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THE ABSOLVING WORD: LUTHER'S REFORMATIONAL TURN

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my beautiful wife...

Thank you for your never-ending love, patience, and support. Love you.

To my precious son...

Thank you for saving my life. Always love you.

To my dear Professor...

Thank you for not giving up on me and for encouraging me to push the boundaries towards evangelical freedom.

To my beloved Lutherans...

Thank you for giving me the *Absolving Word*.

Because of you, I belong to Jesus Christ.

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...

Thank you for bringing me home.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis argues that the *Absolving Word* is the reformational turn and the foundation to Luther's theology. This turn made Luther's theology unique, giving birth to theological categories such as passive righteousness, the eternal gospel, and the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit. In order to make that case, there are four chapters.

Chapter 1 argues that Bayer discovered the uniqueness of Luther's theology and the impact of promise as the reformational turn, and this thesis argues that the promise is not a general category of grammar, but that the *Absolving Word* alone can give the promise of which Luther speaks. The promise is very specific. This makes the *Absolving Word* the cause of the reformational turn and creates the foundation to Luther's theology. This is seen in the competing theology of Cajetan and Luther, which caused the split between what is evangelical and what is Roman Catholic. For Luther, neither contrition or satisfaction attains forgiveness, but only the pronounced *Absolving Word* bestows it. For Cajetan, one cannot truly know if one is absolved unless one feels deep remorse or proves through satisfactory work that the absolution worked. For Luther, the absolution is true because it is God's word working through one sinner to another (John 20, Matthew 16:9). This created for Luther what is true evangelical theology. God's word does what it says.

Chapter 2 argues that since the *Absolving Word* makes a sinner into a saved sinner, and was at the same time the distinction of law and gospel, then the ensuing evangelical conclusion of the *Absolving Word* is the category of passive righteousness.

This stands in contrast to Aquinas' position that active righteousness creates union with God. Aquinas's model, a Christianized form of Aristotelian logic, negated God's grace since its foundation is the legal scheme. This scheme operates from the legal opinion that the law makes a human right with God. Luther believed that the *Absolving Word* puts an end to the law bestowing passive righteousness that predestines a sinner for salvation regardless of one's active moral performance. This passive righteousness places the sinner eternally as God's new creature. The *Absolving Word* revealed to Luther the true grace of God that is eternal and unconditional.

Chapter 3 argues that since the *Absolving Word* establishes the eternal gospel, the law is not eternal and comes to an end. The *Absolving Word* leads Luther to reject the concept of abstract, eternal law in favor of the specific, eternal gospel. He realized that the discovery of the *Absolving Word* simultaneously meant the end of the law for the new creation. The gospel is the end and the telos of the law. Luther realized that one understands the proper place of the law, when one knows that it ends in the *Absolving Word*. He saw that the law serves under the power of the gospel, the *Absolving Word* itself, and is not eternal. Only the gospel is everlasting and the *Absolving Word* is the divine victory of God that delivers this eternal gospel. Christ delivers us from the powers of death, the devil, wrath, and the law itself and unites us with Himself in the pronouncement of divine absolution. Luther realized that the event of justification was not a legal act, but rather a gospel act, that justification and sanctification are unified in the *Absolving Word*, and that this divine word of God makes sinners into new creations that produce real fruit. This evangelical righteousness given in the *Absolving Word* works for the neighbor and passively trust's in Christ alone. The *Absolving Word* truly gives

what the law signifies. The law remains eternally behind the new creation, and the eternal gospel remains forever.

Chapter 4 argues that since the *Absolving Word* establishes a Christocentric and monergistic pneumatology, the Holy Spirit is the only one who is active in the redemption and sanctification of the life of the one who is *simul iustus et peccator*. Luther understood that the work of the Holy Spirit, to save and sanctify, was solely the work of the Holy Spirit. Just as in the evangelical absolution, contrition and satisfaction are not needed to obtain forgiveness, so now Luther understood that in the work of the Holy Spirit, the assumed free will is not needed for the Spirit to act. This Holy Spirit sends the preacher who preaches the *Absolving Word* that solely justifies and sanctifies the hearer. Through this work the Holy Spirit preserves the saved sinner in the faith, bestows Christian righteousness, and creates the image of God. He does all of this through the salvific external word, i.e. the *Absolving Word*. The Holy Spirit separates the law and the gospel in such a way that Christ is proclaimed, who is the *Absolving Word*. This functional reality is the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit, sending the preacher to give over Christ to the hearer. While elevating Christ by the pronounced *Absolving Word*, the Holy Spirit brings the law to an end. Though the law cannot create life and must end, the Holy Spirit creates and eternally preserves the new creature through the *Absolving Word*.

These three aspects of Luther's theology, passive righteousness, the eternal gospel, a monergistic and Christocentric pneumatology, are the fruits of the unique reformational discovery of the *Absolving Word*. The *Absolving Word* freed Luther's theology from the legal scheme and created what is truly "evangelical."

CHAPTER 1

PROMISE AND THE *ABSOLVING WORD*

Introduction

Luther scholarship has long attempted to identify the beginning of the Reformation as a breakthrough or development. Foremost among the recent attempts has been Oswald Bayer whose theory of *promissio* has led the recent discussion. Bayer concludes that the actual reformational turn centered on Luther's developed understanding of promise, which preceded Luther's late reflection of his own breakthrough in several places, but especially the *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings*. Bayer makes a passing and yet profound observation in his breakthrough work *Promissio*. He states, "Luther saw that the *Absolutionswort* created an opportunity for faith, (*occasio credentie*) not as a general possibility but as defined specifically."¹ The promise is not heard, unless the "occasion for faith" is created by the *Absolving Word*. The speech act must happen in time and space to bring an end to the condemned sinner, and to bring a new beginning for the forgiven creation. Luther's was not an abstract speculation about the form and nature of promise, but the actual giving of a specific promise in preaching the forgiveness of sins from a person to a person. This use of absolution created the cataclysmic break with the Roman Catholic Church.

¹ Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte Der Reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), 193.

Luther's breakthrough came by this understanding of promise, but only as it is anchored in, and not separated from the *Absolving Word*. This thesis will demonstrate that the *Absolving Word* caused Luther's reformational turn. For God's word is divinely performative by creating a new reality, unlike human words, which can also perform, but not out of nothing. This divine performative Word is Christ Himself entering into the present in a bodily word.² It thus not only creates out of nothing, but what it creates is sacramental, a gift in the form of God giving Himself. Since the nature of the promise is Christ bestowing Himself through the absolver, the promise supersedes the power of human words. Not every word will give God to you, but amazingly, some will. That is the interest of this thesis, to identify the particular words of forgiveness that accomplish this sacramental giving that not only creates something, which is amazing enough, but gives the divine. The *Absolving Word* is the actual reformational turn, the break with the Roman Church, the *evangelischer Ansatz* of scripture, and, so the cornerstone to Luther's theology.

Luther found the gracious God in the *Absolving Word*, literally. The promise of course informs how Luther understands scripture. Scripture itself is not the origin of the authority in and of itself. Scripture gives us the words to use for absolving, without which there would be no promise, but by itself scripture is not the originating power. Bayer agrees with Werner Elert's position, which states that scripture alone does not possess the gospel impact, since it provides a myriad of possible interpretations.³ Reading the

² Oswald Bayer, "With Luther in the Present," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2007): 9.

³ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Concordia Classics Series (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 181-182.

Scripture does not give an assertive gospel impact, nor does exegesis. These would leave one thinking that the word needs completing in the form of ideas. The Scripture would provide words as text, and an exegete would use the words as signs that give rise to thoughts, which form the real power of religion and faith. But it was precisely this way of approaching scripture that Luther broke with as a form of faith seeking understanding. Instead, the word itself must be effective, or one is left with conflicting interpretations that are resolved only by a subjective act of will. Instead, as Luther himself experienced it, an *Absolving Word* must deliver the gospel not in the form of an idea, but a promise, and not just any promise, but the promise that Christ specifically makes to sinners, while they are sinners, which is the forgiveness of sin. Luther's theological breakthrough is that the *Absolving Word* is only effective in that it must carry the promise, or we are left dead in our sins in a competition of wills imposing their own interpretations on Scripture rather than hearing what it says to us. This did not come to Luther as an objective historian of Scripture or an idealistic interpreter of the text, but in his own struggle of conscience that could not find comfort with the traditional path of penance. Yet it was in the sacrament of penance where Luther began to grasp what it meant to have a promise, authorized by Scripture, and given in the present by a preacher. Bayer locates the first reformational text in the *Investigation of Truth and for the Comfort of Troubled Consciences* in the early Summer of 1518.⁴ He believes what exists here is the *promissio* concept, which will later take robust shape. Here one should notice that the sacrament of penance is reflected upon in relation to the *Absolving Word*, as authoritative and effective in Matt. 16:9 and

⁴ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 49-50; Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 61 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883-), 1:629-633.

John 20:23. Luther writes, “Therefore sin is really forgiven and absolves from guilt... As long as there is the service of the word of Christ, the sinner is justified as faith is placed inside simultaneously. There is nothing to justify but only faith in Christ.”⁵ This *Absolving Word* that carries the promises marks the actual reformational turn, in Luther’s thought much earlier than his work on Romans and the tower experience. The *Absolving Word* only carries force, as it is a declarative act on behalf of God much as the prophetic formula “Thus says the Lord....” At this point the *iustitia Dei* is redefined to be a genitive of justice that bestows the thing to the sinner, and doesn’t demand it of him. This declaration creates the occasion for faith, i.e. the favorable moment, and ultimately constitutes faith in a sinner.⁶ Christ brings together the creature and Creator together in the *Absolving Word*.⁷ In this *occasio credenti*, the sinner is redefined and recreated by the absolution as a forgiven creature.⁸ Thus the evangelical promise is discovered for Luther in the *Absolving Word*.

This fits with Luther’s own later reflection on his becoming a Lutheran when he describes going through all Scripture and seeing that this fits everywhere. The whole Scripture is God delivering two kinds of words, law and gospel. But the gospel word is the one that has always, and continues to create anew. This is how God created in the first place, and continues to do so after the fall into sin. In this way, Bayer understands the promises of God as concrete declarations to the hearer from Christ Himself. These divine

⁵ Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 1:632.

⁶ Oswald Bayer, “Die Reformatische Wende in Luthers Theologie,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 66 (1969): 134-135.

⁷ Ernst Käsemann, *Jesus Means Freedom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 141.

⁸ Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte Der Reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie*, 197.

declarations create *ex nihilo* a new future, which is not governed by a past, but is constituted toward a future, eschatological, assurance in eternal salvation and blessing.

The promises point ahead in hope, but they also currently deliver certain faith:

They are the concrete way and manner in which Christ is present: definite and clear-clearly freeing one and giving one assurance. One cannot remember achieving such freedom and assurance in one's own private, inner monologue. It guarantees and constitutes itself only by the medium of promise made by another human being—not only stated by a priest or preacher who holds office but when spoken by anyone who speaks it to me in the name of Jesus. I cannot say it to myself. It has to be spoken to me. For only in such a way does it demonstrate its truth, bringing thereby freedom and certainty.⁹

This understanding of promise anchors the hearer further into God's character as justified in Himself. Everything depends upon whether God, the promises, is faithful to those promises. Thus God's faithfulness emerges as the primary essence. Faith's certainty lies in the fact that God is obligated to fulfill His promise in the present. But the obligation cannot come from outside, in a law, but is God's own obligation to Himself, or better Christ's obedience to the Father. For Christ to abandon His promise is essentially for Him not to be God. But a promise is not merely an internal matter to God's own being. Christ's promise is trustworthy, assertive, and directed specifically to the hearer.

Bayer's Theology of Promise

Bayer views the divine promise as differentiated from a human promise in its nature. A divine promise cannot fail due to its divine force, that is, that God does not lie. Bayer states, "God is apprehended as the one who makes a promise to a human being in such a way that a person who hears it can have full confidence in it."¹⁰ All of Scripture is

⁹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

finally delivering this truth, as Luther found. According to Luther, God's speech act creates a new reality, which means it makes rather than merely points to something already there.¹¹ This is the distinction between the human word and God's word. God's word is, as Luther explains in his notes on Psalm 2, a *verbum efficax* or *verbum reale*.¹² The real word accomplishes its intention, whether it is to destroy, to create, to remove, or to declare a thing into existence. The purpose of this thesis concentrates on the word of promise that creates, but the word of the law also is efficacious and destroys.

But what or in what manner will He speak? Here we must observe the Hebrew way of expression. For when Scripture says that God speaks, it understands a word related to a real thing or action (*verbum reale*), not just a sound as ours is. For God does not have a mouth or a tongue, since He is a Spirit, though Scripture speaks of the mouth and tongue of God: "He spoke and it came to be" (Ps. 33:9). And When He speaks, the mountains tremble, kingdoms are scattered, then indeed the whole earth is moved. That is a language different from ours. When the sun rises, when the sun sets, God speaks. When the fruits grow in size, when human beings are born, God speaks. Accordingly the words of God are not empty air, but things very great and wonderful, which we see with our eyes and feel with our hands. For when, according to Moses (Genesis 1), the Lord said: "Let there be a sun, let there be a moon, let the earth bring forth trees," etc., as soon as He said it, it was done. No one heard this voice, but we see the works and the things themselves before our eyes, and we touch them with our hands.¹³

For God's word is divinely performative by creating a new reality, unlike human words, which can also perform, but not out of nothing. This divine performative Word is Christ Himself entering into the present in a bodily word.¹⁴ This sacramental giving not only creates something, which is amazing enough, but gives the divine.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 69 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-2010), 69:415.

¹² Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 53; Steven D. Paulson, *Luther for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 78.

¹³ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 12:32.

¹⁴ Bayer, "With Luther in the Present," 9.

The 20th century western philosopher J. L. Austin explored the impact of words in his work *How to Do Things with Words*. He differentiates the impact of words into two categories: words that establish truth and words that constitute a new reality. Some utterances establish truth and other utterances constitute truth. The performative utterance creates a new reality.¹⁵ Austin explains that when you name a boat “Queen Elizabeth,” a new reality is created, i.e. the “Queen Elizabeth.”¹⁶ By degree, some utterances create realities, while others point to what is already established in time and space. Of course, it is important to note that human words have this power already, but are confined to naming something that could fairly well be recognized as a boat. This is not the same thing that we will find in the absolute, but it is important to note that humans can already gain a sense of what it means for a word to do something, rather than simply give something interchangeable labels. In the evangelical absolute, the new reality is created because Christ gives divine authority to His ministers to speak God’s real and effective word, and thus create the sinner as forgiven (John 20). After all, you can’t just name the boat the Queen Anne the next day without going through quite a ritual and upsetting many people.

Bayer believes that Austin is indirectly tapping into what Luther established in Psalm 2 with the real word. Since God’s Word creates a new reality in and of itself, a promise stands forth as a new reality for the hearer. It is performing, doing something with words: He states, “Luther’s reformational discovery of the gospel takes hold of specific statements-such as “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”

¹⁵ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 1-11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Matt. 28:20. Such statements are *promissiones*, promises, assurances.”¹⁷ Bayer sees Austin’s contribution as helpful, since it indirectly affirms the reasonableness of Luther’s position on the dynamic of God’s language. Luther did not discover something by means of an irrational revelation as an enthusiast would. He discovered what otherwise is already going on with words in the world, but once he found God himself using words this way, a whole new world opened.

The popular common medieval theological understanding of how words work is rooted in Platonic philosophy. One of Plato’s contributions to society is the philosophical understanding of how words operate as signs, which point to the true absolute realities or forms. Plato writes, “When someone utters the word ‘iron’ or ‘silver,’ don’t we all think of the same thing?”¹⁸ This Platonic theory bleeds into Augustine’s understanding of language, which is directly mentioned in his *Confessions*.

When they called anything by name, and moved the body towards it while they spoke, I saw and gathered that the thing they wished to point out was called by the name they then uttered... So it was that by frequently hearing words, in duly placed sentences, I gradually gathered what things they were the signs of; and having formed my mouth to the utterance of these signs, I thereby presented my will.¹⁹

Plato’s teaching of words as signs of truer realities informs Augustine’s understanding of Christian theology. In his work *Christian Doctrine*, Augustine explicitly states that words operate as signs.²⁰ He meshes this philosophical notion with his developing theology.

¹⁷ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 50.

¹⁸ Plato, *Complete Works* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 540.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 8 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 1:49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:536.

Plato's influence on Augustine has major consequences for how the church understands the operation of words in human language.

Augustine does not conceive of words as creating new realities. In his *Tractates on the Gospel of St. John*, Augustine articulates his theology of how Christ's words are not efficacious, but point to efficacious things. He states, "The word is added to the element, and there results the Sacrament, as if itself also a kind of visible word... For even in the word itself the passing sound is one thing, the abiding efficacy is another."²¹ For Augustine, the word is not effective itself. This is where Luther parts ways with Augustine. For Luther, God's word is effective and creates new reality. At least in the theological realm, Luther believed that God's words either command or create reality. Augustine limits his understanding of words as signs in the tradition of Platonic philosophy.

Bayer identifies Luther's understanding of the real word as a break with this theological understanding of words as signs. Luther was not able to reconcile the theory of signs, words pointing away to truer realities, with the real word of God's promise.

The *signum* itself is already the *res*, that the linguistic sign is already the matter itself- that was Luther's great hermeneutical discovery, his reformational discovery in the strictest sense. Luther sharpens this way to understand language in the following statement from a table talk: "*Signum philosophicum est nota absentis rei, signum theologicum est nota praesentis rei*" [The philosophical sign is the mark of something that is absent; the theological sign is the mark of something present].²²

Unlike the philosophical usage of language, God's theological language creates and is the reality itself, rather than pointing away to a distant reality. Luther broke through by

²¹ Ibid., 7:344.

²² Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 52.

learning that the *signum* (word) is a *res*, a real thing itself not because it corresponds to a reality already there or not, but because it makes that reality by saying it. Here is where Luther moves from philosophical signs that are absent of things, to theological that make things to be present. The reality is present when God speaks His promise into reality.

Linguistically, Bayer explains that God's words operate in a constitutive way. Bayer mentions that Luther identified God's words as speech generating reality.²³ While reflecting upon a lifetime of work, Luther states this explicitly in his *Commentary on Genesis* on the nature of promise.

In Holy Scripture, however, there are real blessings. They are more than mere wishes. They state facts and are effective. They actually bestow and bring what the words say...But the blessing of a promise of faith, and of a gift that is at hand is this: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; that is, I reconcile your soul to God, remove you from God's wrath and displeasure, put you in His grace, and give you the inheritance of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven."²⁴

In this work, Luther ties directly the word of promise with the *Absolving Word*. These direct statements to hearers are the effective words of Christ, which are differentiated in theology from words entrapped and limited as signs. Luther states, "The philosophical sign is the sign of the thing absent, the theological sign is the sign of the thing present."²⁵ For Luther, theological language does not point to distant realities, but is the reality itself. For Bayer the promise possesses the constitutive function.

Another aspect of the divine promise for Bayer is that this promise is unconditionally good news. It is an actual divine gospel that cannot be given to those who

²³ Ibid., 53.

²⁴ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 5:140.

²⁵ Bayer, "Die Reformatische Wende in Luthers Theologie," 134n; Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger, 1912-1921), 4:666.

are justified by virtues, but exists for those who are virtue-less and need an unconditional acquittal.

In the midst of contradictory ways in which God encounters us, which are laden with tension and conflict, the gospel stands out in its uniqueness as God's decisive final word. The gospel, strictly speaking is a promise without any demand, a pure promise (*promissio*), a gift.²⁶

Ultimately, this understanding of promise bleeds through Luther's actual reformational turn and is the catalyst itself that opens up the possibility of actual gospel. The promise of Christ and His benefits create the gospel that must be uttered by the sinner to another sinner. The promise is the gospel according to Bayer.

Bayer observes that Luther's breakthrough of promise not only creates a new hearer, but also places the hearer in time with Christ. This time has no beginning or end for Christ Himself is the Alpha and the Omega of the promise.

His word is creative and efficacious; it does what it says (Is. 55:10,11). By his word he created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1). By this same powerful word he sustains all things (Heb. 1:3), forgiven sins, and thus creates life and salvation. Therefore we have no need to worry about our existence, either in the past or the future.²⁷

The performative nature of God's word strips anxiety from a worried conscience. For one to be without a condemned past or future is to be located in the pierced hands of Christ. This is the purpose of the absolution. When the *Absolving Word* is uttered and the promise of God is handed over, then Christ Himself establishes the new reality.

Bayer's theology claims that the promise brings certainty of salvation to a sinner. Luther repeatedly claims that "God cannot lie" in reference to God's promise. God's truth

²⁶ Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 125.

²⁷ Oswald Bayer, "Preaching the Word," *Lutheran Quarterly*, no. 3 (2009): 249.

lies in His faithfulness to the promise.²⁸ Therefore, Christ's word remains certain in the midst of a bound will, which cannot merit righteousness.

The will's capacity to be turned toward salvation and faith is in no way the work of the human being. It is solely God's work, just as the divine promise that creates faith is solely God's work. No one can hinder the divine work of fulfilling and consummating the divine promise, because God is omnipotent. God does not merely desire to fulfill promises; God can also keep promises. An uncertainty would sneak in if salvation were not entirely and solely in God's hand, if I had only the tiniest bit to say and to work in the matter, if I were left to my own devices in this single point—which, of course, is the Archimedic point. This uncertainty would destroy the certainty of salvation.²⁹

Luther affirms the idea that corrupted human nature cannot perform a purely good work, nor can it give itself a pure works righteousness examination. Since the original sin of humanity dominates human will, the promise must break in *extra nos*. This is why Luther wrote, "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel."³⁰ The conscience is too opaque to be properly self-aware of sins or to acknowledge God. In this way, the promise gives the certainty of salvation to the sinner as the *Absolving Word* is proclaimed into reality.

Bayer also contributes the *vita passiva* as a major category in understanding Luther's theology. Bayer makes a distinction that the Christian life is not defined by a life of action or a life of contemplation to achieve oneness with God, as in the mode of Aristotle. The Christian life is one where God acts upon the creature.

²⁸ Oswald Bayer, "Luther as Interpreter of Holy Scripture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Luther*, ed. Donald C. Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 77.

²⁹ Oswald Bayer, "Freedom? The Anthropological Concepts in Luther and Melancthon Compared," *Harvard Theological Review* 91, no. 4 (1998): 381-382.

³⁰ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 355.

The decisive aspect of the *vita passiva* is that it is linked to a specific experience: to an experience for which I am not the prime initiator, but which instead I suffer... The righteousness of faith is passive, “in that we allow God alone to work in us and we ourselves, with all our powers, do not do anything.” “Faith is a divine work within us that changes us and brings us to a new birth from God [John 1:13] and kills the old Adam; he makes of us a completely different human being in the heart, mood, mind, and in all powers” (cf. Deut 6:5). Faith is thus the work of God, through and through, with nothing accomplished by the human being; rather it can only be received and suffered. The righteousness of Christ is set in complete opposition to the righteousness of works; it is passive. We can only receive it. We do nothing, but instead suffer its coming from another, who works in us: God. It is hidden from the human being who is caught up in the self, who seeks to perform on his own, who not only wants to make something of himself by his deeds and actions, but also wants to be self-made.³¹

Through the promise God creates the creature. He provides righteousness and works righteousness through the sinner. That which is passive is the righteousness of faith, i.e. *iustitia passiva*. For Bayer, the promise gives the faith that creates the passive life.

Bayer acknowledges that the reformational turn is widely held to be when Luther began work on his *Commentary on Romans*. This is due in large part to Luther’s own admittance in the *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings*.³² However, Bayer argues that the true turn is better observed, when Luther’s idea of promise gradually percolates in his theology. Luther also acknowledges this aspect of his breakthrough in his *Lectures on Genesis*.

Toward the beginning of the revival of the Gospel I heard a certain monk saying when, after casting off papal superstition, he heard and clearly understood the purer doctrine: “Good God! I never heard anything about the promise in my whole life.” And he congratulated himself from the heart because he was permitted to hear and understand this word “promise.”³³

³¹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 43.

³² *Ibid.*, 47; Luther, *Luther's Works*, 34:336-337.

³³ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 8:181.

This quotation along with Luther's prior theological distancing from the scholastics between 1515-1520 causes Bayer to pause and re-examine the reformational turn. For Bayer, the reformational turn was not the result of a tenacious study of Romans 1:17, but rather by an understanding that is informed by the promise.

Bayer points out that Luther's distinctive break does not come by the Augustinian understanding of the righteousness of God. Luther's developed understanding of promise brings the reformational turn and breaks with Augustine's righteousness of God.³⁴ Bayer identifies the distinctive element as the promise, which causes the movement away from the tradition of syllogism and toward the Christian distinctive understanding of broken humanity's relationship with God.

Luther wrestled with how a sinful human can obtain the righteousness of God, if not by works or by merit. Paulson explains that part of the struggle for Luther is rooted in his understanding of the Aristotelian theory of distributive justice.³⁵ In his work *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defined justice as "the excellence through which everybody enjoys his own possession in accordance with the law; its opposite is injustice, through which men enjoy the possession of others in defiance of the law."³⁶ This understanding of justice drove Luther to understand the righteousness of God as unattainable.

For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically

³⁴ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 54.

³⁵ Paulson, *Luther for Armchair Theologians*, 45.

³⁶ Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2:2174.

regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.³⁷

For Luther, it would be unjustified for man to obtain God's justice, since this justice is a genitive of God and not man. He concludes under the Aristotelian model that there was no way to attain God's righteousness. Bayer understands that the promise was the key that unlocked the revelation of God as gracious and bestowing righteousness not by works, but by *sola fide*.

So the promise gives form to Luther's interpretation of Romans 1:17, not the other way around. Bayer shows that the development of Luther's understanding of promise forces him to break with an Aristotelian understanding of justice and active righteousness, and move towards a view of God's judgment as one of justification by a passive righteousness.

