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Isaiah* [LW 17:224 {WA 31, pt. 2, p. 434.1-4}]). See also Martin LUTHER, *1519 Lectures on Galatians* (LW 27:226 [WA 2.493.36-494.13]); *Id.*, *The Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:280 [WA 18.778]); *Id.*, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:178 [WA 40, pt. 1, p. 298.19-21]; LW 27:11-12 [WA 40, pt. 2, p. 13.9-31] and 17 [WA 40, pt. 2, pp. 19.22-20.15]).

have been savvy to this drift in Luther: The interrogator accuses the arrested man, "You Lutherans have but half a faith. For you believe God only in his promises; in his threats you believe him not at all" (§11, p. 446). Luther reduced the Law to an agent of humbling terror and hardly ever praised its place as a pattern of love and never accepted it as an ongoing condition for the attainment of salvation. Blessed John Henry Newman also saw these deficits in Luther⁹⁰.

Second, the contradiction appears implicitly. Luther comes — quite soon — to esteem deliverance from punishment over deliverance from sin. In 1521, he writes,

We would perhaps have disregarded corruption [i.e., our own sin] and been pleased with our evil unless this other evil, which is wrath [i.e., the punishment threatened by divine anger], had refused to indulge our foolishness and had resisted it with terror and the danger of hell and death, so that we have but little peace in our wickedness. Plainly wrath is a greater evil for us than corruption, for we hate punishment more than guilt⁹¹.

Here one finds the reason that Luther esteems "grace" more than "gift". "Grace" is God's favor towards man by which he acquits the believer from punishment; "gift" is the transformative effect that God works in the believer, by which he purges sin away. Grace is lovable as a means of escape from punishment. But since one hates punishment because one loves oneself, one loves grace because one loves oneself. Thus, Luther's

⁹⁰ See John Henry NEWMAN, *Lectures on Justification*. New York, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900, *Lectures*, I, section 4, pp. 9f, n. 1; *Lectures*, I, 9, p. 24; and *Lectures*, I, 10, p. 27. Newman writes, "Co-operation is the condition, not of our acceptance, or pardon, but of the continuance of that sacred Presence which is our true righteousness, as an immediate origin of it" (*Lectures*, VIII, 2 [Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900], 184; see also *Lectures*, IV, 5, pp. 94f; *Lectures*, XII, 1, p. 275; *Lectures* XII, section 2, p. 279; *Lectures*, XII, section 8, par. 2, p. 294; and *Lectures*, XII, final note, pp. 304-11). See Bernard LOHSE, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995, 288f.

⁹¹ Martin LUTHER, *Against Latomus* (LW 32:224 [WA 8.104.17-21]). See the whole discussion (LW 32:223-27 [WA 8.103.35-106.28]).

justification *sola fide* contradicts itself, for one clings to faith precisely in order to escape from punishment. Should one lose confidence in one's salvation but even for a moment, one would immediately commence hating God. So much for the solution to his supposed dilemma.

This passage is not anomalous. A few pages later, he writes,

Almost always in Scripture, this righteousness which is contrary to sin refers to an innermost root whose fruits are good works. The companion of this faith and righteousness is grace or mercy, the good will [*favor*] of God, against wrath which is the partner of sin, so that he who believes in Christ has a merciful God. For we would not be completely happy in this good of righteousness, and we would not highly esteem God's gift, if that was all there was, and it did not gain for us the grace of God. Here, as ought to be done, I take grace in the proper sense of the favor of God — not a quality of the soul, as is taught by our more recent writers. This grace truly produces peace of heart until finally a man is healed from his corruption and feels he has a gracious God. It is this which fattens the bones and gives joy, security, and fearlessness to the conscience so that one dares all, can do all and, in this trust in the grace of God, laughs even at death. Hence, just as wrath is a greater evil than the corruption of sin, so grace is a greater good than that health of righteousness which we have said comes from faith. Everyone would prefer — if that were possible — to be without the health of righteousness rather than [without] the grace of God, for peace and the remission of sins are properly attributed to the grace of God, while healing from corruption is ascribed to faith⁹².

Again, in his 1525 *Bondage of the Will*, Luther disputes Erasmus's reading of Ezek 18:23,32:

But our Diatribe, again making no distinction between words of law and of promise, takes this verse of Ezekiel as an expression of the Law, and expounds it thus: 'I desire not the death of a sinner,' that is, 'I do not want him to sin mortally or become a sinner liable to death, but rather that he may turn from his sin, if he has committed any, and so may live.' For if

⁹² Martin LUTHER, *Against Latomus* (LW 32:227 [WA 8.106.4-20]). More is aware of Luther's reading of grace as favor (*Dialogue*, Book III, §8, p. 332).

she did not expound it so, it would not serve her purpose at all. But this means completely throwing overboard the loveliest thing in Ezekiel, 'I desire not death.' If that is how in our blindness we wish to read and understand the scriptures, what wonder is it if they are obscure and ambiguous? For he does not say, 'I desire not the sin of a man,' but, 'I desire not the death of a sinner,' plainly showing that he is speaking of the penalty of sin, which the sinner experiences for his sin, namely, the fear of death. And he lifts up and comforts the sinner from his affliction and despair, so as not to quench the smoking flax and break the bruised reed [Isa. 42:3], but to give hope of pardon and salvation, so that he may rather be converted (by turning to salvation from the penalty of death) and live, that is, be at peace and happy with an untroubled conscience⁹³.