There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith as it is written.³⁸

The promise informed Luther's understanding, which brought the breakthrough of the gospel in Romans 1:17. Bayer also accedes to Luther's "tower experience" as a reformational turn, but only in so far as it understands the promise as the catalyst, which unlocked the understanding of passive righteousness. Luther did not receive this as an inner discovery of self-examination, it came from an external word.

Bayer also points out that Luther integrated his understanding of the promise with the Lord's Supper. In 1520 Luther published two works addressing the function of

³⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 34:336.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 34:337.

sacrament. He deals with the idea of promise and sacrament in his *A Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, The Holy Mass*, where he cites Christ's promises as the source that faith feeds on and the antidote to troubled consciences.³⁹ Since Luther discovered repentance as a return to Baptism, the Lord's Supper is now the promise, which sustains faith.⁴⁰ *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* is the other pivotal earlier work where Luther articulates how the promise sustains faith in the sacrament. For Bayer, this work has a weight far greater than the *Heidelberg Disputation*, as Luther is setting forth the primary matter in theology.

A testament as everyone knows, is a promise made by the one who is about to die, in which he designates his bequest and appoints his heirs. A testament, therefore, involves first, the death of the testator, and second, the promise of an inheritance and the naming of the heir... Christ testifies concerning his death when he says, "This is my body, which is given, this is my blood, which is poured out" [Luke 22:19-20]. He names and designates the bequest when he says "For the forgiveness of sins" [Matt. 26:28]. But he appoints the heir when he says, "For you [Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:24] and for many" [Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24], that is, for those who accept and believe the promise of the testator. For here it is faith that makes men heirs as we shall see. You see, therefore, that what we call the mass is a promise of the forgiveness of sins made to us by God, and such a promise as has been confirmed by the death of the Son of God.⁴¹

At this point the promise informs the direction of the constitution toward the hearer. For Luther, the promise links up with the *pro me* aspect of faith. Here Luther concludes in a stunning and robust statement that God will not relate to man apart from "faith in the Word of His promise."⁴² This formula of "Christ for us" becomes a distinct rhetorical

³⁹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 270-272; Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:79-111.

⁴⁰ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 46, 57; Luther, *Luther's Works*, 36:124.

⁴¹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 36:38.

⁴² Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 40; Luther, *Luther's Works*, 36:42.

aspect to Luther's preaching.⁴³ As Luther makes connection between sacrament and promise, Luther is also confessing the main matter in theology. Martin Lohrmann states that Luther relied heavily on these spoken promises during his struggle with illness and before his death.⁴⁴ For Bayer the promise is the medium of where true God and true man unite, i.e. why *Creator est creatura*.⁴⁵ The same axiom applies for God's presence in and with the bread and wine. The Lord's Supper is where Luther begins developing and connecting the promise to the sacraments.

The promise also informed Luther's understanding of baptism. Bayer explains that the promise is taken literally as the *extra nos*, and therefore not created by a person himself.⁴⁶ Since this is the case, the promise is a literal divine guaranty.

I have been baptized. I have been absolved. In this faith I die. No matter what trials and cares confront me from now on, I will certainly not be shaken; for He who said: 'He who believes and is baptized will be saved' (Mark 16:16) and 'Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 16:19) and 'This is My body. This is My blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins' (cf. Matt. 26:26, 28)—He cannot deceive or lie. This is certainly true.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ulrich Nembach, "Preaching and Sermons," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, trans. Hans J. Hillerbrand, 4 vols., vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 323.

⁴⁴ Martin Lohrmann, "Bugenhagen's Pastoral Care of Martin Luther," *Lutheran Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2010): 133.

⁴⁵ Oswald Bayer, "Das Wort Ward Fleisch: Luthers Christologie Als Lehre Von Der Idiomenkommunikation," in *Creator Est Creatura: Luthers Christologie Als Lehre Von Der Idiomenkommunikation*, ed. Oswald Bayer und Benjamin Gleede, Theologische Bibliothek Topelmann 138 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 24.

⁴⁶ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 54.

⁴⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 8:193-194.

No power of hell can steal the promise from baptism. Luther discredited rebaptism as he saw that it ignored the promise, which God makes to the sinner in the first true baptism.⁴⁸ For Luther, Mark 6:16 is a promise of God that carries the divine force of guarantee, fulfillment, and creates the new reality not by water, but by the promise attached to the water.

Bayer also believes that the discovery of promise moves the church into a proper understanding of ethics. Immanuel Kant's theory of categorical imperative possesses immense ramifications on both Western secular and church ethics. Bayer proposes that for *caritas* to emerge for the neighbor, one must operate solely out of the categorical gift of the promise.

Bayer believes that the promise is the categorical gift that accomplishes the goals of Kant's categorical imperatives. As established by Luther in his work *The Sacrament of Penance*, the conscience is darkened and does not possess ability to recount errors clearly nor to move the body to make proper satisfaction.⁴⁹ The will is bound to stare into its ability to make perfect contrition and satisfaction. Bayer explains that the promise directs the sinner's attention away from self-reliance and onto Christ Himself.

It is of capital importance for an approach to ethics that we do not see the 'joyous exchange' as an ideal to be realized. It occurs through concrete speech acts, through performative statements. The freedom that arises from these is not a freedom that one asserts for oneself, either worked out by ourselves or remaining to be worked out. It is freedom as gift; it is claimed by hearers in their particular material situations and changes both situation and hearer in its role as promise.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid., 40:229-262.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 35:18-22.

⁵⁰ Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 86.

The promise moves the subject of action away from human will to Christ's will. Human will is always seeking to self-create, and therefore place itself in the role of Creator.⁵¹ Harrisville states that the Christian life is one that is hidden and works are not visible to the human as distinguishably Christian.⁵² In this sense, one should not look at one's achievements that are hidden, but to the neighbor's need. The categorical gift or promise brings the actual freedom to love the neighbor through works of love and not by personal ethical analysis. Bayer states, "piety in action does not arise from the goodness of categorical imperative, but rather from that of categorical gift."⁵³ In this way, Luther's discovery of promise informs the direction of ethics and completes what it means to have a true reformational discovery that touches all aspects of Christian theology and life.

God's promise even covers the "final matters" of eschatology, since it does not look to a further eschaton, but breaks in time and space effectively in the present.⁵⁴ It is this understanding that steers Luther's thought away from Aristotelian, Platonic, and scholastic interpretations of scripture to a more confessional, evangelical, radical, and alien proclamation.

⁵¹ Oswald Bayer, "Self-Creation? On the Dignity of Human Beings," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (2004): 286-287.

⁵² Roy A. Harrisville, "Christian Life in Light of the Cross," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (2009): 229.

⁵³ Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, 8.

⁵⁴ Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 51.

Absolving Word or Promise as the Reformational Breakthrough?

One complication with Bayer's understanding of promise is that it is not subject to a simple definition. It is fluid, referring to Christ, a promise, a benefit, a categorical gift, etc. Bayer offers myriads of possibilities, but never boils it down to one single entity consistently. This can have the tendency to operate against his own better lights, since he also warns against abstraction of the promise into an ideal. Perhaps that is the beauty of Bayer's evaluation of Luther's promise. It is best to stay closely to Luther's original discovery that the promise is Christ and His benefits present in the effective *Absolving Word*. In other words, the Word is effectively and really Christ Himself, and His benefits are His activities of absolution.⁵⁵ There is a distinction made here between God who is substance, and God who is effect, as Luther explains in his *Table Talk*.

Christ is the Word Incarnate, which was true God from the beginning. This Word has been revealed to us. It is substantially God. But this [the spoken] Word is effectively God, not substantially. It is the power and might of God, for it is characteristic of the man Christ or of His minister. Nonetheless it effects what it promises (*dicit*); for through this instrument God deals with us, does everything and offers us all His treasures.⁵⁶

This is more than presence, though it is surely that (substantially). It is “the power and might” of God and this not abstractly or merely in his own being, but in Christ or his minister. Where Christ is present His benefits are in operation. God can be, as Luther argues in the *Bondage of the Will*, present and not have it be good news. That is, God can hide outside of or without Christ. But when he comes in the characteristic of the man

⁵⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 1:17; Edwald Plass, ed. *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 4.

⁵⁶ Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1464.

Christ, or his minister, this is something different. This is where a person, indeed a sinner, has God not only in himself, but in his word—specifically the word of forgiveness that is a promise, but a very specific promise that is precisely what a sinner needs to hear.

This aspect of Bayer’s promise is captured more accurately in the *Absolving Word*. This speech act gives a specific place of Christ and His operation, an “occasion,” in contrast to the idea of promise, which may reach into myriads of possibilities as an abstract category.

Another consideration is that the *Absolving Word* in Luther’s life preceded his discovery of something that can be called, in general, promise or real word. Luther recounts in *Table Talk*, his days as a monk before giving lectures at the university.

There’s something great about the employment of the keys and of private absolution when the conscience can be put to rest...For under the papacy I was always a despairing monk, even when I made the greatest efforts. Finally I received comfort from a brother through this one Word. God himself has commanded us to hope. Our salvation is faith in God. Why shouldn’t we trust in God, who bids and commands us to hope? Through this Word he gave me life again.⁵⁷

Though the promise and *Absolving Word* are interrelated and deeply connected, they also are distinct. When timing is considered, the *Absolving Word* precedes the promise and confirms his discovery of the real word in Psalm 2. Luther mentions no work of satisfaction, but only a performative pronouncement from the absolver to the troubled sinner. This would not have been the proper protocol for a Roman Catholic confession. Through this new absolution, Luther received the *Absolving Word* and experienced the power of Christ. Obviously, the promise is given through the *Absolving Word* and yet absolving words of the absolution are needed to be spoken for Luther to be awakened to the promise. It is important to note always that, when dealing with a promise, it is the

⁵⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 54:334.

specific promise spoken to you in time and place that creates, not a category of promise as if it were a discovery of an idea.

Competing Claims for the Reformation Breakthrough

Modern scholarship beyond Bayer's argument places Luther's reformational turn in two basic time periods between 1514 and 1518 or 1520 and 1523.⁵⁸ Lennart Pinomaa believes, for Luther, gospel clarity and purity developed as early as 1510 or 1512 to 1513.⁵⁹ Otto Pesch points out that Bizer's work, *Fides ex Auditu*, reinvigorates the reformational turn debate to reconsider the possibility of an earlier date.⁶⁰ Though these prove important years for Luther's theological development, Luther's reformational turn must have happen early, even prior to His early writing of the Psalms, for only an unmerited *Absolving Word* could generate his understanding of a real word or a promise. The probability of the reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* may have happened as early as his entrance into the Augustinian cloister in 1505.⁶¹ By Luther's own admission, the impact hit during sometime in those early years.⁶² Helmar Junghans discredits the

⁵⁸ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 90-94; Eric Leland Saak, *High Way to Heaven: The Augustinian Platform between Reform and Reformation, 1292-1524*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 2002), 637-639; Markus Wriedt, "Luther's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim, trans. Katharina Gustavs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 91.

⁵⁹ Lennart Pinomaa, *Kristikunnan Suuria Julistajia* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 1945), 49.

⁶⁰ Otto Hermann Pesch, "Zur Frage Nach Luthers Reformatorischeer Wende: Ergebnisse Und Probleme Der Diskussion Um Ernst Bizer, 'Fides Ex Audite'," in *Der Durchbruch Der Reformatorischen Erkenntnis Bei Luther*, ed. Bernhard Lohse (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), 445-450.

⁶¹ James M. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 21.

⁶² Luther, *Luther's Works*, 54:334.

“tower experience” as “the reformation discovery.”⁶³ Though Junghans is correct, “the reformation discovery” still does not arrive by scholastic or humanistic training or developed instinct from his early years, simply because Luther’s confession states that reason itself does not create the Christian breakthrough. Breakthrough comes by “hearing” not “understanding” or reason.⁶⁴ Luther’s witness discredits both a reason-driven discovery of a “tower experience” or by way of an intellectual development in mystical and scholastic discipline.

Luther’s reformational turn cannot be dated historically to a specific time as of yet, but it can be traced systematically via his theological discoveries caused by the *Absolving Word*. It is the assertion of this thesis that the unmerited and unconditional *Absolving Word* was the evangelical employment of the keys that altered Luther’s life forever. This evangelical absolution deeply contrasts itself with the normative legal medieval absolution that balanced contrition and satisfaction with the merit of forgiveness.⁶⁵ From the point of Luther’s own reception of the *Absolving Word*, the monk came to know that God was actively creating peace through the Word of Christ.

The *Absolving Word* is the absolving Christ. “*Ego te Absolvo*” are Christ’s words to the sinner. Christ present in the speech event is central in Luther’s thought. Indeed, it is much earlier and more clearly Luther’s breakthrough than any attempt to speak of Christ present in the person of faith, or indwelling, as has been discussed by Tuomo

⁶³ Helmar Junghans, “Bibelhumanitstische Anstöß in Luthers Entwicklung Zum Reformator,” *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 85 (2005): 25-40.

⁶⁴ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to the Reformation 1483-1521*, trans. James L Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 223; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 355.

⁶⁵ Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to the Reformation 1483-1521*, 68.

Mannermaa.⁶⁶ When Luther speaks of Gospel it is closely linked with God's activity in justifying and sanctifying. The *Absolving Word* is not limited to private confession, but exists wherever one preaches the Gospel.

To preach forgiveness of sins means nothing else than to absolve and loose from sins. This is done also in Baptism and in the Sacrament of the Altar, for these were likewise ordained to exhibit the forgiveness of sin to us and to assure us of it. Therefore being baptized or receiving the Sacrament of the Altar is also an absolution. Here forgiveness is promised and awarded each person in particular in the name and at the Command of Christ. You should hear this absolution when and as often as you are in need of it and should accept and believe it as if you were hearing it from Christ Himself. For since it is not our absolution, but Christ's command and Word, it is just as good and effective as if you were hearing it out of His own mouth.⁶⁷

The *Absolving Word* is the speech act that gives Christ properly in all sectors of the ministry of the Word. Revelation of God does not move beyond the proclaimed *Absolving Word*. Fred W. Meuser writes, "We do not go beyond the Word...the apostolic message brings God and all His gifts."⁶⁸ This understanding is the pivotal element in Luther's theology and his break from the Roman Catholic Church, whose theology was based on a *lex schema* of merit.⁶⁹ The whole law-driven logic that constructed the theory of purchasing an indulgence for an absolution in the Roman Church is a legal logic.⁷⁰ Luther's reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* moved his understanding of

⁶⁶ Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁶⁷ Plass, *What Luther Says*, 4.

⁶⁸ Fred W. Meuser, "Luther as Preacher of the Word," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 137.

⁶⁹ Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2004), 32-39.

⁷⁰ David Bagchi, "Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and the Contemporary Criticism of Indulgences," in *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits*, ed. R. N. Swanson, vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 339, 348.

absolution from a merit based legal scheme to the victorious gospel that really frees sinners and permanently ends the legal scheme. The efficacy of the *Absolving Word* leans on Christ's promise, as opposed to the Roman understanding of meritorious contrition and satisfaction.

Berndt Hamm counters the trend in locating the reformational turn in Luther's theology by proposing Luther's unique theology as a result of an *Anfechtung* process. Hamm places the reformational turn as a process in the range of 1505 to 1511.⁷¹ He dates Luther's official break with the medieval theological structure as late as 1520 in *The Freedom of A Christian*.⁷² He believes that Luther's reformational turn developed as a result of being exposed to the combination of *Anfechtung* with mystical exposure. These various mystical forms were available to Luther though the likes of Bernard of Clairvaux, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Johannes Tauler.⁷³ All of these forms of *theologica mystica* ultimately sought a nearness to God, in a *unio mystica*.⁷⁴ For this reason, Hamm believes Luther developed under the medieval love-union paradigm. During the Middle Ages, the union with God was understood in the mystical form of love developed in the heart for God, which creates the mystical union of the sinner as bride with God as the bridegroom.⁷⁵ But this monastic urge to show pure love was removed from Luther

⁷¹ Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 32.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 169-177.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 13, 96, 196-197, 224-229.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

because of his *Anfechtung*.⁷⁶ The more he looked inwardly, the less pure love he found. Luther experienced distance from and the absence of the graceful God. Experiencing the *Anfechtung*, Luther was forced to turn outward and search for God in external forms. This outward process removed Luther from placing the efficacy of salvation on his spiritual ability to love or inner disposition.⁷⁷ This is how Luther found faith and the Holy Spirit, by combating the misery of his *Anfechtung*.⁷⁸ Luther's medieval experience is not to be ignored, as it shaped his theology towards a new *Christian mysticism*, but neither is *Anfechtung* to be ignored.

One attractive element in Hamm's argument is his emphasis on a holistic turn, rather than a mere intellectual assent. Hamm perceives Bernard of Clairvaux's influence on Luther as resulting in a holistic connection to God. In Bernard's form of mysticism, the Logos-union mysticism and Cross-suffering mysticism are connected in the Christian religious experience.⁷⁹ We find truth through the experience of suffering, and as we suffer we are one with God. Bernard is one of most important theologians who contributed to the medieval understanding of the Passion.⁸⁰ He also emphasized the marriage between the soul and the Bridegroom as the continuing union between God and

⁷⁶ Ibid., 215-216.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 215.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ulrich Köpf, "Die Passion Christi in Der Lateinischen Religiösen Und Theologischen Literatur Des Spätmittelalters," in *Die Passion Christi in Literatur Und Kunst Des Spätmittelalters*, ed. Walter Haug und Burghart Wachinger (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993), 29-30.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 30.

the humankind.⁸¹ He writes in his sermon *On Conversion*, “Love is the very being of the Bride. She is full of it, and the Bridegroom is satisfied with it.”⁸² It is true that one must have an experience with God as Hamm argues, however this experience must arrive in the *Absolving Word* for Luther, which became the only external object to which faith could actually cling.

Hamm argues that Staupitz aided Luther in creating a new Christian mystical form. Certainly, Staupitz held an influential place in Luther’s development. But it was not to create another mystical form, quite the contrary. The influence of Staupitz concerns the *Absolving Word*, which breaks with mystical union of the inner being. Hamm believes that Staupitz’ “Marital Union” idea creates a bridge for the “Happy Exchange” in Luther’s theology.⁸³ This may well be, however, the key to the union is the shift from love to faith. Wetzel points out that the idea of the “Happy Exchange” in Luther’s *Freedom of the Christian*, preceded Luther and Staupitz and took shape in the works of Augustine and Bernard in other written forms.⁸⁴ Despite Hamm’s argument for an evangelical mysticism, Luther’s theological logic carries gospel logic not a law logic. Law logic seeks for human effort to bring revelation of God, specifically through love. It also seeks for God to use a human experience or an *Anfechtung* that is devoid of the oral Word, which is a form of the law, to bring His revelation. *Anfechtung* may be a

⁸¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 53.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 273.

⁸³ Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in Reformation Reorientation*, 209-210.

⁸⁴ Richard Wetzel, “Staupitz Und Luther,” in *Martin Luther: Probleme Seiner Zeit*, ed. Dieter Stievermann (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlage, 1986), 86.

necessary, but not a sufficient condition for what made Luther free. The breakthrough is the alien word that cannot be attained from reason or the experience of *extra nos* in suffering, and specifically cannot be found by turning inward and upward as in mysticism.

The closest possibility for Hamm's evangelical christian mysticism experience to be true is for the *Absolving Word* to create the mystical union. It is not a turn by the human because of the *Anfechtung*, but rather a turning of the human by the power of the *Absolving Word*, itself. All sinners have *Anfechtung*, only Christians have the *Absolving Word*. This is what calmed Luther down in times of despair, and brought his mind to peace in the monastery.

But the more contrite I was, the higher rose my sorrows and my conscience, and I could not accept the absolution and the other consolations which those to whom I confessed brought me. This was the way I thought: "Who knows whether such consolations should be believed?" Later on, by chance I asked my preceptor, amid many tears, about these many temptations of mind, which I was suffering also because of my age. He said to me: "Son, what are you doing? Do you not know that the Lord Himself has commanded us to hope?" With this one word "commanded" I was so strengthened that I knew I should believe the absolution which I had heard so often before. I had been so preoccupied with my foolish thoughts that I did not think I should believe the Word, but heard it as though it had nothing to do with me.⁸⁵

For Luther there is no Christian experience without this *Absolving Word*. The sinner cannot prepare to receive the Gospel by *Anfechtung*, but can only be given rest by virtue of the *Absolving Word*.⁸⁶ The righteousness of Christ is not bestowed as one trusts. One trusts because the *Absolving Word* that creates the faith gives Christ's righteousness.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 12:370.

⁸⁶ Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in Reformation Reorientation*, 217.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Whether Hamm is aware or not, like the mystics, he is still placing the result on the *voluntas* of the human being rather than Christ's power alone. It is not the ability to love that saves, but is it then the ability to believe?⁸⁸ Is it justification by faith in one's faith, or justification by the *Absolving Word*, which creates faith? The latter is the matter for Luther. Real grace cannot remain "nearby" it must be bestowed for Luther. One can preach that salvation is "no more by human works or merit but by pure grace and by Christ's merits of our Lord Jesus Christ," but it remains a "nearby" grace if not given to the hearer.⁸⁹ This is what the scholastics were forced to conclude when they did not have an evangelical *Absolving Word*. For them, absolution was achieved by a loving contrition.⁹⁰ They kept true grace at a distance from the hearer. Similar to the mystics, it was "nearby," but it did not create faith. The *Absolving Word* first creates the faith that justifies, and then demands it. The *Absolving Word* creates the mystical union with God, not the other way around.

For Luther, mystical formation or *Anfechtung* did not bring the breakthrough. The breakthrough brought itself to Luther. The *Absolving Word* creates the Christian experience of salvation. Luther's confession is quite clear that faith does not come through reason or experience apart from the *Absolving Word*.⁹¹ No amount of *Anfechtung*

⁸⁸ Ibid., 216.

⁸⁹ Volker Leppin, "Luther's Transformation of Medieval Thought: Continuity and Discontinuity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 122-123; Johannes Tauler, *Die Predigten Taulers: Aus Der Engelberger Und Der Freiburger Handschrift Sowie Aus Schmidts Abschriften Der Ehemaligen Strassburger Handschriften* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1910), 123.

⁹⁰ Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in Reformation Reorientation*, 8-19.

⁹¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 355.

can create the new experience or even direct one towards it. Nevertheless, we should appreciate Hamm's historical analysis of the systematic thought that brings richness to Luther scholarship. The *Absolving Word* is the bridge between the sinner and God, while the *Anfechtung* is the separator. It is not the ideas that matter or the senses which may attain union with God. The creative and evangelical message of the Creator "Ego te Absolvo" creates the union, not a creative suffering process. Only the *Absolving Word* can usher in the new creation. Hamm does concede that God's acquittal and effective word changes everything for Luther, but this must come by speaking.⁹² It is also true that Hamm eventually agrees that the absolution is the final word in the reformational turn, but it is more than the period at the end of the sentence.⁹³ It is the origin of the reformation, not only its culmination. To move from the centrality of love to the centrality of faith, the *Absolving Word* must speak, which creates faith. Only the *Absolving Word* brings breakthrough and simultaneous union with God.

It should be no surprise that there was a movement that encouraged the inward turn for mystical experience. The medieval church was not handing over a merciful God in the absolution. Scholasticism failed to form absolution that reconciled humanity to the creator. This failure helped give rise to mysticism in the first place. Where does one go to actually hear the voice of the Merciful God? How could one receive the promise? This lack forced an inward turn.

For that reason, Luther would have been like every other monk and scholastic had he never received the promise as the *Absolving Word*. However, Bayer may be

⁹² Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in Reformation Reorientation*, 171.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 243.

imprecisely locating the discovery of the promise as the event when he makes this a concept. The true breakthrough was Luther's own receiving of the *Absolving Word*. That was the only way Luther could apprehend the promise as something other than a concept, abstraction or mere thought. Before one can speak of the *Absolving Word* as Luther did, he had to have received it. This confessional event defined his interpretation of scripture, where the arrival of the Word of God makes Christ's work satisfactory, beneficial, and so a sure and certain promise that does not depend upon the righteousness of the receiver, but upon the faithfulness of the giver.

Absolving Word Breaking Through in the Sermon on Penance

Since we do not have an historical description of the moment of his reception of the absolution, we rely on the effects of this occasion as reflected in Luther's confession of faith and his theological change. Luther's 1518 *Sermon on Penance* signals a robust breakthrough where he examines the nature of confession and its relationship between God and man. This breakthrough reflects the activity of what occurs in the evangelical absolution Luther experienced, which was not the medieval absolution. Jared Wicks marks this year as the great dogmatic divergence between Luther and the Catholic tradition.⁹⁴ It is in this writing that Luther articulates the limitations of human will's ability to make meritorious contrition and satisfaction. The *Absolving Word* declares the sinner justified before God and creates the new man.

⁹⁴ Jared Wicks, *Man Yearning for Grace: Luther's Early Spiritual Teaching* (Washington: Corpus Publications, 1968), 13.

Luther first explains that contrition is imperfect. It cannot give faith. No one is able to confess every sin.⁹⁵ Luther realized that the conscience is never able perfectly to locate its trespasses due to a darkened and limited self-awareness: “Non intres in iudicium cum servo tuo, quia non iustificabitur.” For this reason, Luther believed that there are none justified in God’s sight.⁹⁶ Luther also breaks down the divide between mortal and venial sins, confessing that not every sin can possibly be recounted.

He went on to criticize the efficacy of the examination of one’s contrition. Examining one’s contrition does not make a sinner justified before God. When sinners examine themselves then the forgiveness is based on the awareness of the contrition. Luther was not denying that guilt arises in the human soul, but he did not believe the guilt itself merits the forgiveness.⁹⁷ Hamm is correct in stating that Luther expressed a theological observation that people can “never be good in themselves” as a constant condition.⁹⁸ However, this awareness or contemplation of despair does not attain absolution. Not even humility can achieve a merit of forgiveness or favor with God. It is God who absolves in contrast to the nominalist position that equates predestination with foreknowledge of human merit.⁹⁹ Uuras Saarnivaara notes that this Augustinian-Roman

⁹⁵ Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 1:322, 322-329.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:323, 321.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:323.

⁹⁸ Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in Reformation Reorientation*, 158.

⁹⁹ David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation*, vol. 4, Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1980), 85-86.

form of conditional absolution binds rather than looses the penitent sinner.¹⁰⁰ For Luther, no contrition can merit an absolution.

Luther believes that the solution is to first look towards God's mercy, rather than the efficacy of contrition or even satisfaction. Luther holds that even mortal and venial sins arise in good works, so the sinner must look to God himself as the one to heal the matter.¹⁰¹ Citing Matt. 9:2 and Psalm 63, Luther exhorts the sinner to put confidence in God's mercy, "But the Lord commands me not to trust in myself but in his mercy."¹⁰² Hamm believes that the contrition is the necessary stage to ignite the relationship with God.¹⁰³ Luther certainly struggled with the predicament of the care of souls under the law-driven penitential system in these early years.¹⁰⁴ However, the *Absolving Word* is the necessary and actual speech act that reveals God and places the sinner in true relationship to God. All pagans possess contrition, but only Christians possess absolution. Though Luther certainly experienced the dark night of the soul, *Anfechtung* does not justify or reveal God.¹⁰⁵ The starting point of God's truth does not come in the contrition or awareness of sin and need, but rather in the absolution itself. This creates an absolute

¹⁰⁰ Uuras Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 27-28.

¹⁰¹ Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 1:323.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in Reformation Reorientation*, 159.

¹⁰⁴ James M. Kittleson, "Luther and Modern Church History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 262.

¹⁰⁵ Jane E. Strohl, "Luther's Spiritual Journey," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 150, 153.

dependence on the pronouncement of the *Absolving Word* itself.¹⁰⁶ Luther at this point redirects the hearer away from the inward self and toward God Himself.

Luther's last stage of thought in his *Sermon on Penance* thunders the promise in the *Absolving Word*. Peeling away the understanding that the sincerity, quality, and performance of the contrition as meriting absolution, Luther expresses the Gospel promise out of his understanding of Matthew 16:19.

Second: See that you do not in any way be confident that you are absolved because of your contrition...No, you are forgiven because of Christ's words where he says to Peter: "Whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven". So trust strongly that when a priest absolves you, you are absolved without anything having to do with the contrition. God does not lie, despite the form of your remorse. If you do not believe the Word is for you, then you are calling Him a liar. For this sentence is solid and secure... Even if you have a priest jesting to absolve, you are absolved if you truly believe, you are absolved. So great a thing is faith and so powerful is the Word of Christ. Therefore, the people are cursed, who will not trust that they are absolved before they are sure that they have repented enough, they will build their conscience and house on sand, not rock.¹⁰⁷

In this beautiful sermon section, Luther declares that the *Absolving Word* is the promise because "God cannot lie." As Ronald Rittgers explains, "the crucial corollary of this understanding of authority was that believers could be certain of forgiveness, because the divine promise to forgive was utterly trustworthy; God could not lie."¹⁰⁸ Luther's understanding of the promise as expressed in this sermon, breaks with the Roman Catholic understanding that contrition and satisfaction merit absolution. Walter Sundberg

¹⁰⁶ Gerhard Müller, "Luther's Transformation of Medieval Thought: Discontinuity and Continuity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 107-108.

¹⁰⁷ Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 1:323.

¹⁰⁸ Ronald K. Rittgers, "Luther on Private Confession," *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005): 313.

argues that the role of public absolution as unconditional thwarts the binding key.¹⁰⁹ But the absolution Luther identifies is actual absolution since it is from *solus Christus*, not merely churchly talk about unconditional grace. Leif Grane translates Luther on this matter: “Where the revelation of the Father and the Confession of Christ are present, the keys are present.”¹¹⁰ When the priest speaks absolution, it is Christ’s *Absolving Word*, which are words that bring peace even to the dying.¹¹¹ Whether the absolution is public or private, it is unconditionally and actively valid. The *Absolving Word* is fully reliable for the Christian sinner.¹¹² It is “solid and secure,” since God is faithful. The *Absolving Word* proclaimed by the preacher to the sinner is Christ’s absolution, which bestows the full forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

The Break: The Absolving Word Separating Luther from Rome

Luther’s encounter with Cajetan in Augsburg marked the public break with the Roman Catholic Church. Ernst Wolf writes, “The gospel is the crisis in the history of religion” and “the crisis of all religion.”¹¹³ On October 12th of 1518 Luther was called to confess his error to Cajetan on behalf of Pope Leo X, in hopes of reconciliation between

¹⁰⁹ Walter Sundberg, *Worship as Repentance: Lutheran Liturgical Traditions and Catholic Consensus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 166-167.

¹¹⁰ Leif Grane, *Martinus Noster: Luther in the German Reform Movement, 1518-1521* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp Von Zabern, 1994), 60.

¹¹¹ Austras Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying: The Ars Moriendi in the German Reformation (1519-1528)* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 67; Luther, *Luther's Works*, 42:110.

¹¹² Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 164.

¹¹³ Ernst Wolf, *Peregrinatio: Studien Zur Reformatorischen Theologie Und Zum Kirchenprobleme* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954), 13; Ernst Wolf, *Martin Luther: Das Evangelium Und Die Religion, Theologische Existenz Heute 6* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1934), 26.

the monk and the church. Instead Luther confessed the promise and thereby redefined the *Absolving Word* as the crucial matter in the sacrament of penance. Luther gave a presentation on how he understood the error of the *Extravagante*, as distorting the plain meaning of scripture. The *Extravagante* argues for the legal logic of the indulgence system. It states that the merits of the saints create a treasure, though Holy Scripture states that, “God rewards beyond our worth.” This bull stands in contradiction to the promissory and gospel logic of abundant grace in Rom 8:18.¹¹⁴ Luther cites the scripture based promissory logic of Thesis 7 from his *1518 Explanation of the Ninety-Five Thesis or Explanations of the Disputations Concerning Indulgences* as more preferable and authoritative to the philosophical Thomistic legal logic of the bull.¹¹⁵ Luther believes that the power to remit sin resides in the *Absolving Word*, not in a system of checks and balances. He believes the power of the *Absolving Word* resides on Christ’s promise and exercised through the vicar as stated in the scriptures.¹¹⁶ In essence, Luther’s debate with Cajetan centers on the understanding of Matt. 16:19 and is an actual turning point, which marks the break with Rome.¹¹⁷ Defending the idea that works or loyalty to the Pope cannot merit salvation, and so Luther made his confession before Cajetan.

I stated that no one can be justified except by faith... Faith, however, is nothing else than believing what God *promises* and reveals, as in Rom. 4[:3], “Abraham believed God, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” [Cf. Gen. 15:6]. Therefore the Word and faith are both necessary, and without the Word there can

¹¹⁴ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31:265-266.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31:262.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31:100-105.

¹¹⁷ Bayer, “Die Reformatische Wende in Luthers Theologie,” 135, 150.

be no faith, as in Isa. 55 [:11] “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty.”¹¹⁸

Luther describes the function of the Word as promise, which creates faith that justifies the sinner. Since the promise gives assurance and makes one “Christian,” the *Absolving Word* creates the person justified, as opposed to works of supererogation and satisfaction. For this reason, Cajetan claims that Luther is in error.¹¹⁹ It is this confession that Christ’s promise brings justifying judgment, which creates the chasm between Rome and the evangelical voice of Christ’s true church. The *Absolving Word* that promises sinners into the new creation is irreconcilable with Cajetan’s theology.

Cajetan’s formula of penance stems from Thomas Aquinas’ penance theory in *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas divided penance into three parts, operating out of the framework of Aristotle’s theory of justice. The three parts are contrition, confession, and satisfaction.¹²⁰ At this point the sinner becomes the subject of his own work. As Aquinas states, “Satisfaction confers grace in so far as it increases grace, according as it is accomplished.”¹²¹ This form of Aristotelian justice negates any room for a promise to breakthrough in the *Absolving Word*. The unique idea of satisfaction being made by the penitent in order to bestow or merit grace is pivotal in Cajetan’s thinking, which excludes Luther from the Roman Catholic Church.

¹¹⁸ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31:270-271.

¹¹⁹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 50.

¹²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols. (New York: Benzinger Bros., 1948), 5:2557-2559.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 5:2558.

For Luther, the sacrament of penance is divided into three parts: absolution, grace & forgiveness, and faith.¹²² The power does not reside in the priest, but in the *Absolving Word*. The priest drenches the conscience with divine forgiveness and grace that creates and sustains faith by the *Absolving Word*. Since Christ has made the satisfaction and commanded the priest to bestow this gift, the sinner is absolved by the hearing of this *Absolving Word*.

Cajetan critiqued Luther heavily on the issue of faith before love. This view is evident in his 1532 work, *De Fide et Operibus adversos Lutheranos*. Although the document is dated a decade after their meeting in Augsburg, Cajetan pressed mightily on the issues that separate Luther from the Roman Catholic Church. Denis R. Jans states that Cajetan's offenses orbited around Luther's understanding of faith, absolution, and mercy.¹²³ It is specifically the *Absolving Word* that Cajetan rejects. The Cardinal embraced the theological scholastic concept of *fides caritate formata*.¹²⁴ Cajetan believes Luther incorrectly places faith before love and thereby creates a faux absolution.

Luther believes that love cannot exist without faith alone given in the promise of the *Absolving Word*. Only this promise is the water that grows a good tree, which produces love.

Some have ruined their bodies and gone out of their minds thinking by virtue of their works to do away with their sins and soothe their heart...sins must be forgiven before good works can be done. For works do not drive out sin, but the

¹²² Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:11.

¹²³ Denis R. Jans, *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983), 147.

¹²⁴ Bernd Wannewetsch, "Luther's Moral Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 128.

driving out of sin leads to good works. For good works must be done with joyful heart and good conscience toward God, that is out of forgiveness of guilt.¹²⁵

Luther is referring to the traditions of making satisfaction through works, but he is also referring to love itself. A heart cannot become joyful, full of love that produces love, unless it is absolved for being mortally and venially sinful. Otherwise, love would be a human moralistic achievement, i.e. acquisitive love, and not the divine creative gift of God for the neighbor.¹²⁶ Luther believed the absolution comes first, then forgiveness, and finally a faith alone that actually gives love to the neighbor.

Cajetan dismisses the notion that justification is by faith alone. He criticizes Luther for basing faith alone as the justifying agent, and believes that what Luther called faith is simply conviction.¹²⁷ Conviction does not justify, but only love expressed through penance.

A person devoutly approaching any sacrament does believe that by receiving it he is justified by the merits of the passion and death of Christ, or else he would not so approach. But this conviction is not the same in all, since one person devout join to this conviction a doubt, namely, that the contrary be the case.¹²⁸

Cajetan is lost in his own labyrinth of Aristotelian and Thomistic logic, that is, a legal scheme. He believes that there must be levels of conviction, in order for it to effectively merit the forgiveness of sins. Scott Hendrix has observed this lack of assurance that

¹²⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:10.

¹²⁶ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 683.

¹²⁷ Tommaso de Vio Cajetan, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy*, edited by Jared Wicks (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1978), 220-221.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

arrives in Cajetan's sacramental uncertainty.¹²⁹ Cajetan essentially is searching to turn faith into a work.

Luther sees faith alone as a pure gift that directs its gaze toward the true Absolver. Ebeling writes, "Faith alone owes itself to the Word."¹³⁰ The Word is active with faith simultaneously.¹³¹ Luther saw even weak faith as a gift of God, which He uses to drive the sinner to God's mercy alone.

Now if God allows faith to remain weak, one should not despair on that account, but rather recognize it as a trial and temptation [anfechtung] by means of which God tests, prods, and drives a person to cry out all the more and plead for such faith, saying with the father of the possessed boy in the gospel, "O Lord, help my unbelief" [Mark 9:24] and with the apostles, "O Lord increase our faith" [Luke 17:5]. Thus does a person come to learn that everything depends of the grace of God: the sacrament, the forgiveness, and the faith. Giving up all other hope, despairing of himself, he comes to hope exclusively in the grace of God and cling to it without ceasing.¹³²

Ironically, it is a seemingly weak faith that is actually a strong faith when it leans on God's grace. It is through the *Absolving Word*, that a sinner receives faith and is nourished by God.¹³³ Luther says, "But faith itself which is poured into us from hearing about Christ by the Holy Spirit, comprehends Christ."¹³⁴ When the sinner receives the

¹²⁹ Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 59.

¹³⁰ Gerhard Ebeling, "Luther's Understanding of Reality," *Lutheran Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2013): 67.

¹³¹ Ernst Bizer, *Fides Ex Auditu: Eine Untersuchung Über Die Entdeckung Der Gerechtigkeit Gottes Durch Martin Luther* (Neukirchen-Vluyn Neukirchener Verlag, 1958), 118.

¹³² Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:19.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 35:22.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34:153.

absolution, election occurs and faith is given to the sinner. The sinner declares God a liar, if he does not trust in the *Absolving Word*.

Cajetan believed the Pope possessed the keys that made any pronouncement effective. In his 1521 *Divine Institution of the Pontifical Office*, Cajetan expressed that the promise does not reside in the absolution, but rather in the one who makes the absolution.¹³⁵ One of Cajetan's major stumbling blocks is his understanding of Matt. 18:18 as pertaining to the philosophy of church unity under the Petrine office of the Papacy.

By Matt. 18:18 Cajetan found difficulty escaping from the philosophical argument, "having unity under a sole head", which leads to the theological consequence that Peter received the keys of the whole church and the whole church through the keys of Peter.¹³⁶

Since Christ commanded Peter to feed His sheep, so the seat of His office is the rightful owner of the keys. For Cajetan the absolution is valid as long as it flows forth from the seat of Rome, since the key is actually the key to heavenly treasury of merit rather than the direct forgiveness of a sinner.

Luther believed that the *Absolving Word* alone makes the absolution effective because it is based on Christ and His promise. This is a break with the medieval Roman understanding of attaining God's absolution through *imitatio Christi*.¹³⁷ He sees Christ's words as effective. First, Luther believed that the keys of Peter were not a promised

¹³⁵ Cajetan, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy*, 110.

¹³⁶ Gerhard Hennig, *Cajetan Und Luther: Ein Historischer Beitrag Zur Begegnung Von Thomism Und Reformation* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1966), 95-96.

¹³⁷ Irene Dingel, "True Faith, Christian Living, and a Blessed Death.' Sixteenth-Century Funeral Sermons as Evangelical Proclamation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2013): 399, 413.

authority, but a promised service and gift for sinners.¹³⁸ Secondly, the keys are for sinners to receive by another forgiven sinner as promised in Matt. 18:18.¹³⁹ Thirdly, the authority rests in Christ's *Absolving Word*. For when one confesses, He confesses to Christ through a sinner. Fourthly, Christ is the absolver and not Peter.

This ought especially to be taught, that confession's not made to man but to Christ. Likewise it isn't man who absolves but Christ. But few understand this. Today I replied to the Bohemians, who insist that God alone remits sins and are offended by my little book on the keys. Wherefore one should teach that men make confession to Christ, and Christ absolves through the mouth of the minister, for the minister's mouth is the mouth of Christ and the minister's ear is the ear of Christ. It's to the Word and the command that one should pay attention, not to the person. Christ sits there, Christ listens, Christ answers, not a man.¹⁴⁰

At the Augsburg Proceedings, Luther hammered this point before Cajetan that Christ's promise makes the absolution effective, "in the face of the peril of eternal damnation, we must believe the words of Christ: "Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."¹⁴¹ Plainly reading scripture for what it says, Luther saw that Christ's promise and His presence alone makes the absolution effective and complete.

Cajetan believed that in penance, works of love established a kind of faith in the believer. His argument is taken from 1 John 4:16-19. He states that since God is love, sinners must also have love infused in them before faith, in order to generate a proper faith.¹⁴² Here we see that faith is not given by God, but rather awakened from within, since it is a property of the soul. Cajetan, like Aquinas, believed that grace is a quality

¹³⁸ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:16.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 35:22.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 54:394.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31:271.

¹⁴² Cajetan, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy*, 224.

placed in the soul as opposed to Luther's understanding of grace as a disposition of God toward the sinner.¹⁴³ These two systematic understandings are irreconcilable, one premised on the law and the other on the gospel.

It is evident therefore that the ordinary teaching of the Church is true that the forgiveness of sins occurs not by uninformed faith but faith formed by faith informed by charity. The normative texts teaching that we are made righteous by faith are consequently to be understood in the precise sense of faith informed by that friendship toward God, which we call charity.¹⁴⁴

On this point, Cajetan explains that if we do not have a faith that stems from a perfect love for God, then justifying faith does not exist. Forgiveness of sins must come after love and cannot precede love. Therefore, works are demanded before forgiveness in order for the forgiveness to be of any effect.

Luther believed that the *Absolving Word* gives faith and creates love for God and neighbor. Luther states in his 1536 *The Disputation Concerning Justification*, "But faith itself which is poured into us from hearing about Christ by the Holy Spirit, comprehends Christ."¹⁴⁵ Luther also states, "For God gives us his grace freely without cost; so we should also serve him freely without cost."¹⁴⁶ Luther understood that to serve the neighbor was to serve God. Rooted in God by faith and therefore in His divine love, causes love then to flow to the neighbor.¹⁴⁷ The works for the neighbor are not salvific,

¹⁴³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2:1132-1135; Philipp Melanchthon, "Loci Communes Theologica," in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1521), 87.

¹⁴⁴ Cajetan, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy*, 225.

¹⁴⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 34:153.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 35:17.

¹⁴⁷ Karl-Heinz Zur Mühlen, *Nos Extra Nos: Luthers Theologie Zwischen Mystik Und Scholastik*, ed. Gerhard Ebeling, *Beiträge Zur Historischen Theologie* 46 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohler [Paul Siebeck], 1972), 200-201.

but emerge from a faith rooted in salvation that is established by the *Absolving Word*.¹⁴⁸ Once the conscience is freed from meditating on its own contrition and satisfaction, it is then able to love the neighbor.

Cajetan's system of penance exhibits partial forgiveness, which needs the addition of satisfaction for sins in order to fulfill the law. In his 1531 writing, *Four Lutheran Errors*, he divides forgiveness into two spheres, full and partial. He views some instances where Christ gives full forgiveness, and other instances where satisfaction needs to be made. In the end, satisfaction is the finale to the confession because it confers the grace needed to assuage the guilt.

We also read, however, that in other cases God forgives sin without removing all need of punishment... Since therefore God at times forgives sin while leaving an obligation of punishment after forgiveness, we must consequently say that God at times forgives sin without removing the full debt of punishment due for the sin. Thus the need arises to complete the remaining punishment not remitted when God forgave sin.¹⁴⁹

Continuing into theodicy, Cajetan concludes that suffering of some sort is making satisfaction for the forgiveness uttered by the priest. God is not pleased and forgiveness is not completed until the transgressor through satisfaction atones for punishment. There must be works befitting penance in order for the penance to be real and effective.¹⁵⁰ Cajetan's model of penance makes forgiveness only as effective as the perceived punishment or satisfaction. Satisfaction for sin is found in the penance, as opposed to the *Absolving Word*.

¹⁴⁸ Carter Lindberg, "Luther's Struggle with Social-Ethical Issue," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 166.

¹⁴⁹ Cajetan, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy*, 212-213.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

Luther contended that the *Absolving Word* alone is authoritative because of its divine force, which eliminates the need for satisfaction. Luther understands perfect contrition and satisfaction to be impossible for human beings. Contrition is impossible due to the darkened conscience, while satisfaction is always tainted with the carnality of the human will.¹⁵¹ Reconciliation between God and humanity cannot depend on human will due to its frailty and infection of original sin.

Therefore if you believe the word of the priest when he absolves you (that is, when he looses you in the name of Christ and in the power of his words, saying, “I absolve you from your sins”), then your sins are assuredly absolved also before God, before all angels and all creatures-not for your sake, or for the priest’s sake, but for the sake of the very Word of Christ, who cannot be lying to you when he says, “Whatever you loose...shall be loosed.”¹⁵²

The *Absolving Word* makes and constitutes the satisfaction of God. James Arne Nestingen states, “In the direct and personal declaration of the forgiveness of sin in Christ, the gospel overlaps the law, both confirming its accusation and bringing the law to its end.”¹⁵³ This constituting proclamation places the hearer toward the face of the crucified and resurrected Christ. The sinner no longer needs to seek to satisfy God, since Christ completed this work and grants us the benefits (Rom. 5:1; 10:4). The promise in the *Absolving Word* ends theodicy and provides divine satisfaction.

Cajetan believed that a good steward of God’s keys gives absolution when worthy contrition is visible. In his *Augsburg Treatises*, Cajetan argued that a priest does not grant absolution unless he has discerned that the repentant sinner is worthy. He states, “The

¹⁵¹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:18-22.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 35:13.

¹⁵³ James Arne Nestingen, “Preaching Repentance,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (1989): 260.

church does not forgive before God forgives, as if God followed after the judgment of the church.”¹⁵⁴ Therefore, the awareness of venial and mortal sins proves God’s work on the sinner, which merits forgiveness.

Luther viewed good stewardship of God’s keys as pronouncing the *Absolving Word*, whether or not one appears worthy of forgiveness. The command of Matt. 18:18 to do this work is every Christian’s vocation.¹⁵⁵ In this way, to not pronounce or believe Christ’s words is to call Christ a liar. Luther identifies disbelief in the *Absolving Word* as the grievous sin against the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁶ Christians are commanded to use the keys and be good stewards by indulgently absolving sinners.

Cajetan believed that works are meritorious towards eternal life, as explained in his assessment of Baptism. He states, “God is by far more willing to admit the good deeds of men as meritorious of some reward for himself.”¹⁵⁷ Cajetan’s understanding of God’s nature and justice is aligned with Aristotle’s distributive justice theory.¹⁵⁸ In this way charity is given in Baptism, but must grow in adult faith for the baptized to be saved.

As it pertained to Christ’s excellence also to gain eternal life for his body, glory for his name, and the like, by his own merit, so it belongs to the dignity of a member of Christ to cooperate with his Head in attaining eternal life. “The most divine thing of all is to become a cooperator with God,” says Dionysius in the *Heavenly Hierarchies*, chapter 3. Thus, you see it is not superfluous for us to merit eternal life, for this is to make eternal life our due in another manner or by

¹⁵⁴ Cajetan, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy*, 65.

¹⁵⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:22.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 35:14-15.

¹⁵⁷ Cajetan, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy*, 230.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

an additional right, just as Christ merited his exaltation, making it due to himself by an additional right.¹⁵⁹

For justice to be served, one must develop an inheritance that belongs to him or herself.

One must create one's own justified existence in generating, working, and growing in charity.

Luther contended that the *Absolving Word* in baptism creates and grants the new life. This can be seen in *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) where Luther discusses infant baptism. Luther demands faith must call on baptism, and then he makes one more confession.

In contradiction to what has been said, some might cite the *baptism of infants* who do not comprehend the promise of God and cannot have faith of baptism; so that therefore either faith is not necessary or else infant baptism is without effect. Here I say what all say: Infants are aided by the faith of others, namely, those who bring them for baptism. For the Word of God is powerful enough, when uttered, to change even a godless heart, which is no less unresponsive and helpless than any infant. So through the prayer of the believing church which presents it, a prayer to which all things are possible [Mark 9:23] the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by in-poured faith.¹⁶⁰

For Luther, salvation is granted when the Christian utters the *Absolving Word* to the sinner. This word is performative. This is why he confesses in his *Large Catechism*, “This is the simplest way to put it: the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves.”¹⁶¹ It is the *Absolving Word* with the water that performs forgiveness, creates the new creation, and saves the sinner.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 233.

¹⁶⁰ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 36:73.

¹⁶¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 459.

This logic of penance finally leads Cajetan to assert that satisfactory works pardon sins. Putting aside the evaluation of moral and venial sins, Cajetan explains that none of our works satisfy for guilt, nor do works committed in mortal sin satisfy God's justice. Yet, works emerging out of love can clean the sinful record of a human being.¹⁶² In a sense, it is love and its expression through works that justify a human being before God.

Luther believed that the *Absolving Word* pronounces satisfaction. Not because the *Absolving Word* only remits a debt, but because the Word creates the new reality of a righteous sinner. Since all works are tainted with carnality, they cannot endure the righteousness of God. The promise must come from outside of the sinner. Therefore, the divine proclamation of forgiveness creates the forgiven reality.

That is, "you have power to speak the word over the sinner, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' and it is valid as if I Myself were speaking." Just as in the beginning, when God said, "Let there be light" [Gen 1:3], and then it was certainly made, even so certainly here you will have remission of sins.¹⁶³

The *Absolving Word* declares and creates the new reality where salvation with God is experienced. Bayer states, "Nothing more is needed for salvation, 'for where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation' (Small Catechism): salvation is to be understood as final and total communion with God."¹⁶⁴ The *Absolving Word* removes the sinner as the subject of the satisfaction, and declares God as the one who begins and completes the satisfaction through His promise.

¹⁶² Cajetan, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy*, 236.

¹⁶³ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 69:415.