In his great *Commentary on Galatians*, he writes, "For if love is the form of faith, then I am immediately obliged to say that love is the most important and the largest part of the Christian religion. And thus I lose Christ (...) Thus if the Law commanding love conflicts with faith, then love is not of faith"⁹⁴. He continues: "Once the Law has been put aside, love is also put aside, as well as everything that belongs to the Law; all that is kept is faith, which justifies and makes alive"⁹⁵. Therefore, faith "consists only in receiving good things from God. But the Law and works consist in doing and in giving to God"⁹⁶.

⁹³ Martin LUTHER, *Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:136-37 [WA 18.683.28-684.3]).

⁹⁴ Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:270 [WA 40, pt. 1, pp. 423.15-424.16]).

⁹⁵ Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:271 [WA 40, pt. 1, p. 424.18-19]).

⁹⁶ Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:271 [WA 40, pt. 1, p. 425.14-17]). As I have argued elsewhere (see my *Engrafted into Christ: A Critique of the Joint Declaration*. New York, Peter Lang, 2005, 323-37; and my "Sola Salus, or Fides caritate formata? The Premised Promise of Luther's Dilemma", in: *Fides Catholica* 3 [2008], 375-432), the foregoing evaluations of pain and guilt also oppose the solid principles of the early Luther: "If guilt remains, punishment also must remain" (Martin LUTHER, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 58th Thesis [LW 31:220 {WA 1.610.16-17}]); see also *Id.*, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Explanation to Thesis 6, part. 2, pt. 23 [LW 31:69 {WA 1.374.15-24}]; and *Id.*, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, 7th Thesis [LW 31:103 {WA 1.542.20-28}]. Contrary to Luther's critique of the indulgences, the recipient must have not only faith but also hope and charity. Further, many who obtain the indulgence offer the benefit up for the soul of a dead person.

Compare these statements with this remark exemplary of Augustine's mind:

That man is under the law, who, from fear of the punishment which the law threatens, and not from any love for righteousness, obliges himself to abstain from the work of sin, without being as yet free and removed from the desire of sinning. For it is in his very will that he is guilty, whereby he would prefer, if it were possible, that what he dreads should not exist, in order that he might freely do what he secretly desires⁹⁷.

Whereas Augustine believed that divine mercy was sufficient to make a heart of stone fleshly, Luther despaired of this. One detects this despair even in his *Commentary on Romans* (1515): "I believe that if we rightly examine our heart, no one will find himself to be that kind of person except one who is absolutely perfect, but rather, if he had the freedom, he would omit many good works and do many evil works. But this is what it means to be in your sins before God"⁹⁸. Thus we have the proximate genesis of the condemnable hope-despair. Its remote root was a false reading of the Law as impossibly rigorous.

So, according to our benign reading of Luther, pure love of God was the laudable original goal. That goal was yet burdened by an excessively rigorous reading of the Law: Everything but such love is condemned as sin. That burden brought despair that God's mercy could not accomplish in man the fulfillment of the Law. Finally, that despair gave birth to presumption on divine mercy. Moreover, the presumptive solution contradicts the very promise on which the edifice was premised: If one clings to faith on account of deliverance from hell, a deliverance greatly to be prized, one clings to faith because of self-love. Thus, faith itself serves the same sin that, Luther alleges, charity towards God and neighbor in a

⁹⁷ AUGUSTINE, *On Nature and Grace*, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, in *Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, vol. 5, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series. Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, chap. 67.

⁹⁸ Martin LUTHER, *Lectures on Romans* (LW 25:221 [WA 56.236.3-6]).

life of sanctification with the hope of a reward of eternal communion with the God of one's heart serves. The foregoing justifies More's accusation that Luther's faith, rather a believing *hope*, is truly "condemnable" (§11, p. 435). And although he did not perceive the ultimate origin of Luther's doctrine in the search for pure love, he was certainly aware of the damage that a scrupulous reading of the law can do — namely, drive someone utterly to reject all law:

He [a certain man whom the Messenger complains may have been wrongly forced to recant his heresy] was, as I say, very fearful and scrupulous (...) People definitely do say that in the end, with the weariness from that superstitious fear and servile dread, he went as far in the opposite direction. And under the pretext of love and liberty got so drunk of the new must of base lightness of mind and vain gladness of heart, which he took for spiritual consolation, that whatsoever he himself wished to take for good, he immediately thought it approved by God. And so framed himself a faith, framed himself a conscience, framed himself a devotion, wherever he liked; and wherever he liked, he set himself at liberty⁹⁹.

Conclusion

I have argued that Thomas More's presentation of the early Lutheran doctrine *iustificatio sola fide* is substantially accurate. Although More neglected an important genetic factor in Luther's development of that *sola fide* doctrine, he nonetheless understood the various elements of the doctrine accurately. Consideration of that genetic factor — the search for pure love of God — would have deepened but not altered More's analysis of the Lutheran doctrine itself. Perhaps such consideration would have caused him to modify his personal attacks on Luther, but one cannot speculate with much certainty on such possibilities. At any rate, such consideration would have revealed for More both a brighter beginning to Luther's project and

⁹⁹ *Dialogue*, Book III, §2, pp. 295f. See More's closing remarks concerning this person on p. 298.

also, from More's Catholic perspective, an misconception antecedent to and partially causative of Luther's doctrine *sola fide*. Herein, More would have found additional evidence upon which to charge the Lutheran doctrine with internal contradictions. If my findings regarding More's own reading of Luther prove accurate, then there is at least one exception to the contemporary consensus that the early Catholic controversialists misunderstood Lutheran doctrine¹⁰⁰.

¹⁰⁰ I am indebted for the counsel of the following persons, though I wish to burden none of them for any of the weaknesses of this essay: Thomas Scheck, Christian Washburn, and Gerard Wegemer.