¹⁶⁴ Oswald Bayer, "Theses on the Doctrine of Justification," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (2008):

Cajetan's rejection of Luther's idea of the promise through the *Absolving Word* created the cataclysmic break between the Roman Church and evangelical theology. The faith alone given by God in the *Absolving Word* leans on Christ alone. Though Bayer rightfully places great weight on the promise in assessing Luther's theology, it is very specifically the *Absolving Word* received personally that shapes Luther's theology toward a reformational turn. This is a particular word, not a category of speech. Luther then began to redefine scripture, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the sacrament of penance from the matter of the gospel, the *Absolving Word*. When one hears the *Absolving Word* one hears and receives Christ and His benefits. Though promise is the proper category for the *Absolving Word*, it is the *Absolving Word* itself that bestowed to Luther the promise and unveiled the gospel impact of scripture.

CHAPTER 2
PASSIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS AS THE ENSUING EVANGELICAL CONCLUSION
OF THE *ABSOLVING WORD*

Introduction

In this chapter it will be argued that the reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* moved Luther to the understanding that righteousness from God was only to be passively received. This forced Luther to radically reconstruct major pieces of medieval Christian theology. In order to identify the crucial matter of Luther's reformational turn a contrast with the scholastics is best seen in relation with the major figure of medieval theology, Aquinas, in so far as Aquinas is christianizing Aristotle's basic structure. Afterall, Luther knew enough of Aquinas' interpretative theory to cite him as the main problem during his dispute with Cajetan.¹ Historians are not clear to what extent Luther read or did not read Aquinas, but what is clear is that Luther is making a direct break with scholastic theology as he himself had taught it by teaching the ethics of Aristotle. In fact, Luther said you cannot be a theologian and follow Aristotle at the same time.² Since Aquinas was so dependent upon the ethics of Aristotle in his scholasticism, a systematic comparison is called for, much as we find with Otto Pesch, who thinks Luther misunderstood Aquinas, but recognized how important the comparison was. The comparison is an exegetical-

¹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31:262.

² *Ibid.*, 31:12.

dogmatic one, not an exegetical-historical one based on direct responses of Luther to Aquinas. Luther abandoned the legal opinion that righteousness arrives by the law, since he understood that the *Absolving Word* settled the matter by way of the promise. Luther is using a dialectical theology that distinguishes law and gospel, and Aquinas is using a monoethical theology in which the law is the structure of the gospel. Informed by the legal opinion, Aquinas assumes that an active righteousness achieves salvation with God. On the other hand, Luther saw that God desires to bestow a passive righteousness because God's eternal will is the gospel and not the law, as expressed in the *Absolving Word*. The *Absolving Word* bestows a certainty of predestination that scholastic theology was not able to provide because it made salvation contingent on the cooperation of the human will with the law. The *Absolving Word* places the sinner in a certain and fixed time with God under passive righteousness, so the sinner no longer has to guess when he or she will be in union with God. The *Absolving Word* brings the passive righteousness into the present. Likewise the sinner no longer wonders when he or she will be located in God's kingdom, since the *Absolving Word* gives the passive righteousness that unites sinner with God in the present pronouncement. This moment of *Simul* is the Christian reality that affirms that the sinner is predestined as God's forgiven sinner. Luther's encounter with the *Absolving Word* made him realize that true grace is compromised under the legal scheme. The *Absolving Word* itself rejects the assumed free will and shatters the legal scheme as it declares no contrition or satisfaction pleases God, but only His evangelical absolution. Under Aquinas' legal opinion, grace loses its unconditional nature since it is dependent on the human will for union with God to be achieved. Luther realized that passive righteousness is true Christian righteousness, where *sola gratia* is

true grace, which is heard in the declaration of the *Absolving Word*. Luther's reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* confesses and bestows the true Christian righteousness as passive righteousness.

Discovery of the Absolving Word as the Discovery of the Law and the Gospel

Luther's discovery of the *Absolving Word* was at the same time the distinction between the two words of God, law and gospel. Hearing the evangelical absolution, one that required no contrition or satisfaction to make the absolution valid, helped Luther understand that the absolution was more than pardoning sin or moral failure, it actually brought eternal life. This reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* also made Luther realize that the only righteousness from God is one that could not be achieved by human effort, but rather could only be received through the hearing of the absolution. This passive righteousness predestinated sinners as God's own, establishing a certainty of salvation that was not dependent on a cooperative will, but rather established by true grace. Thomas Aquinas searched for this pure form of grace, but he could not find it, as will be evident later in this chapter. This true grace found Luther in the *Absolving Word*, and for him it changed everything.

As Luther began to distinguish the law from the gospel, he found that the promise is a different kind of thing entirely from the command, though both are words of God. However, faith is designed to rest on the promise alone. This promise given in the *Absolving Word* fully justifies, sanctifies, and creates the sinner as a child of God.³

³ Ibid., 31:349.

In this *Absolving Word* Luther lays out that the passive righteousness given in this absolution is more than pardon for bad moral performance.

Now is this sick man well? The fact is that he is both sick and well at the same time. He is sick in fact, but he is well because of the sure promise of the doctor, whom he trusts and who has reckoned him as already cured, because he is sure that he will cure him; for he has already begun to cure him and no longer reckons to him a sickness unto death. In the same way Christ, our Samaritan, has brought His half-dead man into the inn to be cared for, and He has begun to heal him, having promised him the most complete cure unto eternal life, and He does not impute his sins, that is, his wicked desires, unto death, but in the meantime in the hope of the promised recovery He prohibits him from doing or omitting things by which his cure might be impeded and his sin, that is, his concupiscence, might be increased. Now, is he perfectly righteous? No, for he is at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man; a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God that He will continue to deliver him from sin until He has completely cured him.⁴

This *Absolving Word* gives more than a pardon for a bad act. The *Absolving Word* bestows eternal life. The promise is the freeing gospel because what it frees you from is not just a bad act or a poor use of active righteousness, but from death and the law itself.

Luther's new category of passive righteousness is the ensuing evangelical conclusion of his reformational turn of the *Absolving Word*. This new category contrasts itself from the popular medieval scholasticism of Aquinas and from Aristotelian logic. In the 1535 *Galatians Commentary*, we see this new category in contrast to the idea of active righteousness. The ensuing evangelical conclusion that had to be drawn from Luther's encounter with the *Absolving Word* is the confession of passive righteousness, which removes the *deus absconditus* and reveals Christ alone to a sinner.

Those who hear God's unthwartable will in Christ for them no longer are merely in the room of faith, or have a place for faith, but are fixed in faith, and are certain

⁴ Ibid., 25:260.

that the work of Christ is for them. They no longer speculate about God's will in general because they have it in particular.⁵

Consequently, certain Aristotelian categories must be removed or reordered from the metaphysical explorations and explanations on how one is made just before God.

Aquinas intentionally engages and embraces the Aristotelian scheme, which will be evident later in this chapter, while Luther critiqued the categories because they elevated the free will as the dependent factor in salvation, rather than Christ's will. Contrary to Otto Pesch's hope, Luther and Aquinas hold two distinctive theologies that cannot be inner mixed due to one's rejection of and the other's embracement of Aristotle.⁶ Aquinas' theology is driven by the law, while Luther's theology is driven by the *Absolving Word* that distinguishes law and gospel. The *Absolving Word* reveals Christ's will for sinners in the bestowing of passive righteousness.

The *Absolving Word* pushed Luther to distinguish two kinds of righteousness. This was and is revolutionary; as it has been assumed in religion as well as philosophy that there is only one kind of righteousness, and that is righteousness is an activity. The active righteousness and passive righteousness are literally separated and categorized by the *Absolving Word*. By 1509 Luther was an expert on Aristotelian moral ethics. While lecturing on *Nicomachean Ethics* at the University of Erfurt, Luther grew very critical of scholastic theology, especially Aristotle's contribution, as Luther began to understand life through the logic of *Absolving Word*, i.e. Christ alone.

It is an error to say that no man can become a theologian without Aristotle....Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one

⁵ Steven D. Paulson, "Luther on the Hidden God," *Word & World* 19, no. 4 (1999): 369.

⁶ Otto Hermann Pesch, "Freiheitsbegriff Und Freiheitslehre Bei Thomas Von Aquin Und Luther," *Catholica* 17 (1963): 197, 241-244.

without Aristotle...Briefly, the whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light.⁷

One does not become a theologian by mastering the law, as practiced by Aristotle. Rather, one who confesses and pronounces the *Absolving Word* to other sinners is a theologian. Lastly, one is a theologian who replaces the law with the *Absolving Word* as the overarching systematic category. For this reason, it was Luther's emerging theological conviction that theology and philosophy begin with God, and more specifically with the God man, Christ Jesus.

The Legal Opinion in Aquinas

Aquinas' theology operates from a righteousness achieved solely from the law. The emergence of the *opinio legis* is what happens when you have only the law to work with in theology. The promise does not exist as the primary matter. This legal opinion assumes that the law is the only, or at least primary, word of God. Consequently everything must flow from it. According to this scheme, if there is a law one must be able to do it. "Ought" implies "can" according to this opinion of the law. This concept is best captured throughout the content of Luther's argument in his 1535 *Galatians Commentary* as well as Melancthon's *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*. Luther cites that the legalistic opinion as a broken natural human faculty.

For they suppose that the function of the Law is to justify. And that is the general opinion of human reason in all the sophists and in the whole world about religion and about righteousness that it is achieved by the works of the Law. Reason will not permit this extremely dangerous opinion to be taken away from it by any means at all, because it does not understand the righteousness of faith.⁸

⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31:12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26:307.

Melanchthon reflects this same theological line of reasoning.

In human eyes, works are very impressive. Human reason naturally admires them; because it sees only works and neither looks at nor understands faith, it dreams that the merit of these works brings forgiveness of sins and justification. This legalistic opinion clings by nature to the minds of men, and it cannot be driven out unless we are divinely taught. The mind must be turned from the fleshly opinions to the Word of God. We see that the Gospel and the promise of Christ are presented to us.⁹

The legalistic opinion is the starting premise for Aquinas. Aquinas's system of thought is ruled by the opinion that the eternal law is the essence of God. Therefore, to be in union with God one must be in union with the law. Aquinas inherits this opinion from Aristotle, with the assumption that the law is eternal and the essence of things divine. Since man has been given a will that is designed to work with grace, becoming a better moral creature is the road to achieving justification in the legal scheme. This position is not unique to Aquinas, as it was part of the legal mindset of the medieval church.¹⁰ However, Aquinas' logic as reflected in his *Summa Theologica*, certainly affirmed this natural conviction of humanity. This active righteousness presupposes as well that the law is the overarching systematic category that operates over the will and grace. This metaphysical construct asserts that since humans are under law and must therefore possess a free will to fulfill the law, everyone has the potential to arrive at justification. Robert Bertram claims that the *opinio iustiti*, plus law, equals the opinion of the law.¹¹ This opinion of the law is the main presumption that informs Aquinas' convictions on the ability of will to

⁹ Theodore G. Tappert, ed. *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 146.

¹⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 246.

¹¹ Robert W. Bertram, "Human Freedom in a Lutheran Theory of Education," *The Cresset* 22, no. 9 (1959): 16-20.

work sufficiently with grace, in order to fulfill the law in the form of active righteousness.

The Assumption of Active Righteousness

Aristotle assumed that the habit of virtue creates a virtuous human, which brings happiness. That habit drives the active life.

Now excellence is a habit of the soul. And there is such a thing as the exercise and use of it; so that the end will be its activity and use. Happiness therefore will consist in living in accordance with the excellences. Since then the best good is happiness, and this is the end, and the complete end is an activity, it follows that it is by living in accordance with the excellences that we shall be happy and shall have the best good.¹²

For Aristotle, the human will possess power to inform that habit and create it as active.

The active righteousness establishes the human as just in the eyes of society. Aristotle sees active righteousness as the way to justify one's self and form just character.

Aquinas adopts Aristotle's theme and implants it deeply into his understanding of theology. Mirroring the Aristotelian scheme and system, Aquinas operates on the basis of an inference, "Since God is the greatest, we ought to give him the greatest love."¹³

Though he poses this as a point of discussion, he affirms its assertion.¹⁴ Here Aquinas replaces in Aristotle's scheme the category of "happiness" with "God." Nevertheless, it is still the same legal construct, urging the will into habit toward the *telos* of virtue and God. Fergus Kerr thinks Aquinas was more indebted to the church fathers than

¹² Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2:1873.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, ed. *Aquinas on Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, Nature and Grace (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 142.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

Aristotle.¹⁵ Yet the church fathers too were influenced by Aristotle, even if Plato was the greater influence. Kerr recognizes that Aquinas expresses the construction of his thought within an Aristotelian grid, while inserting Christian concepts. For example, Aquinas argued: “Again every virtue is possessed as a habit which is an accident... Human virtue therefore consists in the attainment of the rule of human action.”¹⁶ Virtue is possessed as a habit and therefore requires an active righteousness to attain it. But what is more important than virtue is that both Aquinas and Aristotle affirm the eternal law as the overarching category in understanding the nature of God.

Aquinas’ logic concludes that Christian righteousness is actively seeking its attainment and is incomplete in present time. Aquinas is concerned with the power of the will to choose between objects that are related to its goal, which is the supernatural goal of God Himself.¹⁷ This is the pivotal problem with Aquinas’ systematic thought; A theologian using philosophy at its base, which assumes the law as the one common essence of the theology. In other words, having only one righteousness that functions only as a law and so demands an active human response for righteousness. As M.D. Chenu states, “Greek reason is adopted as a tool, a simple tool, yet an authentically qualified tool because of the coherence of nature and grace.”¹⁸ Chenu believes that the

¹⁵ Fergus Kerr, “Thomas Aquinas,” in *The Medieval Theologians*, ed. G. R. Evans (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 207.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Aquinas on Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, 346-347.

¹⁷ Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 251; Harry McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 144; James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1974), 222.

¹⁸ M. D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas Aquinas* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), 311.

elements of Christianity were preserved, and yet Aquinas' voice and vocabulary mimics Aristotle's scheme, replacing confessional logic. Aquinas is not able to understand the biblical theme of justification without inserting the Aristotelian trope of *liberum arbitrium*.

It would seem that the justification of the ungodly does not take place in an instant, but successively, since, as already stated (A. 3), for the justification of the ungodly there is required a movement of free will. Now the act of free-will is choice, which requires the deliberation of counsel as stated above (Q. 13, A. 1).¹⁹

Here the free will operates as a factor in receiving the grace that justifies a sinner. This grace has to be in constant operation with the will in order for one to remain just. In other words, there is no certainty or assurance because salvation is not dependent on *sola gratia*, but is dependent on the sinner's will and its cooperation with grace. God's cause and human cause dance together.²⁰ In this scheme, humanity's will merits movement toward God, even as it remains in synergy. Yet if the will fails, though God's grace prevails, man's election does not. According to Aquinas, an active righteousness is the habit that proves that one is currently in a state of right standing with God.

Both Aristotle and Aquinas believe that it is the habit of the active righteousness by way of the will that justifies one's being. For Aristotle it establishes the human's character as just, while for Aquinas it establishes the sinner as just before God, though incomplete. However for Luther, dismissing Aristotle on matters of righteousness brought him to a deeper understanding of the promise.

When Luther came to the gospel, the difference between the Bible and Aristotelian influence became clear. He could see that if one followed Aristotle

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2:1149.

²⁰ Antoine Cote, "Siger of Brabant and Thomas Aquinas on Divine Power and the Separability of Accidents," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16, no. 4 (2008): 685-686.

one could never understand the biblical meaning of righteousness... Only when he discarded the philosophical notion of justice could he read the Bible properly and understand the Word correctly... that is God gives man His whole righteousness, everything that He possesses; and faith thus means to receive God's righteousness.²¹

The *Absolving Word* reconstructs Aquinas' and Aristotle's understanding of righteousness. It is neither something earned teleologically nor is it something that emerges from within, but rather it is given from God *extra nos* and *ex nihilo* to sinners. The sole habit of active righteousness is replaced by passive righteousness.

The Exodus from Active to Passive Righteousness

With the insertion of the *Absolving Word* as the motor and axel to Luther's theology, active righteousness is moved out of the relationship between God and man and designated solely to human relationships. Luther states, "it would be better to understand it as an exodus from virtues to the grace of Christ."²² Humanity shares in the common acceptance of the category of an active righteousness, but the passive righteousness is uniquely Christian. Removing the obsession of whether or not one is virtuous, the *Absolving Word* presses one to Christ Himself who possesses and bestows all required righteousness. The *Absolving Word* creates the saved sinner, bestows the passive righteousness, and removes uncertainty. In this way, active righteousness is replaced categorically with passive righteousness.

The *Absolving Word* structures Luther's argument such that Christian righteousness is purely passive. Luther separates passive righteousness from active

²¹ Ragnar Bring, *How God Speaks to Us: Dynamics of the Living Word* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 22.

²² Luther, *Luther's Works*, 25:137.

righteousness, and is able to do so because the *Absolving Word* is the real word that creates a creature as righteous.

First of all, we must speak of the argument, that is, of the issue with which Paul deals in this epistle. The argument is this: Paul wants to establish the doctrine of faith, grace, the forgiveness of sins or Christian righteousness, so that we may have a perfect knowledge and know the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness.²³

Faith, grace, and forgiveness of sins are all purely passive gifts. They are not attainable by human faculties. They are only established by the breaking in of the *Absolving Word*. Luther identifies these as the components to Christian righteousness. It is purely passive.

Identifying Christian righteousness as passive, Luther excludes active righteousness from the realm of justification between God and humanity. There is no longer a requirement for a sinner to work contrition or move toward satisfaction, since now the *Absolving Word* encounters the sinner and bestows the promise.

Over and above all these there is the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, which is to be distinguished most carefully from all the others. For they are all contrary to this righteousness, both because they proceed from the laws of emperors, the traditions of the pope, and the commandments of God, and because they consist in our works and can be achieved by us with “purely natural endowments,” as the scholastics teach, or from a gift of God. For these kinds of the righteousness of works, too, are gifts of God, as are all the things we have. But this most excellent righteousness, the righteousness of faith, which God imputes to us through Christ without works, is neither political nor ceremonial nor legal nor work-righteousness but is quite the opposite; it is a merely passive righteousness, while all the others, listed above, are active. For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness “passive.” This is a righteousness hidden in a mystery, which the world does not understand.²⁴

²³ Ibid., 26:24.

²⁴ Ibid., 26:24-25.

The *Absolving Word* uniquely effects justification. Bestowing an unconditional absolution upon a sinner makes the Christian righteousness uniquely passive, which is something anathema according to the assumptions of the law. All the benefits of Christ in time and space are placed upon the believer and sealed by a promise. Anders Nygren is correct in explaining that the eschatological moment of the Christian witness in the gospel is “now.”²⁵ The *Absolving Word* breaks into the “now” not “later,” bringing Christ alone and His righteousness. The *Absolving Word* extinguishes any form of active righteousness in the relationship between Christ and humanity.

The passive righteousness only arrives through the *Absolving Word*. The passive righteousness is not transmitted by any means other than the proclamation by an apostolic absolver to the sinner. Luther states, “In other words, this is the righteousness of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, which we do not perform but receive, which we do not have but accept, when God the Father grants it to us through Jesus Christ.”²⁶ The granting happens through the mode of an oral absolution.

Without a preacher there is no good news, no gospel, and so no distinction between law and gospel. The arrival of the preacher is the sine qua non for faith, since “faith comes by hearing” and no one can hear without a preacher (Romans 10).²⁷

If there is no *Absolving Word*, then there is no bestowing of the passive righteousness upon a sinner. The two are inseparable. The gospel only arrives in the “spoken word.”

And the gospel should really not be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called his teaching not

²⁵ Anders Nygren, *The Gospel of God* (London: SCM Press, 1949), 46.

²⁶ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:26.

²⁷ Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 27.

Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth.²⁸

The oral *Absolving Word* proclaimed by a preacher is the necessary voice to perform real justification. A performative word fits only with a passive receiver in the case of the absolution. Here the use of Anglo-philosophy of language reaches its limits of understanding. The reason for this is that what is being performed by the word of forgiveness is to bind bondage, to release a sinner from “the sinner’s self-deception”, which cannot be done by an act of will.²⁹ The *Absolving Word* is the “spoken word” that may arrive in various grammatical forms, and yet bears the forgiveness as passive righteousness upon the hearer.

Qualified Predestination vs. Predestination as Election

Predestination for the early Luther was a frightful issue, until he learned what it was to have God preached, rather than unpreached. A preached God actually acts to elect, rather than leave the sinner to muse epistemologically about the meaning of election. The question of election was the source of Luther’s famous *Anfechtung*, i.e., election based on a form of active righteousness that creates uncertainty. Even for a very accomplished monk like himself, that idea was “wretched torment.”³⁰ How do I become perfect in order to be elected? This fear of damnation could never be quelled until the election broke

²⁸ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. David Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 132; Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:123.

²⁹ Notger Slenczka, “Luther's Anthropology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 225.

³⁰ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 54:104.

through in the word of forgiveness.³¹ When he connected the *Absolving Word* with election Luther understood what it truly was to have the conscience put to rest by God.

The reason that Luther had been so troubled is that he understood very well the scholastic theology and its consequences. For example, Aquinas' theology affirms a predestination that is contingent on the performance of the synergy between the will and grace. Aquinas asserts that God predestines, "I answer that, Predestination is not anything in the predestined; but only in the person who predestines. We have said above that predestination is a part of providence."³² Yet the free will still has the ability to sabotage one's election, creating an uncertainty of belonging. This is the existing contradiction in Aquinas' theology. On the one hand, God's predestination is absolute, and yet on the other, the non-cooperation of the will with grace is evidencing an absence of predestination according to Aquinas' scheme. Aquinas wants to get one righteousness in relation to the law.

I answer: since the free will with which he is naturally endowed can turn either to good or to evil, there are two ways in which a man may obtain from God perseverance in good. He may obtain it through the consummation of grace whereby his will is finally turned to good, as it all shall be in heaven. He may also obtain it through a divine moving which inclines him to good till the end.³³

The division of mortal and venial sins only makes the matter worse. Aquinas states, "Wherefore such sins are called mortal, as being irreparable."³⁴ Finally, he asserts that fruits of the active righteousness reveal one as just or unjust. "The merits of the elect will

³¹ Ibid., 54:334.

³² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1:126.

³³ Aquinas, *Aquinas on Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, 216.

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2:980.

be discussed, not to remove the uncertainty of their beatitude from the hearts of those who are to be judged, but that it may be made manifest to us that their good merits outweigh their evil merits, and thus God's justice be proved.”³⁵ The combination of irreparable sins and evil merits, which may arise in one’s conscience as revealed in the quality of the active righteousness brings uncertainty. This understanding unsettled Luther’s spirit about his confessions and his standing with God.³⁶ For Luther, he constantly looked to the cooperation of his will with grace, which drove him into deep despair since it had no point at which the goal would be reached. For Luther, the unconditional *Absolving Word* settled the issue of where and to whom he belonged. According to Aquinas’ theory, if the will does not press towards good, then it does not have grace and God’s predestination is brought into question. In this legal scheme, the sinner is not able to locate oneself with or without God because God is hidden.

An absolver delivering the *Absolving Word* executes God’s predestinating aim of granting passive righteousness. The absolver is the true messenger of the *Absolving Word* and thus places the absolver as a necessary component of the apostolic succession.

He delivers God’s predestination in the form of an unthwartable promise that is not dependent upon the righteousness of the receiver. This is what makes Apostle the most powerful office in the world... When church people confess in their creeds that they believe in an apostolic church, they are not referring to bishops or kings, but to the reason Paul wrote the letter to the Romans-which is to give the content of the of the true preaching of the New Testament.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., 5:2931.

³⁶ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 54:104.

³⁷ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 27.

This aspect of the *Absolving Word* is radically different from the Medieval Roman Catholic metaphysical construct. Luther simply replaces the See of Peter, with a preacher. Volker Leppin mentions that the mystical medieval notion of “nearby grace”, which creates a new immediacy without the need of a clergyman, was formative in Luther’s early doctrine of justification.³⁸ But that mystical notion had to be gotten over. This changed the direction of divine activity, and the means. A true Absolver, i.e. a preacher, was needed to mediate the *Absolving Word*. The *Absolving Word* works the forgiveness of sins and not the preacher, though the preacher is used to speak this word.³⁹ A true predestination is not theorized about, but it actually enters time and space through the absolver’s voice, “*Te Absolvo.*” The *Absolving Word’s* bestowal of passive righteousness accomplishes God’s predestinating act.

Uncertain Time of Salvation vs. the Certain Time of Salvation

Aquinas’ affirmation of the will working with grace produced a necessary uncertainty between God and the sinner that could have no end, certainly not in this life. Salvation has no concluding assurance because it is not complete until the synergy of the will and grace, affirming the free will, achieves its proper goal.

It seems that justification of the ungodly is not instantaneous but gradual. For it was said in Art. 3 that justification requires a movement of the free will, and the action of the free will is that of choice, which presupposes thoughtful deliberation, as was said in Q. 13, Art. I. Now deliberation implies a certain amount of

³⁸ Leppin, “Luther's Transformation of Medieval Thought: Continuity and Discontinuity,” 122-123.

³⁹ Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to the Reformation 1483-1521*, 359.

reasoning, and reasoning involves a degree of succession. It seems, therefore, that the justification of the ungodly is gradual.⁴⁰

Aquinas' theory creates uncertainty about God's judgment and its relationship to time. When is the sinner declared just before God? How long before the sinner meets his or her end in and with God? Since choice and grace must work constantly by the power of the free will, there is no certainty when one is finally justified. Constant action must be volitional. There must be an active righteousness, which qualifies a current state of justification, which is ultimately unsecured. The absence of the *Absolving Word* takes certainty of time out of the relationship between Christ and the sinner.

For Luther, certainty of time with God is established by the *Absolving Word* and comes by passive righteousness. This is simply because when God speaks into time, the new reality is established in time, while bringing an end to other possibilities. For Luther, human choice plays no role in the attaining or compromising passive righteousness. It is only instituted for the sinner by the pure choice of God Himself, rather than as a virtue of natural human rights. Predestination is horrible as long as one is trying to be actively righteous. Only when it is the passive righteousness that is received, does it become the sweetest word. As Luther states, "we do not fulfill the Law even when we fulfill it."⁴¹ No matter how much time a sinner has to focus on the working of the assumed free will with grace, the sinner will never be able to perfect an active righteousness. There will always be margin for error. However, the nature of passive righteousness is timeless, as the *Absolving Word* is not conditioned by time. Paul Tillich noted that there are two types of

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *Aquinas on Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, 193.

⁴¹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:28.

time that exist for human beings. *Chronos* is chronological time and *kairos* is the “right time” with God.⁴² But, according to Tillich’s understanding, both concepts of time are placed under the law because they require active preparation of the self. However, *The Absolving Word* establishes the actual “right time” because it passively breaks in upon the hearer. The right time is God’s, rather than the hoped for arrival of “the right time’s” that was contingent upon the self-preparation of the hearer. Instead, Luther’s theology came to learn that *Kairos* is dependent on the arrival of the *Absolving Word*. This is a type of accident, it cannot be made into a mystical or transcendental experience that can be produced by the recipient. But when the preaching comes, it gives complete assurance. The *Absolving Word* places the sinner out of *chronos* into actual *kairos* with Christ the Savior.

Now he begins to sigh: “Then who can come to my aid?” Terrified by the Law, he despairs of his own strength; he looks about and sighs for the help of the Mediator and Savior. Then there comes, at the appropriate time, the saving Word of the Gospel, which says: “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven (Matt. 9:2). Believe in Jesus Christ, who was crucified for your sins. If you feel your sins, do not consider them in yourself but remember that they have been transferred to Christ, ‘with whose stripes you are healed’ (Is. 53:3).”⁴³

Since it is the *Absolving Word* that establishes passive righteousness, time is brought to an end and the eternal nature of the promise is fully realized. When free will is removed as a determining factor by the *Absolving Word*, then passive righteousness is truly and passively received by the sinner. *Chronos* time ends in Christ and actual *kairos* time begins, a world without end.

⁴² Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, edited by Carl E. Braaten (New York: SCM-Canterbury Press, 1968), 7.

⁴³ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:131-132.

Uncertain Location with God vs. Certain Location in Christ

Aquinas' assertions of active righteousness as a contingent factor in salvation, locates sinners in an uncertain place in relation to God. Luther inherited this doctrine of uncertainty, which drove him into despair. He states, "Before our time confession was wretched torment."⁴⁴ The lack of the authentic *Absolving Word* caused him to question where he was located with God. Was Luther under His wrath or under His grace? Since salvation is contingent on the sinners' will cooperating with grace, one can never be sure if one is truly located in God's kingdom of grace.

I answer that, Predestination most certainly and infallibly takes effect; yet it does not impose any necessity, so that, namely, its effect should take place from necessity. For it was said above (A. 1), that predestination is a part of providence. But not all things subject to providence are necessary; some things happening from contingency, according to the nature of the proximate causes, which divine providence has ordained for such effects. Yet the order of providence is infallible, as was shown above (Q. 22, A. 4). So also the order of predestination is certain; yet free-will is not destroyed; whence the effect of predestination has its contingency. Moreover all that has been said about the divine knowledge and will (Q. 14, A. 13, and 19, A. 4) must also be taken into consideration; since they do not destroy contingency in things, although they themselves are most certain and infallible.⁴⁵

For Aquinas, predestination does not locate one in Christ, but rather places one in a kingdom where the free will affirms or damns its place. Since the result of predestination is contingent on the cooperation between the choice and grace, a believer is not able to be fully located in Christ's kingdom. This will not happen until the end when God examines the merits of a believer, to see if the merits prove the election, or at the very least to determine whether one has acted in proper correspondence or not to the ordering of the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 54:104; Rittgers, "Luther on Private Confession," 312.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1:131.

entire cosmos according to God's law. But in this world, the location of one's soul remains uncertain.

For Luther, passive righteousness by the *Absolving Word* locates the sinner in Christ. Receiving an irrevocable and certain decree from God not only declares the relational status, but also places the sinner in the proper location of relationship with God. This *Absolving Word* overcomes wrath by removing it.⁴⁶ This removes the hidden God and reveals Christ alone.

By the proclamation of this doctrine, moreover, the devil is overthrown, and his kingdom is cast down. From his hands are torn the Law, sin, and death; through these powerful and invincible tyrants he has subjugated the whole human race. In short, his prisoners are transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and liberty (Col. 1:13).⁴⁷

The kingdom of light is the realm of passive righteousness. The sinner is placed under the category of passive righteousness by the proclamation of the *Absolving Word*.

Commenting on Psalm 37, Luther writes "On the contrary, it is *good* that a man is righteous, because he is placed in Christ."⁴⁸ Man is righteous not because he acts righteously, but because he is placed in Christ. But this is not a mystical participation in the divine, it is the application of the divine in time and space through the preaching of the word. Even in these early writings, the *Absolving Word* already informed Luther's understanding of location in Christ. The *Absolving Word* shapes Luther's category of passive righteousness and informs its metaphysical boundaries of excluding probability of place, and rather affirms the surrounding boundary of eternal security in Christ alone.

⁴⁶ Oswald Bayer, "God's Hiddenness," *Lutheran Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2014): 273.

⁴⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10:175.

Luther found that the *Absolving Word* created certainty of belonging within the passive righteousness. Since moral performance is not a qualifying category for righteousness, the certainty of belonging is established in the creative decree.

I am indeed a sinner according to the present life and its righteousness, as a son of Adam where the Law accuses me, death reigns and devours me. But above this life I have another righteousness, another life, which is Christ, the Son of God, who does not know sin and death but is righteousness and eternal life. For His sake this body of mine will be raised from the dead and delivered from the slavery of the Law and sin, and will be sanctified together with the spirit.⁴⁹

In the speaking of the absolution sinners belongs to Christ by the promise. The effective passive righteousness locates sinners as Christ's own saved sinner.

Progressive Righteousness vs. the Simul Iustus et Peccator

Luther realized that as the absolver spoke the evangelical absolution, the sinner still remained a sinner and yet belonged to God in time, location, and relationship. The sinner becomes connected to Christ by the *Absolving Word*. The sinner is not only still a sinner, but he is fully justified by the *Absolving Word*. The sinner becomes *simul iustus et peccator*, a saved sinner who is simultaneously sinful and just.⁵⁰ The absolution establishes the Christian reality by the bestowal of passive righteousness upon the sinner. Unlike Aquinas who sought to establish an active righteousness through the working of the sinner's will, the *Absolving Word* bestows God's righteousness in these words "Your sins are forgiven." Aquinas' theology misses this understanding of the *Simul*, as Luther's establishes it.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 26:29.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 25:260.

The *simul iustus et peccator* is established by the *Absolving Word*, which declares a sinner just. This *Absolving Word* is a creative word that comes in the form of declaration, but functionally creates and recreates the sinner into the new creation.⁵¹ Mark Mattes is correct in showing that this new creation is not a self-deification, but rather re-establishing “our creatureliness before God.”⁵² God does not address the sinner only as what her or she is in himself or herself.⁵³ Rather under His creative and liberating *Absolving Word*, the future is secured and finalized. As the *Absolving Word* bestows upon the sinner passive righteousness, the certainty of belonging is bestowed despite moral performance. Lennart Pinomaa writes, “The basic sinful nature remains unchanged as long as we are alive. Therefore, we are really sinners. But when we belong to Christ, we are righteous sinners.”⁵⁴ The Christian, though sinner, is entirely just on the strength of God’s promise in the *Absolving Word*, not in the sinner’s natural nature.⁵⁵ The morally deficient sinner, unable to cooperate with grace, is now sealed by the grace of God. This seal bestows true Christian liberty, which belong to those who exist in God’s kingdom in time and location.

⁵¹ Risto Saarinen, “Justification by Faith: The View If the Mannermaa School,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L’ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 259-260.

⁵² Mark Mattes, “Luther on Justification as Forensic and Effective,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L’ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 271.

⁵³ Eberhard Jüngel, *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther’s Significance of Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 63.

⁵⁴ Lennart Pinomaa, *Teologien Tie* (Porvoo Helsinki: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 1963), 147.

⁵⁵ Leif Grane, “Justification by Faith? An Unguarded Essay,” in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 43-44.

This simple uncertainty directs a sinner away from God Himself. For to grasp God is to hear His *Absolving Word*, that is for Him to reveal Himself. Driven by the legal opinion that the human will must be actively righteous in order to be in union with God, Aquinas' theology necessarily rejects the Simul. Having both God and the created world ordered by the law will not allow two worlds to say nothing of two persons. But the cost was to condemn Christians to the necessity of uncertainty along with the necessity of the law. Christ was not necessary for the system to work. To the contrary, Bayer states, “‘To seek God outside of Jesus is [the mark] of the devil.’ Where there is no certainty of salvation, it is impossible to speak properly of God, let alone believe in him.”⁵⁶ Aquinas' assertions of uncertainty point sinners toward the *deus absconditus*.

Absolving Word: Overcoming the Free Will and the Opinion of the Law

The task of the *Absolving Word* is to replace the category of a justifying choice or free will. The nature of the *Absolving Word* allows no room for free will, since it unconditionally determines the destiny of the sinner. As long as one believes in the free will, the will rebels against the passive nature of the *Absolving Word*. This shattering of the legal scheme is the point of conflict with confessional theology. It shatters the legal scheme of logic established by Aristotle and heralded by Aquinas.

The exodus from virtue to the grace of Christ means for Luther that justification can be understood as a complete break with all attempts to view it as a movement according to a given standard or “law,” either natural or revealed. Righteousness is imputed by God and such imputation means a complete shattering of all our

⁵⁶ Oswald Bayer, “What Is Evangelical? The Continuing Validity of the Reformation,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2011): 10.

schemes. The justification which results comes neither at the beginning or end of a movement. It establishes-creates-an entirely new situation.⁵⁷

The *Absolving Word* knocks out the will as it is unable to cooperate with grace in the words, “*Te absolvo!*” For the *Absolving Word* to absolve is to destroy the category of free will and move the sinner toward real Christian freedom.

The *Absolving Word* is an affront to the legal opinion. The opinion of the law always affirms that active righteousness is the proper way toward ultimate righteousness. This legal opinion exists in the carnality of humanity; it is naturally inherited.⁵⁸ Hans Schwartz states, “God always works under the appearance of the opposite, that is, in a way that we would not expect God to work.”⁵⁹ The fact that God bestows righteousness through passive righteousness is not naturally revealed to common humanity. The *Absolving Word* is required to bestow this incarnational status upon a sinner.

Luther’s theology is revolutionary because it operates under the category of *Absolving Word*, which is the word of promise that operates entirely different than the word of the law. In this way the logical and metaphysical constructs are not driven by the ability of the object, but by the subject.

Now if the Gospel is the revelation of the Son of God, as it really is, then it certainly does not demand works, threaten death, or terrify the conscience. But it shows the Son of God, who is neither the Law nor a work. But this simply cannot persuade the papists. Therefore they make a “Law of charity” of the Gospel. But Christ is the subject of the Gospel. What the Gospel teaches and shows me is a

⁵⁷ Gerhard O. Forde, “The Exodus from Virtue to Grace: Justification by Faith Today,” *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 36.

⁵⁸ Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. David Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 277.

⁵⁹ Hans Schwartz, *True Faith in the True God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996), 57.

divine work given to me by sheer grace; neither human reason nor wisdom nor even the Law of God teaches this. And I accept this gift by faith alone.⁶⁰

In this way every outcome in theology is only relevant to the extent that it is related to the *Absolving Word*. This is a relational logic, where everything depends on the relationship between the *Absolving Word* and its object. Tuomo Mannermaa writes, “the existential relevance of Luther’s theology derives from the central content of his thinking: God comes near and gives himself to us in the mode of favor and gift.”⁶¹ Christ becomes the center of theological logic and every other category is secondary and subservient to the outcome of the *Absolving Word*. Mannermaa does not quite grasp the *Absolving Word* as the thing that gives us, and unites us, with Christ. He does not emphasize that the favor comes before the gift (as a word before effect), and the gift is none other than forgiveness, which is the way Christ dwells in creatures—as a new creature, not the old improved. For Luther, all other categories operate under the unconditional nature of Christ’s forgiveness and promise.

Luther’s dialectics move accordingly, generally working backwards from the apocalyptic conviction to its predicates. For example, the argument for the bound will begins with a conclusion drawn from the gospel: if Christ has overcome the power of sin, we must be sinners; if Christ’s death and resurrection were the necessary condition of such release, humanity must be incapable of freeing itself any other way. There is a descriptive quality to Luther’s reasoning; beginning with assumptions about human sinfulness, it is not difficult to find evidence. But the force of the argument theologically is shaped by the gospel. The same must be said for Luther’s understanding of law. It is certainly true, as he argued experientially, that the law must come before the gospel. As commonly observed, people don’t change without a reason. But it is just as certain that theologically, Luther’s understanding of law is predicated on his prior conviction about the gospel: if Christ saves, the law must not be capable of redeeming; if God saves apart from the law, he must always have intended to come to us in Christ; if there

⁶⁰ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:73.

⁶¹ Tuomo Mannermaa, “Why Is Luther So Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research,” in *Union with Christ*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 20.

is no salvation in the law, it must have some other essential but ancillary functions.⁶²

Here the categories become subservient to the *Absolving Word*. As Luther operates this way in theology, Aristotle becomes completely irrelevant and theology becomes confessional again, as law is removed as the overarching category. The *Absolving Word* replaces the law as the overall conditioning principle in the construct of theology.

The *Absolving Word* places the law within the proper limits of serving the neighbor, and removing it from justification between God and the sinner. In this incarnational miracle of the promise, the Christian begins to perform active righteousness for the neighbor only. Hans Joachim Iwand captures this beautifully in his work *The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther*.

Then this law, this cycle of “I” and works the conscience would indeed be broken and I could confront the works that wait for me, knowing that God’s judgment supports me, with the confidence of a master who commands his slaves. Then I would act with the greatest freedom and confidence, knowing that no work that I do can decide my fate, my salvation, or my righteousness before God. That is precisely the heavenly gift that Luther finds in the New Righteousness; the freedom of the children of God who do work simply that it may be done, but who do not need to do any work at all in order to know that they live by God’s grace.⁶³

Once Christ takes His seat in the conscience of the sinner by pronouncement of the *Absolving Word*, the Holy Spirit works for the neighbor through the absolved sinner.

Miraslov Volf states, “God gives, and therefore we can work.”⁶⁴ Volf is correct only as

⁶² James Arne Nestingen, “The End of the End: The Role of Apocalyptic in the Lutheran Reform,” *Word & World* 15, no. 2 (1995): 204.

⁶³ Hans J. Iwand, *The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther*, trans. Randi H. Lundell (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 67.

⁶⁴ Miraslov Volf, “God at Work,” *Word & World* 25, no. 4 (2005): 384.

much as it is God's work, actualized through the hands of a sinner. By this method the Christian righteousness actively blesses the neighbor, and yet passively justifies a sinner.

Exodus from False Grace to True Grace

Though Aquinas has been named the great "Doctor of Grace", his metaphysical construct is primarily contingent on the assumed eternal law. Aquinas himself admitted that his work was as worthless as "straw."⁶⁵ Did Aquinas realize that grace was compromised in his legal construct? For the law to be justified, the will and grace must work together in the scheme of active righteousness. In this way grace loses its aspect of certainty and immutability, as it is conditioned under whether or not it aids the free will towards moral performance for righteousness. Consequently, grace is compromised in the aspects of its nature. It loses its necessary aspect of certainty.

Under Aquinas' construct, grace loses its aspect of unconditional force. It does not have the ability to achieve unconditional results within its own actions, because it is conditioned by how well it operates with the will to create active righteousness. According to this legal scheme, God's unconditional act is compromised. Grace cannot operate as true grace under Aquinas' scheme.

Grace also loses its independence under Aquinas' scheme. Its status as grace is compromised because it is modified by the law through the law's demand of complete moral transformation and synergism of the will. Under Aquinas' construction, grace does not stand alone in essence, and therefore loses its nature in being actual grace.

⁶⁵ Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works*, 321.

As Aquinas inserted grace into his construct of theological logic, willingly or unwillingly, he conditioned grace and limited its effects and operation within time and space as well as stripping away its aspect of assurance. The free will conditions grace and seeks out a consummation that will never arrive. This is evident in Aquinas' doctrine of predestination, where he strips the grace out of it and limits this promise to God's foreknowledge only, so that the free will is responsible for response to God. Grace cannot work with the will synergistically. Grace must overcome the will and therefore be *sola gratia*.

Luther's category of the *Absolving Word* opened the possibility of understanding and confessing passive righteousness as the Christian righteousness. This category gives the Christian the peace that passes all understanding, clarifying that the sinner truly belongs in certain time and location with God, and thus establishing assurance of salvation.

Again, if Christ Himself is made guilty of all the sins that we have all committed, then we are absolved from all sins, not through ourselves or through our own works or merits but through Him. But if He is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them. "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christi Amen." (1 Cor. 15:57)⁶⁶

By the proclaimed *Absolving Word*, the sinner is created holy and is assured by the passive nature of the promise that God is pleased with the sinner to whom the forgiveness has been given. The schemes of active righteousness via Aristotle and Aquinas are dismissed, as the law is replaced with the promise of Christ alone, i.e. the *Absolving Word*. Only by this theology is *sola gratia* truly grace. This grace given in the *Absolving*

⁶⁶ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:280.

Word is the unique gift of the church to the unbelieving world.⁶⁷ Luther's reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* confesses and bestows the true Christian righteousness as passive righteousness.

⁶⁷ Hans J. Iwand, *Kirche Und Gesellschaft*, 4 vols., vol. 1, Nachgelassene Werke: Neue Folge (Verlagshaus: C. Kaiser, 1998), 277.

CHAPTER 3

ABSOLVING WORD AND THE ETERNAL GOSPEL

Introduction

In this chapter it will be argued that the reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* led Luther to conclude that the law is not eternal, as he had been taught by medieval theology. Rather, only the gospel as spoken in the *Absolving Word* is eternal. The *Absolving Word* leads Luther to rethink the concept of the (non) eternal nature of the law verses the eternal gospel. Luther realized that the discovery of the *Absolving Word* simultaneously meant the end of the law for the new creation. So there are two times for the baptized person, one for the *old Adam* where the law rules temporarily and the other to the new creation, which is ruled by the eternal gospel. For the *old Adam*, the law exists to restrain the sinner, while also exhausting its power towards the gospel. In the same way wrath exhausts its power, in order to serve the *Absolving Word*. The gospel is the end and the telos of the law. Luther also discovered that the *Absolving Word* brought the divine victory of God, which is His spoken word that delivers sinners from death, the devil, wrath, and the law itself. Christ delivers us from these powers and unites us with Himself in the pronouncement of divine absolution. Luther realized that one understands the proper place of the law, when one knows that it ends in the *Absolving Word*. Where Agricola wanted the law only in the courthouse, Luther new the law needed to remain in the preaching to restrain and condemn the *old Adam*. Where Melanchthon elevated the law as eternal, and in such a way that the *Absolving Word* serves under the law's power,

Luther corrected this misunderstanding. He taught that the law serves under the power of the gospel, the *Absolving Word* itself, and is not eternal. This turned the event of justification from a legal act into a gospel act. Where Melancthon placed sanctification under the power of the law, Luther placed sanctification under the power of the gospel. The *Absolving Word* showed Luther that justification and sanctification are inseparable, because this creative, divine, spoken word of God makes sinners into new creations. Forde's contribution on this matter gives clarity to this unified relationship between justification and sanctification under the power of the gospel. So Luther now saw the benefits of truly living a Christian life. The *Absolving Word* ends the law by bestowing an evangelical righteousness, and not a legal righteousness. The gospel does not come to establish the legal system, but rather to destroy it. Now the fruit of faith is true fruit. The function of the *Absolving Word* gives what the law signifies, that is new creations who serve the neighbor. The law cannot give what it signifies. It cannot sanctify or create the Christian into something new. It can only restrain and condemn the *old Adam* outside of faith. Now the eternal gospel nourishes the new creation eternally and the function of the law remains eternally behind the Christian.

Luther's understanding of the *Absolving Word* made it impossible to maintain the legal scheme of his time. The law was no longer the eternal basis for all theology. Luther discovered that the law possessed finite boundaries. The law kills, while the gospel resurrects a Christian.¹ The absence of the eternal law found a prominent place in

¹ Martin Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, trans. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), 35.

Luther's theology.² Where the *Absolving Word* is present, the law ceases and the eternal gospel overfills the gap. The function of the gospel, and not the law bestows the righteousness of God. The *Absolving Word*, i.e. the incarnate Christ and the spoken words of Christ, exposing the limits of the law for the Christian.³ The reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* created for Luther a category of an eternal gospel. We see the explicit impact of this development in Luther's *Galatians Commentary* of 1535, *The Complete Antinomian Disputations*, *The Small Catechism*, and *The Large Catechism*. This gospel is eternal, with continuing benefits in the realm of heaven itself. Here, grace, mercy, and forgiveness continue only in heaven because the eternal gospel orbits around the incarnate *Absolving Word* and all His benefits.

Absolving Word: Moving from the Eternal Law to Eternal Gospel

The discovery of the gospel as the end to a theological concept of eternal law means that there are two times or kingdoms. The law is not eternal, it actually comes to an end. This makes Luther's theology work entirely differently than preceding theology, which always assumed the structure of the law as the one and only will of God.

For the Christian proper, eternal law is displaced by eternal gospel. Luther argues that there are two times and two persons who exist after baptism. Paul had put this in terms of the distinction between flesh and Spirit. These two correspond appropriately, one to the law, and the other to the gospel. Luther determines that at Christ's arrival, only one of these can rule the eternal Christian life.

² Virpi Mäkinen, *Lutheran Reformation and the Law*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions, 112 (Boston: Brill, 2005), 24.

³ Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 54-55.

An end has to be set for the Law, where it will come to a stop. Therefore the time of Law is not forever; but it has an end, which is Christ. But the time of grace is forever; for Christ, having died once for all, will never die again (Rom. 6:9–10). He is eternal; therefore the time of grace is eternal also.⁴

The arrival of Christ and His *Absolving Word* marks the beginning of the eternal gospel. At this point, the eternal law is eternally behind the sinner and removed from Christian reality.

Luther held that God's wrath is an aspect of His hidden will. To the contrary, the category of eternal law claims this will not as hidden, but the proper expression of God's essence. But instead of a category of thought, Luther recognized that the gospel is not merely a thought, but a word that actually ends the wrath of God by revealing His true image to the Christian.

Thus the curse, which is divine wrath against the whole world, has the same conflict with the blessing, that is, with the eternal grace and mercy of God in Christ. Therefore the curse clashes with the blessing and wants to damn it and annihilate it. But it cannot. For the blessing is divine and eternal, and therefore the curse must yield to it. For if the blessing in Christ could be conquered, then God Himself would be conquered. But this is impossible. Therefore Christ, who is the divine Power, Righteousness, Blessing, Grace, and Life, conquers and destroys these monsters—sin, death, and the curse—without weapons or battle, in His own body and in Himself, as Paul enjoys saying (Col. 2:15): “He disarmed the principalities and powers, triumphing over them in Him.” Therefore they can no longer harm the believers.⁵

Rudolph Bultmann summarized this discovery in his famous phrase: “God overcomes us by his grace.”⁶ But Bultmann did not quite grasp the significance of what Luther was saying here. Bultmann meant that God's grace is true for people in general, or as an

⁴ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:342.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26:281-282.

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, “Christ the End of the Law,” in *Essays: Philosophical and Theological* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 59.

abstract possibility being offered to the hearer, but instead Luther's point is that the *Absolving Word* overcomes the sinner through specific individual address. It does not replace the law with a higher law, but overcomes the power of the law altogether. Though a sinner engaged by the *Absolving Word* deserves damnation, wrath, i.e. the eternal law, instead the sinner receives the benefits of the eternal gospel, which is more than a new possibility in life, but rather the creation of a whole new life.

The question remains, is there an antinomy that exists between the divine curse and the divine blessing? And is there a simultaneity of curse and blessing after baptism while the Christians remains in the old world? Gerhard Forde gives a profound answer in the affirmative, "The gospel is the end and the telos of the law."⁷ That is, the presence of the law exists to exhaust itself to death, giving prominence to the eternal gospel. Forde's statement mirrors Luther's assertion that the eternal work of Christ, the eternal gospel, ends the law.

But the work of Christ, properly speaking, is this: to embrace the one whom the Law has made a sinner and pronounced guilty, and to absolve him from his sins if he believes the Gospel. "For Christ is the end of the Law, that everyone who has faith may be justified" (Rom. 10:4); He is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).⁸

The eternal gospel is the end and the fulfillment of the law. The absolution is the moment in which the law ends for the Christian since it has been fulfilled in Christ, and Christ justifies faith, not works of the law. The law has nothing left to do once the absolution

⁷ Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 201.

⁸ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:143.

comes. Correspondingly, wrath exhausts itself in order to serve the *Absolving Word*, expressing God's proper will to maintain Christian existence via the eternal gospel.

Absolving Word and the Victory of God

For Luther you can't know what Christ's cross is for unless you know the *Absolving Word*. The chief matter is that the law is not the way to understand the cross of Christ. It is not what is owed to the law that matters, but how the Father is going to forgive sinners, starting with Christ taking those sins upon himself and falling under the curse.

But He is a sinner, who has and bears the sin of Paul, the former blasphemer, persecutor, and assaulter; of Peter, who denied Christ; of David, who was an adulterer and a murderer, and who caused the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord (Rom. 2:24). In short, He has and bears all the sins of all men in His body—not in the sense that He has committed them but in the sense that He took these sins, committed by us, upon His own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood... Christ was not only found among sinners; but of His own free will and by the will of the Father He wanted to be an associate of sinners, having assumed the flesh and blood of those who were sinners and thieves and who were immersed in all sorts of sin. Therefore when the Law found Him among thieves, it condemned and executed Him as a thief. This knowledge of Christ and most delightful comfort, that Christ became a curse for us to set us free from the curse of the Law.⁹

Christ takes away all sin from sinners. He conquers these sins, by absorbing them into Himself. The question arises, how are my sins conquered now while I remain in this old world? Luther realized that in the *Absolving Word* the atonement happens, where sinners are made one with God and His victory in the spoken absolution "*Te Absolvo*." This opens up for us the classic work of Gustaf Aulén on Luther and the atonement.

⁹ Ibid., 26:277-278.

The *Absolving Word*, which bestows the eternal gospel, is the divine victory of God. Gustaf Aulén notices this theme in examining Luther's 1535 *Galatians*

Commentary.

It is God's act of victory, when Christ goes under the Divine wrath, and bears the burden of the punishment which on account of that wrath impends upon men. Thus the love of God breaks through the Wrath, in the vicarious act of redemption the Wrath is overcome by the Love which is ultimately, as Luther says, *die Natur Gottes*.¹⁰

Not only does the *Absolving Word* bestow the eternal gospel, but it also reveals the perfect, proper, and ultimately real expression of God.

And as long as a man deals only with the God of the law and with his ethical demands, he does not see and experience the true nature of God. We confront the true God and his real deity only when we hear the Gospel of God's spontaneous gift to the sinner.¹¹

God is truly visible in the *Absolving Word*.

L'ubomír Batka observes that in Luther's theology, hell is a place where "there is no Word of God" and that separation from God's Word is the work of the devil.¹²

Without the *Absolving Word*, one cannot know God but only wrath and death. The *Absolving Word* overcomes the suffering when it is spoken again into the ear of the sinner, who therefore becomes not simply a sinner but a righteous, forgiven person. For the time being, that means a person who is *simul iustus et peccator*.¹³ Through the

¹⁰ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (New York: The Macmillan Publishing Company, 1961), 115.

¹¹ Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 11.

¹² L'ubomír Batka, "Luther's Teaching on Sin and Evil," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 248-249.

¹³ Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 137.

Absolving Word the devil is conquered, God is fully revealed, wrath is overcome, and the sinner is saved. The curse moves from us to Christ, which is the final work of the law.

The law's work comes to an end. It has nothing more to do. Since the eternal law ends in Christ, no forms of distributive justice are enforced in the shape of the Christian life.

God's nakedness exists in the *Absolving Word*, i.e. the bestowing of the eternal gospel.

Luther also realized that as the *Absolving Word* made us one with Christ, it is also the power of the resurrection. Since the work of Christ was done to satisfy the gospel, and not the law, Luther then realized that the satisfaction in the absolution is God's victory.

The words "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.¹⁴

The resurrection power of Christ is the word of forgiveness and the word of forgiveness is Christ's resurrection power. As "*Te Absolvo*" is spoken, salvation is established and the resurrection happens, the eternal gospel is bestowed to the sinner. This is God's victory over sin and death, the *Absolving Word* of the resurrection, making sinners one with Christ.

The *Absolving Word* bears the actual victory of God as eternal benefit, in the eternal gospel. For Luther, the cross and resurrection is an event of triumph for God over the powers that opposes the *simul iustus et peccator*.

He refers to the resurrection of Christ, who rose again for our justification (Rom. 4:25). His victory is a victory over the Law, sin, our flesh, the world, the devil, death, hell, and all evils; and this victory of His He has given to us. Even though these tyrants, our enemies, accuse us and terrify us, they cannot drive us into despair or condemn us. For Christ, whom God the Father raised from the dead, is the Victor over them, and He is our righteousness. Therefore "thanks be to God,

¹⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 362.

who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57).
Amen.¹⁵

Christus Victor, the *Absolving Word*, conquers these oppressive powers. Christ brings the “the death of death.”¹⁶ Christ’s victory rules over death.¹⁷ When He becomes our Lord Christ is “redeeming, purchasing, freeing” from “all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.”¹⁸ This is true liberation.¹⁹ What baptism promises is the *Absolving Word* that brings this invincible and eternal victory, the eternal gospel.

In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. Christians always have enough to do to believe firmly what baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of baptism are so boundless that if our timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could all be true.²⁰

It is true, however, that the victory is not seen or felt in the old world. This is because the *Absolving Word* creates the new situation of the Christian: *simul iustus et peccator*, along with all of its (finally) victorious benefits when only the righteous one lives in relation to Christ. Luther illustrates this point in his 1523 *Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter*.

But what is being offered to us? That which we heard above, namely, that he who believes in Christ and clings to the Word has Him with all His blessings, so that he becomes lord over sin, death, devil, and hell, and is sure of eternal life. This

¹⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:21-22.

¹⁶ Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 13.

¹⁷ Hans J. Iwand, *Der Name Des Herrn. Geistliche Reden*, vol. 38, Bekennende Kirche (Verlag-München: Chr. Kaiser 1936), 49.

¹⁸ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 355.

¹⁹ Matthieu Arnold, “Luther on Christ's Person and Work,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 284.

²⁰ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 461.

treasure is brought to our door and laid into our laps without our cooperation or merit, yes, unexpectedly and without our knowledge or thoughts. Therefore the apostle wants us to set our hope cheerfully on this grace, for the God who offers it to us will surely not lie to us.²¹

Luther's imagery of God laying the gospel in the lap of the believer is the function of the *Absolving Word*. Aiming to establish the eternal gospel, the oppressive power of the death, the devil, and hell are brought and end by the *Absolving Word*. This eternal gospel delivered by the *Absolving Word* is eternal, Victor of God as eternal benefit, in the eternal gospel.

Luther's category of the *Absolving Word* informs the nature of the benefits of the eternal gospel. These benefits do not become limited to time and space, but transcend time and space. Luther states, "Therefore we come to these eternal goods—the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, the glory of the resurrection, and eternal life—not actively but passively. Nothing whatever interferes here; faith alone takes hold of the offered promise."²²

One can see how Luther empties the eternal law as a theological category in the sermon on Psalm 2 (1532) even by the simple reorienting a word like "obedience" away from the law and to the gospel:

Therefore this sentence stands: "The Lord has granted to Christ the King the rule over all nations, and so through His Gospel He calls all nations to faith. Those who hear and are obedient to the Gospel receive the forgiveness of sins and life eternal. Those who do not believe remain in their sins. Nor can they extricate themselves from their sins by the service of reason or the powers of the free will. When they oppose it, therefore, they do not harm the kingdom of Christ but themselves."²³

²¹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 30:29.

²² *Ibid.*, 26:392-393.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12:58.

The eternal gospel is the rule of Christ the King. This eternal gospel does not come by way of the law, but rather by the way of the *Absolving Word*. Obedience to the gospel is the hearing of the *Absolving Word*, i.e. the pure gift. Obedience to the gospel is listening only to the voice of the absolver. For Luther, obedience and *Absolving Word* are inseparable, and operate properly under the rule of the eternal gospel. This is not like “doing a law,” it is like passively receiving a promise, and the obedience of the gospel is waiting, receiving, hearing, not doing, giving and seeing.

The Absolving Word and the Effect of the Law

The effect of the gospel on a person is so different than the effect of the law. The law says: “do this,” even if it is never done. The flesh receives this, and either jumps to doing something, or mutters and sputters in guilt. The spirit, however, receives the forgiveness in a different way. It puts the *old Adam* to death. This is not just passive in the sense of momentary waiting, but absolute, complete passivity, since you can’t be any more passive than dead. The *Absolving Word* gives everything by putting an end to the law. Nomians and anti-nomians alike are unable to embrace this reality.

Strange as it may sound, it is precisely the Antinomian Agricola who tried to get rid of the law only by consigning it to a different place in God’s kingdom, the town council. He imagined by this way of locating he would free the Christian preacher to give only the gospel, but as a consequence the law remained his overarching concept. By it he returned to the Roman position that it is love, not faith that justifies. Thus, when Luther entered the dispute with Agricola, he spent much of his time explaining how the antinomians rejected the *simul iustus et peccator*, and actually they continued functioning

with an eternal law. Luther responded between 1537-1540 to give clarity to the eternal gospel's triumph over the eternal law in his *Antinomian Disputations*.

The *Absolving Word* brings the end of the law by virtue of the end of the flesh, i.e. the *old Adam*. In the second death after baptism, both uses of the law end. Luther describes this in his twelfth argument of his *Sixth Disputation with the Antinomians* where he writes, "Paul speaks about the damning law. When we arrive in heaven, then we will no longer preach the law."²⁴ Unlike the antinomians, the law does not end in this age simply by handing it over to the government. The law must be preached, but it can be preached properly only when you actually know where it ends, and why. It does not end by separating the courthouse from the church. It ends when the *Absolving Word* is used, and this is used in the church only in relation to actual sin, a sin that the law reveals. The *duplex usus legis* ends because the Christian is placed into the realm of the eternal gospel, where there is no function for law. There is no sinful flesh to terrorize and constrain. Once the *old Adam* undergoes the second death on earth, the sinner then enters into an order not of eternal law, but rather of eternal gospel that is created by the *Absolving Word*.

The nomian position overagainst Agricola was assumed by Melanchthon. This forensic process places righteousness of God into the service of the law, which is the categorical split between Luther and Melanchthon as the way to respond to Agricola. As Lauri Haikola notes: "Justification as fully described by Melanchthon is a thoroughly

²⁴ Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 214.

legal act comparable to a court trial.”²⁵ Melanchthon understands justification primarily as a forensic term and act by virtue of its humanistic usage.

“Justification” means the remission of sins, reconciliation, or the acceptance of a person unto eternal life. To the Hebrews “to justify” is a forensic term, as if I were to say that the Roman people “justified” Scipio when he was accused by the tribunes, that is, they absolved him or pronounced him to be a righteous man. Therefor Paul took the term “justify” from the usage of the Hebrew word to indicate remission of sins, reconciliation, or acceptance. All educated people understand that this is the thrust of the Hebrew expression and examples are encountered frequently.²⁶

Melanchthon presupposes that the law must be served by the doctrine of justification, which places justification under the legal scheme and not under the divine *Absolving Word*. The law no longer becomes something to be ended, but rather to be continually served.

Their sins are forgiven for those who take refuge in Christ because sin is displeasing to God, just as the eating of pork was to Him who had been forbidden it. The voice of the Law remains and is eternal: “God does not take pleasure in wickedness,” Ps. 5:4. But He has poured out His great wrath against sin upon His Son who was put to death for us and paid our penalty. By the intercession of this payment we are received. But those who do not flee for refuge to the Son remain under condemnation by the voice of the Law and will perish.²⁷

It is strange that Melanchthon reduces such an event as the death and resurrection of Christ to something necessary in order to get the blessing of the law through Christ’s service. In Melanchthon’s scheme, the *Absolving Word* serves the demand of the law. Why? Perhaps the humanistic theories of justice never fully escaped Melanchthon’s

²⁵ Lauri Haikola, “A Comparison of Melanchthon's and Luther's Doctrine of Justification,” *Dialog* 2 (1963): 35.

²⁶ Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci Communes 1543*, trans. Jacob Aall Ottesen Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 86.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

thought, and encouraged him to frame justification into a tart forensic theory.²⁸ The gospel is in a legal debt to the eternal law in this legal scheme. This movement in Melancthon's soteriology is subtle, and yet shapes his understanding justification as under the rule of the eternal law.

In contrast, Luther believes that the law serves the *Absolving Word*, turning the event of justification into a gospel act. Eberhard Jüngel writes, "Faith cannot give the accusing law its due without giving the liberating gospel its due even more."²⁹ Though giving the law its "due" is precisely what Luther brings to an end. It is not faith giving something due to the law. That was done once and for all by Christ, never to be taken up by faith again. But at least Jüngel correctly saw that the Gospel word does something more than the law could ever do. Luther's matured understanding of the gospel is that it is eternal and the law is temporal. Justification does not serve the law, but dominates and overflows itself over the law. However, the law fervently resists this gospel, while ironically exhausting its demand toward the gospel.

With the words "till the Offspring should come to whom the promise had been made" Paul indicates, therefore, how long the Law should last, both in a literal and in a spiritual sense. But the spiritual duration of the Law clings very tenaciously to the conscience; therefore a man who is applying the theological use of the Law has great difficulty reaching the end of the Law. Amid the terrors and the feeling of sin the mind cannot achieve the hope that God is merciful and that He wants to forgive sins for the sake of Christ; all it does is to suppose that God is wrathful with sinners and accuses and damns them.³⁰

²⁸ Carl. R. Trueman, *Luther's Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers 1525-1556* (Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford, 1994), 72.

²⁹ Jüngel, *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther's Significance of Contemporary Theology*, 63.

³⁰ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:317-318.

Luther continues explaining that the law seeks to dominate the *Absolving Word*.

However, the primary function of the law is to end in Christ. The law is limited in function and time.

Then let the Law withdraw; for it was indeed added for the sake of disclosing and increasing transgressions, but only until the point when the Offspring would come. Once He is present, let the Law stop disclosing transgressions and terrifying. Let it surrender its realm to another, that is, to the Blessed Offspring, Christ; He has gracious lips, with which He does not accuse and terrify but speaks better things than the Law, namely, grace, peace, forgiveness of sins, and victory over sin and death.³¹

For Luther, the *Absolving Word* limits and ends the law. The *Absolving Word* is not a new lawgiver, for His work is to bestow the eternal gospel, as Luther understood.³² The ironic primary function of the law is not to moderate justification, but rather to exhaust itself towards it, i.e. to serve it. The law serves the gospel.³³ The *Absolving Word* offers a relational understanding of justification, binding the sinner to Christ, i.e. creature to Creator, rather than solely Melanchthon's theory of a legal act. The *Absolving Word* is served by the law, turning justification into a gospel act and the law into *lex vacua* or *terminatur legem*.

Melanchthon's eternal law placed sanctification as a process primarily dedicated to law. Since the regenerated man possesses the gospel, he must now serve the immutable will of God. This will is His law.

There are many reasons: necessity, worthiness, and rewards. First necessity is of different kinds. There is the necessity of command, the necessity of debt, the necessity of retaining faith, and the necessity of avoiding punishment. For although it is one thing to speak of compulsion, yet there does remain in force the

³¹ Ibid., 26:318.

³² L'ubomír Batka, "Jan Hus' Theology in a Lutheran Context," *Lutheran Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2009): 17.

³³ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 254.

eternal ordering of the immutable God that the creature shall render obedience to the will of God. This immutable ordering is the necessity of command and the necessity of debt, as Paul says in Rom 8:6, “We are under obligation to God, not the flesh.” And Christ says in John 13:34, “This is my command that you love one another,” cf. 1 Thess. 4:3, 8.³⁴

Present in Melanchthon’s logic is that “command” and “debt” necessitate obedience to the law. The law carries its eternal function for the regenerate man. Melanchthon writes, “the Law must be preached to the regenerate to teach them certain works in which God wills that we practice obedience.”³⁵ Melanchthon in locus 17 articulates this conviction with striking clarity.

But in regards to discipline, we have already said under that locus that all men have not been born or are extremely weak need to be urged forward and made accustomed to virtue by discipline according to the Law, which does apply to us. And elsewhere I have mentioned the four cases of reasons, of which the first is that it is necessary to be obedient to the discipline when God commands it.³⁶

The virtue and discipline of the eternal law creates a righteous man. Here the *Absolving Word* is not the agent of the change but rather, the free will synergistically working with the law.

Absolving Word and Sanctification

This is why Luther deals very differently with sanctification of the Christian that is conceived only according to the word of forgiveness rather than the law. The *Absolving Word* not only brings justification, but it also establishes, creates, and nourishes the new creature in sanctification. At this point, justification and sanctification are inseparable and the law is absent.

³⁴ Melanchthon, *Loci Communes* 1543, 103.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

Then do we do nothing and work nothing in order to obtain this righteousness? I reply: Nothing at all. For this righteousness means to do nothing, to hear nothing, and to know nothing about the Law or about works but to know and believe only this: that Christ has gone to the Father and is now invisible; that He sits in heaven at the right hand of the Father, not as a Judge but as one who has been made for us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption from God (1 Cor. 1:30); in short, that He is our High Priest, interceding for us and reigning over us and in us through grace.³⁷

The *Absolving Word* reigns where Christ reigns. Christ reigns as the *Salvator* and not the *Legislator*.³⁸ This stands in contrast to the medieval tradition, even under Biel's understanding of God as *Legislator*.³⁹ As Luther notes, Christ's reign is marked by the bestowal of grace of the *Absolving Word*. As Christ's reign bestows the *Absolving Word*, it creates the kingdom of the eternal gospel. This reign is Christ's sanctifying work for the sinner, where the law ends, and the *Absolving Word* reigns eternally.

Justification and sanctification must be grasped as a dynamic unity in the light of God's eschatological act that brings new life from death. "Progress" in sanctification is not immanent moral progress but the coming of the kingdom of God among us through the power of unconditional justification. Growth is growth in grace. Sanctification occurs when unconditional justification begins to take the person away from sin, not just to take sin away from the person. There is death to the old, and rebirth to the new in heart, mind, and soul. Justification *sola gratia* sets free from works and just so inspires spontaneity and naturalness in doing truly *good* works.⁴⁰

Sanctification cannot in anyway separate itself from justification, with the *Absolving Word* at the center. As a result, sanctification *is* returning to the *Absolving Word* to realize one's final justification.

³⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:28.

³⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1985), 111.

³⁹ Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 119.

⁴⁰ Gerhard O. Forde, "Justification and Sanctification," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 425.

The “progress” of the Christian therefor, is the progress of one who has constantly to get used to the fact that we are justified totally by faith, constantly has somehow to “recover,” so to speak, from that death blow to pride and presumption-or better, is constantly being raised from the tomb of all pious ambition to something quite new. The believer has to be renewed daily in that. The Old Being is to be daily drowned in repentance and raised in faith. The progress of the Christian life is not our movement toward the goal, it is the movement of the goal upon us...”Complete” sanctification is not the goal but the source of all good works.⁴¹

The interrelatedness of justification and sanctification is only connected by the *Absolving Word*, and thus establishing the eternal gospel. One repeatedly returns to the *Absolving Word*, re-receiving grace, and sharing the remaining old creature in service to the neighbor. The *Absolving Word* now creates *Ordinem Dei*, i.e. the eternal gospel without any law. Luther understands returning to the reformation discovery of the *Absolving Word* is the progression of faith, i.e. the inseparability of justification and sanctification.⁴² It is the return of the *Absolving Word* upon us that is true progression for faith.

Forde’s description of the interrelatedness of justification and sanctification by virtue of the *Absolving Word*, expresses the uniqueness of Luther’s thought. This concept is succinctly captured in his exposition on the third article of the Nicene Creed of his *Large Catechism*. Justification and sanctification both occur at the arrival of the *Absolving Word* upon a sinner.

Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and

⁴¹ Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1990), 51.

⁴² Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation*, 92.

proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation. Therefore to sanctify is nothing else than to bring us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing, which we could not obtain by ourselves.⁴³

Absolving Word and the Boundaries of the Law and the Gospel

The *Absolving Word* ends the function of the law for the Christian, who was once a sinner but now has become righteous by Christ's righteousness. In his *First Disputation Against the Antinomians*, Luther cites the presence of the incarnate *Absolving Word* as the inauguration of the new reality for the Christian.

The law and the prophets last till Christ. When He is present, they cease, since he fulfills the law. And then, since the law condemned him as an innocent, he removed the entire power of the law, which consists in requiring, accusing, and terrifying. This requiring ceased in Christ, but only through the forgiveness of sins and divine imputation; for it is God's will to consider the law fulfilled as long as we believe in the Fulfiller of the law... Therefore to the extent the law is fulfilled, it is removed. In Christ it is fulfilled perfectly.⁴⁴

Again the law does not have any room for operation when the *Absolving Word* is present. The law ends. Christ fulfills the law by becoming the curse.⁴⁵ Christ fulfills the law by abolishing it.⁴⁶ It becomes a *lex vacua*. Luther, of course alludes to his argument in his 1535 *Galatians Commentary*. Christ's fulfillment is being the one who exhausts the law by becoming the greatest sinner on the cross and forcing the legal demands of the law to

⁴³ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 436.

⁴⁴ Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 48.

⁴⁵ Ragnar Bring, *Christus Und Das Gesetz: Die Bedeutung Des Gesetzes Des Alten Testaments Nach Paulus Und Sein Glauben an Christus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), 23.

⁴⁶ Regin Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, trans. Theodor I. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 389.

sin against God.⁴⁷ The legal demand puts God the Son to death. The law overstepped its boundaries. The *Absolving Word* ends the law via the Cross and Resurrection of Christ alone, and by the establishment of the eternal gospel.

The *Absolving Word* ends the eternal law for the Christian by bestowing an evangelical righteousness, and not a legal righteousness. For the evangelical righteousness does not seek to fulfill a legal system, but to overcome, remove, and eradicate the legal or forensic system. Here, grace outbalances and overwhelms demand with its legal and forensic aspects. Regin Prenter best captures the idea. Since God's righteousness existed before time and the creation of the law, it is independent of it. What the law signifies is fulfilled by the function of the *Absolving Word* in the Christian sinner.

Here we find that the form of merit and the order of the law really broken. Our righteousness is not at all under the sign of the law. As Luther stated in his *Table Talks* of 1542, referring to the experience in the tower, it is not legal righteousness but an evangelical righteousness. Our righteousness consists in accepting Christ as a gift. For his own righteousness consists in living as the gift of God to us. Therefore to have his righteousness reckoned to us is the same as to receive him as a gift, and in receiving this gift live as children of God, superior to and independent of all law, just as Christ did. Only in this way is the law fulfilled in us. Just as Christ alone fulfilled the law before he met the law in order to become eternally free and independent of it, so we fulfill the law by beginning to be free and independent of it, because we in faith are sons together with Christ. The law is fulfilled only in free will. And it can be voluntarily fulfilled only by the one who in eternity has been free and independent of it. Here the form of merit is broken. In this manner the law and the fulfillment of the law are understood on the basis of the work of Christ conquering the law, not the work of Christ understood on the basis of the demands of the unconquered law.⁴⁸

Luther is able to speak of both justification and the operation of merit as incompatible.

Christ does not justify Himself in service to the law, and neither does the Christian

⁴⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:277-278.

⁴⁸ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), 37-38.

peccator. Christ is not a law-giver.⁴⁹ The function of law does not make any one righteous, but only the function of the *Absolving Word*, which bestows not a legal righteousness, but an evangelical righteousness.

The function of the *Absolving Word* gives what the law signifies. This is the great irony and insight of Christian faith that Luther proclaimed to a legally minded world. The law, as Luther observed does many things, but it cannot create life or order. Luther notes this ironic truth in his *Sixth Disputation Against the Antinomians*.

The law is abolished for Christians, so that it does not condemn, but it is confirmed nonetheless, as Paul says: We do not destroy the law by faith, but we confirm it (Rom. 3:31). For after I have accepted righteousness the law thinks like me and affirms that I have true righteousness.⁵⁰

The new creature, created, completed, and conquered by the *Absolving Word* will look like the perfect harmony that the law aims to achieve. Eternity with God does not contain death, law, sin, and the devil, but rather is overflowing with forgiveness, mercy, absolution, and eternal life. While on earth, the function of the law is bound to condemn the new creature in the same way it sinned against Christ. By faith, the new creature is only to listen to the *Absolving Word*, which is the Christian's reality. This function of the law will end, as it cannot exist in or with the eternal gospel. The *Absolving Word* will give what the law signifies, which is not the eternal law, but rather the eternal gospel.

The law cannot give what it signifies. This is the genius and uniqueness to Luther's thought. The law cannot give what it demands. Luther writes in his *Fifth Disputation Against the Antinomians*, "But when the law comes, security ceases, and it

⁴⁹ Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 54-55.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

leads us to know ourselves.”⁵¹ Luther also mentions the laws limited use in his *Galatians Commentary* of 1535.

He calls it “the letter that kills” or “the ministry of death and damnation” or “the power of sin.” He deliberately chooses these loathsome names, which show the power and function of the Law clearly and accurately, in order to frighten us away from the Law in the matter of justification. For when it is used at its very best, the Law is unable to do anything but make the conscience guilty, increase sin, and threaten with death and eternal damnation.⁵²

The law does not bestow peace, mercy, and grace. It cannot liberate the *old Adam* from itself.⁵³ Gustaf Wingren writes, “When the law becomes the way of salvation, it goes against God’s commandment and order.”⁵⁴ The law cannot establish the eternal gospel. The law cannot give what it signifies. This very fact repositions the eternal law out of eternity where joy and peace reside, and locates it where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The law does not apply to the new creature in the Christian, since the *Absolving Word* brings the eternal gospel. This principle is deeply imbedded in Luther’s thought, guiding his systematic directions.

The Law is given to the Jews. This proposition is to be denied, since the moral law is given to all nations. Furthermore, we do not preach the law to Christians insofar as they are Christians. For the Christian is a pious man who has forgiveness of sins and is free from the law and the devil.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid., 167.

⁵² Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:362-363.

⁵³ Karl Holl, *What Did Luther Understand by Religion?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 71.

⁵⁴ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 110.

⁵⁵ Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 214.

The consequence of this notion is that since the Christian only exists in heaven, the law ceases to exist. The Christian is not bound to the law, but rather to the eternal gospel.

The law only exists within the realm of restraining and condemning a sinful identity outside of faith. Luther argues that this relates to both Christians and non-Christians, since both have the *old Adam*.

For the impious, however, the demands of the law remain. To be sure, it also accuses and threatens the pious, but it is unable to drive them into despair and damn them. Therefore, when Christ appeared at the time of John, the law and the prophets ceased.⁵⁶

It is important to note that this existence in relationship to law for the Christian is only temporal. The law cannot continue to be in relationship with the Christian, for the *Absolving Word* absolves the necessitating feature of the law, i.e. sin itself. The function of the law only exists for a time, but must cease with the arrival of the eternal gospel.

The time of the law ends when the *Absolving Word* is pronounced to the Christian sinner and the resurrected Christian. This happens in relational and historical time to Christ. Luther expresses this in his *Second Disputation Against the Antinomians*.

We concede the entire argument. Where sin ceases, there the law ceases. And to the extent sin has ceased, the law has ceased, so that in the coming life, the law ought simply to cease, since at that time it will be fulfilled. For at that time there will be nothing left to excite sins, or any sin that could be accused by the law.⁵⁷

Sin ceases when the *Absolving Word* is spoken. Since the Christian exists as *simul iustus et peccator*, the law remains to restrain the sinner. This function of the law only lasts for a limited historical time. Forde's observation is helpful at this point. He explains that Luther understands that the law is written on the human heart and not in the eternal will

⁵⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 90-91.

of God.⁵⁸ This is why Luther removes the law from heaven in his *First Disputation Against the Antinomians*. Luther recognizes that at the time of the physical resurrection, the law will not follow the Christian into heaven, but be eternally abolished from the realm of the eternal gospel.

For as sin and death never rest, but repeatedly perturb and sadden the pious as long as they live, so that the law repeatedly returns to the consciences of the pious and utterly terrifies them. Yet when we are raised it will simply be abolished; it will neither teach us nor exact anything from us.⁵⁹

The *Absolving Word* ends the law at the resurrection. Luther states, “Paul speaks about the damning law. When we will arrive in heaven, then we will no longer preach the law.”⁶⁰ The only place law could be eternal, is in hell for the unjustified sinner.⁶¹

Thus after Christ in the coming life, there it will remain as fulfilled, when that, what it meanwhile demands, is brought about—the new creature... For never will the law be removed in eternity, but it will remain, either as to be fulfilled in those damned, or as fulfilled in those blessed.⁶²

The *Absolving Word* places the eternal law historically and eternally behind the Christian, and the eternal gospel historically and eternally with the Christian.

The *Absolving Word* unifies historical and relational times eschatologically. The end arrives in the spoken *Absolving Word* both relationally and historically.

Man as sinner can never escape the *lex accusans*. He can never place himself above the law. Insofar as he is sinner he is always under the law. Only actual death and resurrection can deliver him from this predicament... The paradigm for

⁵⁸ Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development*, 183.

⁵⁹ Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 44.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶¹ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, 275-276.

⁶² Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 82.

faith is death and resurrection. In faith and in hope man is free from the law. The eschatological possibility is made a present possibility only through faith in Christ.⁶³

The *Absolving Word* bestows grace, which creates faith and bonds together historical and relational time with God. By the *Absolving Word* and in faith, the Christian is no longer under the law. The power of the law itself ends under this *Christiana libertate*.⁶⁴ Once faith is removed in the afterlife, so is the *lex accusans*, which faith hopes against in the present time. The *Absolving Word* brings historical and relational time together eschatologically, making the *lex vacua* and the eternal gospel a present reality for the Christian life.

Absolving Word and the Fruit of Faith

Luther realized that once the *Absolving Word* freed the sinner from death then the fruit of faith arrives. This fruit of faith is love and service to the neighbor. This fruit does not come by means of the law but is rather “organic,” and spontaneous, and so given in the form of reassurance for faith that depends only on the absolution, rather than on feeling and seeing.

The *Absolving Word* bestows grace for the new creature to serve the neighbor voluntarily out of Christian love. This is the difference between Luther and Melancthon. Melancthon viewed the obligation to neighbor as obedience to the law, where in Luther the *Absolving Word* creates obedience to the gospel that expresses itself in voluntary love to the neighbor. Reflecting on Luther’s understanding of the two kingdoms, Notger

⁶³ Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development*, 185.

⁶⁴ Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, 280.

Slenczka states, “Christian freedom is a free discernment for neighborly love... Since Christian freedom is unconditional and independent from any tangible realization and verification (and as promise, counterfactual).”⁶⁵ Love flows from “the relationship with God”, established by the *Absolving Word*, through faith and toward the neighbor.⁶⁶ This love for neighbor takes the place of selfish love, since the *Absolving Word* frees love for neighbor.⁶⁷ It is true that under a legal scheme, the *Absolving Word* bestowing a promise and creating a “good tree” is counter intuitive. This is the main difference between Luther and Melanchthon. The function of the law does not create works of love, but rather the *Absolving Word* creates the loving new creature, who is ruled by the eternal gospel.

The *Absolving Word* not only brings the law to an end, but also brings the sinner’s self serving pursuit of virtue to death. The *vita activa* always seeks virtue, which is conditioned by desire.

Justification kills, and this is the only unconditional act of ultimate mercy; it kills the presumptuous self of the *vita activa*, kills the modes by which one pretends to create an enduring presence that is nothing but the lifeless leftovers of a gift not received, but somehow transacted, negotiated.⁶⁸

Justification puts to death the pursuit of a teleological conditioned act. No longer does the *simul iustus et peccator* seek to create a virtuous future by an active life, but rather produces neighborly love through a passive life under the eternal gospel. The pursuit that defines a sinner as a sinner ends in death by virtue of the *Absolving Word*.

⁶⁵ Notger Slenczka, “God and Evil: Martin Luther’s Teaching on Temporal Authority and the Two Realms,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2012): 7.

⁶⁶ Gordon Rupp, *Luther’s Progress to the Diet of Worms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 89.

⁶⁷ Karl Holl, *The Reconstruction of Morality*, trans. Fred W. Meuser & Walter R. Wietzke (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 72-73.

⁶⁸ Vitor Westhelle, “Justification as Death and Gift,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2010): 252.

Absolving Word and the New Creation

If the sinner ends, along with the law, then who is the Christian? Here we must speak of the new creation. Once the law ends, the Christian life exists in a new way that is not shaped by the law. This is really what is meant by freedom. This freedom begins with what is meant by a new creature, a new creation, and so a new, spiritual kingdom.

Due his exposure to the *Absolving Word* Luther separated “reality” in contrast to signs. This is because under the law everything had to be guessed at in terms of signs, since nothing was complete and nothing was done. So theology was reduced to fragments that were taken as giving a sign of what might come in the future—even if the law cannot be done now, the future may yet yield something of our activities. But Luther now could be rid of such “signs” and fragments, and could speak about wholes, truth and reality since that is what God provides and does outside the law.

The *Absolving Word* not only brings the law to an end, but also brings resurrection in the eternal gospel that nurtures the new creation. This is a unique feature to Luther’s theology, though common to the early Christian faith. This idea arises in Luther’s *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*.

Now since all this constitutes one sacramental reality, one can truly and properly say of each part, as for example the cup, “This is Christ’s blood; this is the new testament; there is forgiveness of sins; there is life and salvation”; just as I point to the man Christ and say, “This is God; this is the truth, the life, salvation, wisdom,” etc.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 37:338.

Luther's understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum* becomes *vere et realiter* rather than merely a *signum verbale*.⁷⁰ This new understanding is created by the reformational turn of the *Absolving Word*. The *communicatio idiomatum* occurs not just in God suffering in the manger as a child, but also in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. The *Absolving Word* creates the true reality of the resurrection and brings the true reality of the Resurrecter. This idea will reprise and be solidified by Luther as a confessional truth to the faith in his *Small Catechism*.

The words "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation...Eating and drinking do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded.⁷¹

The words of Christ spoken through the preacher, brings the *Absolving Word*. Believers attach to the God who speaks by means of this word.⁷² The *Absolving Word* is "doing" salvation to the believer, bringing an end to the old and ushering in the new.⁷³ But more than merely ending the law, the words of absolution primarily bestow grace and the eternal gospel. The *vita activa* drowns in insignificance, since the past, present, and future of the *simul iustus et peccator* are conditioned by *Absolving Word* of the "Merciful

⁷⁰ Notger Slenczka, "Communicatio Idiomatum," in *Religion in Geschichte Und Gegenwart*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 433.

⁷¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 362-363.

⁷² Theodor Dieter, "Martin Luther's Understanding of 'Reason'," *Lutheran Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2011): 255.

⁷³ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 157.

Judge” as opposed to the law-driven “ruling and judging Christ.”⁷⁴ The *Absolving Word*, Christ alone, bestows the *Absolving Word*, i.e. life and salvation. The benefits of the *Absolving Word* cannot be systematically narrowed down, to the degree that it excludes benefits. It can only be narrowed down to the degree that its benefits are innumerable, and that it excludes the function of the law out from its operation. The law cannot exist in the resurrection. After all, it was the function of the law that wished to deny Christ’s life and put Him to death. This *Absolving Word* resurrects the sinner historically, relationally, and eschatologically at the moment it is spoken. The time of the law ends when the *Absolving Word* resurrects the Christian sinner and nurtures the new creation.

Luther’s reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* replaced the theory of eternal law with the reality of the eternal gospel. For the Christian, i.e. the one who is *simul iustus et peccator*, the *Absolving Word* ends the law.

Circumcision and other ceremonies were meant for a certain people and time; after its completion, they ceased. Yet the Decalogue still dwells in the conscience. For if God had never given the law by Moses, the human mind nonetheless by nature would have had the idea that God is to be worshiped and the neighbor is to be loved. The Decalogue also has its predetermined time; that is to say, when Christ appeared in the flesh and submitted himself to the law, he took away its right and restrained its sentence, so that it may not be able to drive into despair and condemn. In the future life, however, it will be totally removed. In heaven it will not be necessary to admonish to love God. But then we will truly and perfectly do what Christ did here. At that time you will not say: “I should love the Father,” but: “I love the Father,” and “as he has given me command, thus I do.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Albrecht Beutel, “Luther’s Life,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5; Klaus Schwarzwaller, “Justification and Reality,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2010): 293.

⁷⁵ Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 43.

The law becomes truly a *lex vacua*. Its function is only to exhaust itself of its power, so the gospel can take its proper existence as eternal. The function of the law remains eternally behind the Christian.

CHAPTER 4

ABSOLVING WORD AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Introduction

In this chapter it will be argued that the reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* led Luther to conclude that the Holy Spirit is only properly understood as the monergistic actor in justification and the sanctification of the broken sinner. That is, He is the only One acting for the sinner's justification and sanctification without any cooperation from the one who is a saved sinner, and giving the saved sinner Christ alone. This gives Luther a Christocentric pneumatology, but one that is never abstracted from the promise of forgiveness. The Holy Spirit preserves the salvation of the sinner as well, perseveres one to salvation, bestows Christian righteousness, and creates the image of God in the one who is saved. The Holy Spirit does this purely by the *Absolving Word*, which is the salvific external word of God. The earthly preacher is the means by which the Holy Spirit breathes this *Absolving Word* onto the hearer. The *Absolving Word* is the word of Christ preached. The Holy Spirit separates the law and the gospel in such away that Christ is the last word and the *Absolving Word*. This functional reality is the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit on the preacher, who is charged with giving Christ over to the hearer. While elevating Christ by the pronouncement of the *Absolving Word*, the Holy Spirit gives the law its limit, by bringing it to an end by the *Absolving Word*. Due to this work, the law truly has two limited functions, which is to restrain and to condemn. The law cannot create life, but the Holy Spirit creates the new creature through the hearing of the gospel.

That is, He creates a new creature who is free to love and serve the neighbor, while eternally living under the good news of the *Absolving Word*.

For a systematic perspective, Luther's reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* must also be understood as creating a new Christocentric pneumatology. The Holy Spirit brings Christ alone, who is working the *Absolving Word* through the Holy Spirit for chosen sinners.¹ A relationship between the one who is *simul iustus et peccator* and the Holy Spirit becomes a salvific relationship, whose logic is typified as abundant.

The grace desired is the forgiveness of sins (not *caritas* or anything else). The remarkable thing is that Luther is here on the very threshold of the "discovery" as the concrete word which is itself the answer to the penitent's prayer to be received with faith: the word of forgiveness. Absolution is not mentioned explicitly, but Luther's interpretation suggests it, and perhaps assumes it: one prays to hear the spoken word of forgiveness, and to sense and feel (*sentire*) by the Spirit's inspiration that his sins are indeed forgiven.²

The spoken *Absolving Word* is the proper presence of the Holy Spirit, who monergistically justifies and sanctifies the one who is *simul iustus et peccator*. That is, He is the only One who is redemptively acting in relationship to the human. As a result of hearing the *Absolving Word*, Luther better understood the inseparable relationship between the external word and the Holy Spirit. His arguments for this reality are evident in his use of Is. 61:1, Luke 4:18, Rom. 10:17, and 2 Peter 1:20-21.³ He then realized that the *Absolving Word* is the external word of preaching and the ministry of the Holy Spirit

¹ Won Yong Ji, "The Work of the Holy Spirit and the Charismatic Movements, from Luther's Perspective," *Concordia Journal* 11, no. 6 (1985): 204.

² James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 264-265.

³ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 9:52; 15:275-276; 16:335; 17:329-330; 20:80; 22:23; 24:336; 40:146; 59:178; 69:356, 380.

entrusted to the minister.⁴ This *Absolving Word* is the proper function of the Gospel.⁵ As Luther came to this understanding, he then realized that the Holy Spirit also directs the understanding of scripture toward the *Absolving Word* via the distinction of law and gospel. Through this new discovery Luther understood that the Holy Spirit brought not just the *Absolving Word* through a grammatical form, but also through a functional form that is real, where even absolution breaks through to a sinner by Christ declaring the sinner “brother.”⁶ Though the human heart cannot believe this, Christ is still offered in the *Absolving Word*.⁷ For Luther, preaching is the *Absolving Word* at work. Through this work of the Holy Spirit, the sinner becomes a new creation, possessing the *imago Dei* as God’s child.

The Holy Spirit functions as the only agent in bringing salvation to a sinner. This function does not happen by inner revelation, but rather by the divine calling of the Holy Spirit through the *Absolving Word*.

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith.⁸

The *Absolving Word* is the gospel, i.e. the living presence of the crucified, risen, and absolving Christ. This *Absolving Word* breathes the Holy Spirit onto the sinner, as the

⁴ Ibid., 69:352-353, 410-411.

⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 319.

⁶ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 69:307-309, 396.

⁷ Ibid., 54:19.

⁸ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 355.

resurrected Christ did with his disciples in giving them the keys of the kingdom in John 20. This does two things, not one. This destroys the old sinner and creates a new creature. The fact that for the time being these overlap, with the old sinner still clinging to the new saint, is what Luther means by the *simul iustus et peccator*. Lennart Pinomaa writes, “Christian existence is characterized by a double aspect: the believer is a sinner, and the believer is righteous; in himself he is a sinner, but in Christ he is righteous.”⁹ The breathing of the Holy Spirit is none other than the giving of the *Absolving Word*, which means that the Spirit never operates or lives outside the Word. This word creates an office of preaching into which preachers are called. So, the sender sends the messenger, and the messenger brings the sender. There is an inseparable nature of the Trinity, due to the shared absolving essence of the three persons.¹⁰ Since the economy of God is the *Absolving Word*, as we read in the first chapter of the *Gospel of John*, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The persons, the Holy Spirit, Christ alone, and the *absolvendi Pater* have one aim. That aim is to absolve the sinner and to bring resurrection from death to life.

The Holy Spirit Alone

The Holy Spirit solely preserves the salvation of the new creature through the *Absolving Word*. Luther’s reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* places perseverance in the office of the Holy Spirit rather than the human will.

Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all

⁹ Lennart Pinomaa, *Faith Victorious* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 77.

¹⁰ Miguel Brugarolas, “La Procepción Del Espíritu Santo En Gregorio De Nisa,” *Scripta Theologica* 44, no. 1 (2012): 48-49.

the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.¹¹

The Holy Spirit works to preserve sinners through the preaching of the *Absolving Word*. Preaching demands an objective speaker and not an inner voice. The scholastic pneumatology dealt with inner searching and meditation for seeking God's voice by the *voluntas*. The evangelical enthusiasts who emerged after Luther also returned to the synergism of the *voluntas* that was thought to ignite the work of the Holy Spirit. The reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* caused Luther to break with the inner voice and move towards the outer ear where God creates and preserves. The direction of preserving salvation comes from the outer voice of the Holy Spirit who creates *promissorily* through the speaking of the *Absolving Word* that distinguishes the *simul iustus et peccator*.

Once the imaginary free choices of will are removed from justification and sanctification, the Holy Spirit emerges in theology once more to be truly divine—a monergistic actor. The Holy Spirit “is the true subject, producer, and agent of sanctification.”¹² Only the *Absolving Word* bestowing the gospel can make a sinner holy.¹³ This means that the Holy Spirit works this work without any other help. The reason the Holy Spirit is so late to the doctrine of the Trinity, and often the forgotten person of God, is that His place is taken by one version or another of freedom of the will. This does not merely obscure the saint, it obscures the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the *Absolving Word* made Luther at the same time a bold teacher of the full divinity of

¹¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 356.

¹² Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, 71.

¹³ Regin Prenter, *The Word and the Spirit*, trans. Harris E. Kaasa (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), 103.

the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit speaks into the creation the new creation.¹⁴ For Luther, sanctification is not a synergistic process, but a monergistic act of the Holy Spirit whose reverberations are felt in the life of the saved sinner.

How does such sanctifying take place? Answer: Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through his birth, death, and resurrection, etc., so the Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following: the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. That is, he first leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church's lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ.¹⁵

For a sinner to be sanctified is to hear the preached word, again and again. This is the down-to-earth of the gospel, to hear the absolution repeatedly.¹⁶ The objective *Absolving Word* comes from outside the sinner, giving the true reality of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The *Absolving Word* creates in the sinner a fruitful heart that grants the absolution to others. This sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from the *Absolving Word*. The Holy Spirit speaks through the absolver. Indeed, the fact that the Holy Spirit speaks through the absolver is the reason that this *Absolving Word* is not a mere sign of something that lies elsewhere, perhaps in the inner ear or self, but instead is the thing itself (the *res*).

¹⁴ Johannes Schwanke, "Luther's Theology of Creation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 210.

¹⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 435-436.

¹⁶ Inge Lønning, "Lifting the Condemnations: Does It Make Sense?" in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden (Cambridge: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 182.

The apostolic succession is, therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit and signifies the *Absolving Word*. For Luther the *Absolving Word* is the work of the Holy Spirit, in calling a minister of the Word.

When Paul says that his Gospel is “not man’s,” he does not mean that his Gospel is not human... But he had simply received it by a revelation of Jesus Christ... “Rise,” Christ says to him, “and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9:6). Christ does not tell him to enter the city in order to learn the Gospel from Ananias. Ananias was commanded to go and baptize him, to lay his hands on him, to commit the ministry of the Word to him, and to commend him to the church—but not to teach him the Gospel, which he had already received, as he boasts here, by a revelation of Jesus Christ on the road. Ananias himself acknowledges this when he says (Acts 9:17): “Brother Saul, the Lord who appeared to you on the road has sent me that you may regain your sight.” Therefore he did not receive his doctrine from Ananias. But having already been called, enlightened, and taught by Christ on the road, he was sent to Ananias, so that he might have the testimony of men also to his having been called by God to preach the Gospel of Christ.¹⁷

Dorothy Wendebourg explains that this *Absolving Word* not only licenses the minister, but also holds the faith together. She writes, “The catholicity of space and of time is the work of the gospel itself, of the apostolic message through which God, in the Holy Spirit, at all times and in all places provokes faith and upholds the communion of the faithful.”¹⁸

Luther’s reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* shapes his understanding of the apostolic succession and catholicity to be based solely on the *Absolving Word* of the Holy Spirit.

The minister of the Word is the instrument of the Holy Spirit for handing over the *Absolving Word*. For Luther, the Holy Spirit speaks exclusively through a preacher to

¹⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:62-63.

¹⁸ Dorothea Wendebourg, “The Ministry and Ministries,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (2001): 177.

bestow the *Absolving Word*. Edgar Carlson notes this unique characteristic of Luther's in his examination of *The Large Catechism*.

Note that what is here described as the work of the Holy Spirit is identical with the function of the ministry. This is why the minister can be the absolver; this is the reason that one should listen to his absolution as to the very voice of God. He is at once the voice of the church and the voice of the Spirit. The church is the Body of Christ in the world in which the Spirit dwells and through which he works. The minister is the mouthpiece of the church and of the Spirit. Because the minister is the instrument of the Spirit, we must not suppose that the efficacy of the Spirit's work depends upon the worthiness of the instrument... The penitent believer can receive the blessings of the sacrament, the truth of the Gospel, and the remission of sins even at the hands of an unworthy minister.¹⁹

The absolver is the speaker of the Holy Spirit. Luther's category of the *Absolving Word* moves the means of the Holy Spirit from prayer to proclamation over a sinner. The Holy Spirit places His voice in the mouth of the absolver, and creates the Christian ministry. So, the entire third article of the creed emerges for Luther on the basis of the absolution. This means not only the person and work of the Holy Spirit, but the teaching of the ministry, apostolic succession, the catholicity of the church and the final things regarding death and resurrection.

The Holy Spirit is sent to bring the *Absolving Word*. That is the proper operation of the Holy Spirit. This is the sovereign voice from a preacher outside of the self.²⁰ Whether it creates conviction or consolation, the Holy Spirit carries the *Absolving Word* toward the sinner.

¹⁹ Arnold Carlson, "Luther and the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," *Lutheran Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1959): 89.

²⁰ Moritz Fischer, "'The Spirit Helps Us in Our Weakness': Charismatization of Worldwide Christianity and the Quest for an Appropriate Pneumatology with Focus on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20 (2011): 112; Martin E. Marty, "Preaching on the Holy Spirit: A Study of Luther's Sermons on the Evangelical Pericopes," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26, no. 6 (1955): 426.

This sort of doctrine, which reveals the Son of God, is not taught, learned, or judged by any human wisdom or by the Law itself; it is revealed by God, first by the external Word and then inwardly through the Spirit. Therefore the Gospel is a divine Word that came down from heaven and is revealed by the Holy Spirit, who was sent for this very purpose. Yet this happens in such a way that the external Word must come first. For Paul himself did not have an inward revelation until he had heard the outward Word from heaven, namely, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?” (Acts 9:4). Thus he heard the outward Word first; only then did there follow revelations, the knowledge of the Word, faith, and the gifts of the Spirit.²¹

For Luther there is nothing inward that possesses the ability to bring a sinner to God. To the contrary, Aquinas believed that an inward willingness sparks the grace to work in the soul.²² But for Luther there is no cooperation needed to assist the reception of grace, since the Holy Spirit imposes it on the sinner and supplies it for the saint. The *Absolving Word* is not sparked by inward divine revelation, but rather is carried toward broken humanity by the Holy Spirit. This objective reality is Christian truth, the basis for the whole third article and (subsequently also what is meant by the Father in creation and the Son in salvation.)

The work of the Holy Spirit creates Christian righteousness by the *Absolving Word*. This righteousness is not only imputed forensically, but is truly bestowed in the new creation. Though it is passive righteousness, it produces love for neighbor. It is a righteousness that serves the neighbor by power of the gospel.

Christ has no other righteousness than the one he works in us. By that righteousness he fulfills the law. This righteousness is not only *Christi justitia*. Because it always exists in behalf of God and so may be called God’s own

²¹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:73.

²² Claudio Basevi, “La Justificación En Los Comentarios De Pelagio, Lutero Y Santo Tomás a La Epístola a Los Romanos,” *Scripta Theologica* 19, no. 1-2 (1987): 172.

righteousness, it is also Christ's grace and Christ's favor, and-since he himself is God and man-God's grace and God's favor.²³

Thus we see that the whole teaching on good works emerges also from the absolution, but now not as preparation or cooperation with the Holy Spirit, but as the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and so something that does not precede justification, but always follows it.

The dynamic of the Christian righteousness is that it bestows and works grace, mercy, favor, faith etc. in the new creation. It is wholly the righteousness of God. A righteousness of God that is not simply forensic, but is also relational, divine, and actual substance. Indeed, forensic now takes on a whole new aspect in the absolution. It is not merely like a declaration in a court of law that a man is not guilty, perhaps by a miscarriage of justice. It is not merely a legal statement. It is a creative statement, more like God creating at the beginning than a court judge passing on a verdict. For this reason forensic now means creative. It makes the reality, it does not merely identify something already there, or overlook the reality of the sinner. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's search for pneumatological and soteriological connection is fully evident in Luther, but only by the driving divine category of the *Absolving Word*.²⁴ The *Absolving Word* that justifies is also the *Absolving Word* that creates the loving neighbor via the Holy Spirit. In the giving of the *Absolving Word*, the Holy Spirit gives us the monergistic justifying and sanctifying righteousness of Christ. This work of the Holy Spirit alone does not cease upon the granting of the word of absolution. This forgiveness does not initiate a process within the new creation, but as with all creation, it makes it and sustains it all by means of the Word

²³ Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 37.

²⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "The Holy Spirit and Justification: The Ecumenical Significance of Luther's Doctrine of Salvation," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 24, no. 1 (2002): 39.

alone. The Holy Spirit's work does not only start as monergistic, but always remains so in eternity.

The Image of God and the Absolving Word

To grasp the radical nature of this change in pneumatology, it is worth considering the preceding teaching borrowed by the scholastics from Aristotle. Aristotle surmised that humanity is connection to essence of God, which is the divine intellect. God, in Aristotle's ethical view, is the primary *par excellence* of humanity.²⁵ For Aristotle, the Supreme Being is *Actus Purus*, i.e. the first cause.²⁶ Through the Supreme Being and its bestowal of actuality and potentiality, humanity has a direct connection to the Supreme Being *via* intellect.²⁷ The divine capability in humans is intellect, which resides naturally within the highest part of their being.²⁸

Now he who exercises his intellect and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state and most dear to the gods. For if the gods have any care for human affairs, as they are thought to have, it would be reasonable both that they should delight in that which was best and most akin to them (i.e. intellect) and that they should reward those who love and honour this most, as caring for the things that are dear to them and acting both rightly and nobly. And that all these attributes belong most of all to the wise man is manifest. He, therefore, is dearest to the gods.²⁹

²⁵ Richard Bodéüs, *Aristotle and Theology of the Living Immortals* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 182.

²⁶ Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2:1555.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:656.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:1861.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:1863.

The cultivation of this divine intellect forms a divine life. As Van Kooten explains, Aristotle expressed that there is imaged “likeness” between humanity and “gods.”³⁰ That analogy always holds between human and God, which makes the linkage between them possible, though always legal, as long as the human truly becomes more and more like God. In theological jargon, the image of God from the creation stories in the book of Genesis is none other than the divinely implanted intellect found in human beings.

Aquinas preserves and develops the category of the image of God outside of faith, that is, without the Holy Spirit, or at the very least, by limiting the work of the Holy Spirit in order to leave room for human cooperation in sanctification. This shifts the work from the Word over to the human will. Borrowing from Aristotle, Aquinas asserts that intellect is the natural God-given attribute in humanity that establishes a connection between humans and God without any later, external intervention.

Since man is said to be the image of God by reason of his intellectual nature, he is the most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature. Now the intellectual nature imitates God chiefly in this, that God understands and loves Himself. Wherefore we see that the image of God is in man in three ways. First, inasmuch as man possesses a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God; and this aptitude consists in the very nature of the mind, which is common to all men. Secondly, inasmuch as man actually and habitually knows and loves God, though imperfectly; and this image consists in the conformity of grace. Thirdly, inasmuch as man knows and loves God perfectly; and this image consists in the likeness of glory. Wherefore on the words, “The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us” (Ps.4:7), the gloss distinguishes a threefold image of “creation,” of “re-creation,” and of “likeness.” The first is found in all men, the second only in the just, the third only in the blessed.³¹

³⁰ George H. Van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity*, vol. 232, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 136-138.

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1:471.

The function of intellect and grace conforms the sinner to likeness of God. However, there is no creative function, but rather the training of natural faculties which then is understood as the perfecting nature. For Aquinas, what is needed is an abstract form of grace. All humans have a connection with God via intellect that needs a blast of grace to inform its structure in the form of law. The image of God possesses an aptitude for connecting with the divine via an abstract entity of grace in the form of law.

The discovery of the absolution lead directly to Luther's rejection of the idea that the image of God exists in humanity after the upward fall of Adam. Luther notes in his *Genesis Commentary* that St. Augustine claims that humans are in God's image by virtue of intelligence, natural endowments, and unique capabilities of reason. Luther is quick to note that these theories are dangerous and unhelpful, as Satan also demonstrates the characteristic of intellect.

If these powers are the image of God, it will also follow that Satan was created according to the image of God, since he surely has these natural endowments, such as memory and a very superior intellect and a most determined will, to a far higher degree than we have them.³²

For Luther, the rational faculty cannot fully comprehend matters of faith, as demonstrated in his 1519 *Sermon on the Sacrament of Christ's Body*.³³ Luther believes Adam possessed the image of God, which was the trust in God's promise above all things. However, this image was lost in the upward fall of Adam's seeking freedom and volition by virtue of his intellect. All humans possess original sin, which needs the remedy of the *Absolving Word*. This reality is the work of the Holy Spirit.

³² Luther, *Luther's Works*, 1:26.

³³ Ibid., 35:60-61; Martin Wernisch, "Luther and Medieval Reform Movements, Particularly the Hussites," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 68.

The Holy Spirit ushers in the *Absolving Word* that resurrects the sinner into the image of God. Self-liberation into the new creation is impossible.³⁴ Unlike Aquinas, who sought transformation by the abstract form of grace in cooperation with intellect, Luther emphasizes the reality of resurrection by the specific and abundant form of the *Absolving Word*.

But now the Gospel has brought about the restoration of that image. Intellect and will indeed have remained, but both very much impaired. And so the Gospel brings it about that we are formed once more according to that familiar and indeed better image, because we are born again into eternal life or rather into the hope of eternal life by faith, that we may live in God and with God and be one with Him, as Christ says (John 17:21). And indeed, we are reborn not only for life but also for righteousness, because faith acquires Christ's merit and knows that through Christ's death we have been set free.³⁵

The *Absolving Word* resurrects the sinner through the work of the Holy Spirit. Working beyond intellect, virtues, and natural faculties, the Holy Spirit through the instrument of the spoken *Absolving Word* creates the new creation.

The image of God for Luther is to be a forgiven and sanctified sinner. Luther notes that a return to belief in the inner *zeitgeist* of the flesh is the way of the upward fall and that embraces the powers of the *old Adam* as had happened again in Paul's Galatian congregations.

The apostle also speaks of this form of Christ in Col. 3:10: "Put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator." Therefore Paul wants to restore the image of God or of Christ in the Galatians. It had been deformed or distorted by the false apostles, and it consists in this, that they feel, think, and want exactly what God does, whose thought and will it is that we obtain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus Christ, His Son, whom He sent into the world to be the expiation for our sins and for those of the whole world (1 John 2:2), so that through the Son we might acknowledge Him as our Father, who has been placated and is kindly disposed toward us. Those who

³⁴ Oswald Bayer, "Being the Image of God," *Lutheran Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2013): 86.

³⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 1:26.

believe this are like God; that is, they think of God altogether as He feels in His heart, and they have the same form in their mind that God or Christ has. This, according to Paul, is to “be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God” (Eph. 4:23–24).³⁶

The *Absolving Word* makes the sinner one with God via faith that claims God as Father, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit. According to this faith, the *simul iustus et peccator* is God’s child, just as the Father is the Father, which reflects the natural order of relationship. So the Father must absolve the child monergistically. Sharing in this understanding with the Father, is the *communicatio de imago Dei*. Those who are *simul iustus et peccator* are wholly the image of God as they trust in His forgiveness and resurrection in Christ alone.

Only the Holy Spirit creates the image of God, i.e., new creation, distinguishing the *simul iustus et peccator* by the *Absolving Word*. The Holy Spirit does the monergistic work of flooding the heart with Christ’s forgiveness of sins, so that it flows over to the neighbor. And as the illustrations suggests, a flood first puts the old to death and then raises up a new creature:

A new creation, by which the image of God is renewed (Col. 3:10), does not happen by the sham or pretense of some sort of outward works, because in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts; but it is “created after the likeness of God in righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). When works are performed, they do indeed give a new outward appearance, which captures the attention of the world and the flesh. But they do not produce a new creation, for the heart remains as wicked and as filled with contempt of God and unbelief as it was before. Thus a new creation is a work of the Holy Spirit, who implants a new intellect and will and confers the power to curb the flesh and to flee the righteousness and wisdom of the world. This is not a sham or merely a new outward appearance, but something really happens. A new attitude and a new judgment, namely, a spiritual one, actually come into being, and they now detest what they once admired. Our minds were once so captivated by the monastic life that we thought of it as the only way to salvation; now we think of it quite differently. What we used to adore, before this new creation, as the ultimate in

³⁶ Ibid., 26:340.

holiness now makes us blush when we remember it... Therefore a new creation is not a change in clothing or in outward manner, as the monks imagine, but a renewal of the mind by the Holy Spirit; this is then followed by an outward change in the flesh, in the parts of the body, and in the senses. For when the heart acquires new light, a new judgment, and new motivation through the Gospel, this also brings about a renewal of the senses. The ears long to hear the Word of God instead of listening any longer to human traditions and notions. The lips and the tongue do not boast of their own works, righteousness, and monastic rule; but joyfully they proclaim nothing but the mercy of God, disclosed in Christ. These changes are, so to speak, not verbal; they are real. They produce a new mind, a new will, new senses, and even new actions by the flesh, so that the eyes, the ears, the lips, and the tongue not only see, hear, and speak otherwise than they used to, but the mind itself evaluates things and acts upon them differently from the way it did before. Formerly it went about blindly in the errors and darkness of the pope, imagining that God is a peddler who sells His grace to us in exchange for our works and merits. Now that the light of the Gospel has risen, it knows that it acquires righteousness solely by faith in Christ. Therefore it now casts off its self-chosen works and performs instead the works of its calling and the works of love, which God has commanded. It praises God and proclaims Him, and it glories and exults solely in its trust in mercy through Christ. If it has to bear some sort of evil or danger, it accepts this willingly and joyfully, although the flesh goes on grumbling. This is what Paul calls “a new creation.”³⁷

The Holy Spirit, creating the new creation by the *Absolving Word*, ushers in the image of God, i.e., the image of Christ. Christ’s image cannot be generated by an abstract form of love, human will, or ignited by our natural intellect, but rather the sinner needs his and her original sin drowned in the *Absolving Word*. The new creation is created by the resurrecting *Absolving Word*, which is breathed upon the sinner monergistically by the Holy Spirit.

For Luther, the Holy Spirit is needed to give the *Absolving Word* through the means of an earthly preacher, which gives the proper image of God, i.e. Christ Himself. This is not an abstract form of love, but is a concrete word of absolution.

Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe in him and receive him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and

³⁷ Ibid., 27:139-140.

completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure, this redemption. Therefore being made holy is nothing else than bringing us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing, to which we could not have come by ourselves.³⁸

Luther's pneumatology does not rest in natural theological possibilities for connection with God. For Luther, Christ cannot be known outside the work of the Holy Spirit, which work is none other than the preaching of the *Absolving Word*.

For Luther, there is no path unto the Holy Spirit except by the external spoken *Absolving Word*. In his exposition of the faith in the *Smalcald Articles*, Luther irrevocably connects the *Absolving Word* and the Holy Spirit.³⁹

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts, that is, the "spirits," who boast that they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the Word. On this basis, they judge, interpret, and twist the Scripture or oral Word according to their pleasure. Müntzer did this, and there are still many doing this today, who set themselves up as shrewd judges between the spirit and the letter without knowing what they say or teach.⁴⁰

The enthusiast sought to replace the external Word with experience, in the montanist fashion, while seeking the Holy Spirit inside or above—anywhere but in the preached word.

³⁸ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 436.

³⁹ Hans J. Hillerbrand, "The Legacy of Martin Luther," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 230.

⁴⁰ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 322.

Luther's pneumatology also deeply criticized the papacy's abuse of power as another form of this enthusiasm. Luther identified the pope, *Schwärmer*, and Turks together as manifestations of the end time because they opposed the *Absolving Word*, which was none other than to oppose Christ.⁴¹

The papacy is also purely religious raving in that the pope boasts that “all laws are in the shrine of his heart” and that what he decides and commands in his churches is supposed to be Spirit and law—even when it is above or contrary to the Scriptures or the spoken Word. This is all the old devil and old snake, who also turned Adam and Eve into enthusiasts and led them from the external Word of God to “spirituality” and their own presumption—although he even accomplished this by means of other, external words.⁴²

For Luther, to remove the *Absolving Word* as interpreter of the scriptures is to invite the devil to speak external words through various tropes, as if the real matter was arousing some inner movement in the person.

Holy Spirit Distinguishing the Law and Gospel

Instead, Luther sought the *Absolving Word* in the scriptures, whose words of law and gospel authorized a preacher to give sinners the living word of Christ in the present through their external word. Thus, we would expect that if the absolution affected the doctrine of the Holy Spirit so fundamentally, then it also would makeover the understanding of Scripture and its interpretation as well. Iwand cites just this development in his systematic thesis, “The understanding of the Law and Gospel is the

⁴¹ Eike Wolfgast, “Luther's Treatment of Political and Societal Life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 397.

⁴² Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 322.

work of the Holy Spirit, since the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ.”⁴³ To glorify Christ is to put the *absolvendi Christus* at the center of the scriptures, which is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Thus all of Scripture, as already said, is pure Christ, God’s and Mary’s Son. Everything is focused on this Son, so that we might know Him distinctively and in that way see the Father and the Holy Spirit eternally as one God. To him who has the Son Scripture is an open book; and the stronger his faith in Christ becomes, the more brightly will the light of Scripture shine for him.⁴⁴

The *Absolving Christ*, taking the center of the scripture, separates law and gospel in such a way, that any legal sense of justification in the manner of the opinion of the law is pressed out and expunged by the gospel itself. In other words, the gospel alone puts the proper limit to the law. This reflects Luther’s experience with the sacrament of penance, where the only hope is the evangelical promise of the *Absolving Word* and not law driven penance.⁴⁵ This is another way of saying that Luther interpreted scripture literally, i.e. Christologically, and abandoned the medieval four-fold method that sought to expand exegesis beyond Christ.⁴⁶ Even in his early exposition of the Psalms, Luther claimed that Christ was the “literal sense, which is the foundation of the rest, the master and light, the author and fountain and origin.”⁴⁷ But that Christological interpretation could still lack the proper distinction of law and gospel, which awaited the later discovery of the

⁴³ Hans J. Iwand, *Gezets Und Evangelium*, vol. 6, Nachgelassene Werke (München: C. Kaiser, 1962), 4:13.

⁴⁴ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 15:339.

⁴⁵ Matthias Kroeger, *Rechtfertigung Und Gesetz: Studien Zur Entwicklung Der Rechtfertigungslehre Beim Jungen Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), 195-196.

⁴⁶ Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ: Stages and Themes of the Reformer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 40-42.

⁴⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 11:414.

absolution. Luther applied a Christological canon of interpretation to the scriptures as the litmus test for legitimacy.⁴⁸ But Christology alone can also be forced back into a legal scheme. That is why Luther went further with exegesis to observe that *Absolving Word*, the Holy Spirit reveals that the law and gospel operate on the functional level in scriptural expression. In other words, Luther's exegesis was not only Christological, but required that the words of law and gospel be distinguished.

In his *Galatians Commentary* of 1535, Luther first distinguished the gospel on a grammatical level, but more importantly, he recognized the deeper functional or theological distinction.

Who would ever believe that these things could be mixed up so easily? There is no one so stupid that he does not recognize how definite this distinction between Law and grace is. Both the facts and the words require this distinction, for everyone understands that these words "Law" and "grace" are different as to both denotation and connotation. Therefore it is a monstrosity, when this distinction stands there so clearly, for the papists and the fanatics to fall into the satanic perversity of confusing the Law and grace and of changing Christ into Moses. This is why I often say that so far as the words are concerned, this doctrine of faith is very easy, and everyone can easily understand the distinction between the Law and grace; but so far as practice, life, and application are concerned, it is the most difficult thing there is.... Let everyone who is godly, therefore, learn to distinguish carefully between Law and grace, both in feeling and in practice, not only in words, as the pope and the fanatics do.... With this doctrine the fanatics obscure the blessings of Christ today; they deprive Him of His honor as the Justifier and set Him up as an agent of sin. They have learned nothing from us except to recite the words; they do not accept the content. They want to give the impression that they, too, teach the Gospel and faith in Christ as purely as we do; but when it comes to the practice, they are teachers of the Law, just like the false apostles.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Carl E. Braaten, "The Holy Scriptures," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 63.

⁴⁹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:143-145.

The notion that grammatical usage of words determines law and gospel eliminates or constricts the tone of the *Absolving Word* from the scriptures. Luther did not only concern himself with the text of Scripture, though he certainly did that. He also concerned himself with the living word of preaching of absolution that truly made this God's word not in general, but specifically for the sinner's hearing. Recognizing this "experience" of hearing that only comes by way of the Holy Spirit speaking the *Absolving Word*, concerns the theological use of the gospel. Since the proper work of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ, His work will always direct the scriptures to the *Absolving Word*. Scripture is for preaching, not merely for giving rise to thought or the endless production of ideas. But neither this experience of hearing nor the discipline of exegesis of texts is something that comes from the inner power of the person. It is passively received, just as is the absolution. As the Holy Spirit interprets scripture to us, He separates the law and gospel, while proclaiming the *Absolving Word* as the final interpretation. This is why Luther discovered not only the interpretation of Scripture but the passivity of faith at the same time.

The Holy Spirit brings out the *Absolving Word* through theological grammar, but applies it to sinners as a destruction and new creation that makes Scripture properly interpreted only when it is preached. This was the discovery of the absolution that made Luther's Christ-centered interpretation now also a Holy spirit-centered interpretation at the same time. Though anyone should read the scriptures in their plain grammatical meaning, the Christian also hears the theological grammar in the *Absolving Word*--the applied, preached, given word:

I have indicated earlier how to solve the problem of the passages that our opponents produce from Scripture regarding works and reward, namely, that by

definition they must always be expounded theologically. Thus if the statement from Dan. 4:24, “redeem your sins by giving alms,” is produced, one must immediately consult the grammar—not the moral grammar but the theological grammar. This will show that “redeem” here is a matter not of morality but of faith, that it includes faith. For in Sacred Scripture a work presupposes a good will and a right reason, not in the moral sense but in the theological, which means faith.⁵⁰

The theological grammar is the absolving Christocentric, and proclamatory grammar of the Holy Spirit. “I forgive you,” is the Holy Spirit’s grammar *par excellence*. Luther writes in his 1520 work, *Treatise of Good Works*, “Now this is the work of the first commandment, which enjoins, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods.’ This means, ‘Since I alone am God, thou shalt place all thy confidence, trust, and faith in me alone and in no one else.’”⁵¹ For Luther the gospel function of the *Absolving Word* can come through a grammatical form of command, and yet bestow the promise. What better way to demonstrate that than going right to the first commandment—the primary word of God to his creatures? The absolving grammar breaks through the command when it is heard through the voice of a preacher by a sinner in need of a God who does all—especially when he makes a promise, like “I am the Lord your God.” Paul Althaus points out that the command to believe God’s absolution bestows the gift of faith for Luther—that is it functions precisely as a promise.⁵² So in this crucial place in scripture and crucial moment in the sinner’s life when hearing the words “for you,” the gospel arrives in the form of a grammatical command, yet with an absolving function. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in the promise via this absolving grammar. Thus the absolution opened

⁵⁰ Ibid., 26:294.

⁵¹ Ibid., 44:30.

⁵² Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 130.

up the matter of experience, effect or the impact upon a hearer that comes when the forgiveness actually hits a person.

The Holy Spirit opposes the moral grammar of the legal opinion. Luther's pneumatology teaches clearly that the Holy Spirit does not bring the voice and grammar of the law to the human heart, but rather rejects it.

Therefore we teach as follows: "Man, although you may fast, give alms, honor your parents, obey the magistrate, be subject to the master of the house, etc., you are not justified through this. This message of the Law, 'Honor your parents' (Ex. 20:12), does not justify either when it is heard or when it is performed. Then what does justify? Hearing the voice of the Bridegroom, hearing the proclamation of faith—when this is heard, it justifies. Why? Because it brings the Holy Spirit who justifies." From this it is sufficiently evident what the distinction is between the Law and the Gospel. The Law never brings the Holy Spirit; therefore it does not justify, because it only teaches what we ought to do. But the Gospel does bring the Holy Spirit, because it teaches what we ought to receive. Therefore the Law and the Gospel are two altogether contrary doctrines. Accordingly, to put righteousness into the Law is simply to conflict with the Gospel. For the Law is a taskmaster; it demands that we work and that we give. In short, it wants to have something from us. The Gospel, on the contrary, does not demand; it grants freely; it commands us to hold out our hands and to receive what is being offered. Now demanding and granting, receiving and offering, are exact opposites and cannot exist together. For that which is granted, I receive; but that which I grant, I do not receive but offer to someone else. Therefore if the Gospel is a gift and offers a gift, it does not demand anything. On the other hand, the Law does not grant anything; it makes demands on us, and impossible ones at that.⁵³

The moral grammar of the human heart expresses itself in the voice of the *opinion legis*. But this law grants nothing. It ends up being the enemy of the Holy Spirit and the strength of the *old Adam*. The Holy Spirit overcomes the moral grammar of the legal opinion through his proclamatory use of the *Absolving Word*.

Once the gospel has come, the Holy Spirit does not add the law in order to complete salvation or add sanctification. There is no return to the law after salvation for

⁵³ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:208-209.

the new creation. Luther emphatically makes this point, “We are justified solely by faith in Christ, without works; and the Holy Spirit is granted solely by hearing the message of the Gospel with faith, not by the message of the Law or by the works of the Law... The Law never brings the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁴

The key in the discovery of the absolution was what the Spirit’s work, through the word, actually does to the law. It ends it. It gives it a limit. The Holy Spirit ends the law by the proclamation of the *Absolving Word*. The Holy Spirit carries Christ alone, the end of the law, to the sinner and makes a new saint. As long as the old creature clings to the new saint, the heart is repeatedly exposed to the infection of the *opinion legis*.

Therefore the Law of Moses produces nothing that goes beyond the things of the world; that is, it merely shows both politically and theologically the evils that there are in the world. With its terrors it merely drives the conscience to thirst and yearn for the promise of God and to look at Christ. But for this the Holy Spirit is necessary, to say to the heart: “After the Law has performed its function in you, it is not the will of God that you merely be terrified and killed, but that you recognize your misery and your lost condition through the Law and then do not despair but believe in Christ, who is ‘the end of the Law, that everyone who has faith may be justified’ (Rom. 10:4).”⁵⁵

There is no continuation of law in the conscience of the justified. When the Holy Spirit arrives, the law ends.⁵⁶ This is the proper sanctification and justification of the Holy Spirit via the *Absolving Word*.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 26:208.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 26:364.

⁵⁶ Steven D. Paulson, “Luther’s Doctrine of God,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L’ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 198.

The Holy Spirit gives the law its limit beyond which it cannot go. Luther cites the intent of the Holy Spirit is to knock the law off kilter as the law seeks to drive the sinner away from God.

It follows, therefore, that the Law with its function does contribute to justification—not because it justifies, but because it impels one to the promise of grace and makes it sweet and desirable. Therefore we do not abolish the Law; but we show its true function and use, namely, that it is a most useful servant impelling us to Christ. After the Law has humbled, terrified, and completely crushed you, so that you are on the brink of despair, then see to it that you know how to use the Law correctly; for its function and use is not only to disclose the sin and wrath of God but also to drive us to Christ. None but the Holy Spirit is intent on this use of the Law or preaches the Gospel, because nothing but the Gospel says that God is present with those who are contrite in heart (Is. 57:15). Therefore if you have been crushed by that hammer, do not use your contrition wrongly by burdening yourself with even more laws. Listen to Christ when He says (Matt. 11:28): “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” When the Law drives you this way, so that you despair of everything that is your own and seek help and solace from Christ, then it is being used correctly; and so, through the Gospel, it serves the cause of justification. This is the best and most perfect use of the Law.⁵⁷

The key to understanding the spiritual use of the law is that when the Holy Spirit conquers it with the *Absolving Word*, the Holy Spirit uses the law to bring Christ to the sinner. The Holy Spirit overlaps the law, distorts its aim to drive you away from Christ. It is the interruption of the Holy Spirit over the work of the law that makes the outcome possible.

The spiritual use of the law does not in a strict sense belong to the realm of the law, but to the realm of the gospel. In the spiritual use of the law the law is no longer an independent power but is subordinated to the gospel and placed at its disposal... Wrath and grace are united in one and the same God, but in such a way that wrath is subordinated to grace.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:315-316.

⁵⁸ Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 220.

The law ends after the Holy Spirit enters upon it, for the *Absolving Word* drowns out the accusing voice. Suffering in itself is not proper the work of the Holy Spirit, but of the law. However, the domination of the law by the Holy Spirit redeems the suffering. This is why the mediated *Absolving Word* is needed for a proper charismatic pneumatology. Simeon Zahl is correct in showing that a written mediated word does not bring the Holy Spirit.⁵⁹ Yet one does not retreat into the self for inner revelation of the Holy Spirit in Blumhardtian (*Schwärmer*) fashion, for the opinion of the law rules there. The spoken *Absolving Word* in spoken prayer, blessing, sermon, hymn or words of institution is the only way to bridge the gap between a Protestant and Pentecostal pneumatology, for there is the Holy Spirit. This does not emerge from a connection to mysticism or specifically by the influence of Tauler, as often argued, but rather from the *Absolving Word* itself.⁶⁰ Though Luther admired Tauler, he differentiated himself clearly from Tauler, as he taught that we should not search inward for God, or in silence, but rather to hear the outward *Absolving Word*. Yes, Luther is a charismatic in the Pauline sense. He sought the *Charis* where it properly could be found, which is in the spoken *Absolving Word*. This is the *Absolving Word* that is physically heard and handled and occupies God's place.⁶¹ There are no more uses of the law, once the Holy Spirit speaks the *Absolving Word*. For the One He brings is the end of the law.

⁵⁹ Simeon Zahl, "Rethinking 'Enthusiasm': Christoph Blumhardt on the Discernment of the Spirit," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 3 (2010): 360-361.

⁶⁰ Bengt Hägglund, "Luther Und Die Mystik," in *Kirche, Mystik Heiligung Und Das Natürliche Bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 92-94.

⁶¹ Johannes Von Lüpke, "Luther's Use of Language," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 145, 151.

When the Spirit uses the gospel to limit the law, then we can also understand the relation between the *Absolving Word* and the later Lutheran discussions of the third use of the law. The *Absolving Word* consumes the vocabulary of the Holy Spirit. Wingren explains the absence of a third use of the law, in Luther's theology.

It is significant that Luther only knows two uses of the law—the civil, which forces us to labour on earth and the theological, which torments man in his conscience... The third use of the law, which was afterwards cultivated, gave an authority to the law even where there was no sin, and thereby the new age was brought under the rule of the old. If this third use is viewed from another angle, one may see that the Christian, in becoming obedient to the law, betakes himself out of the world, where its civil use is in force, to a reborn group where the taskmaster of the old aeon no longer puts to death but rather gives life, a sort of surrogate life instead of the life of the Gospel, which is the life of forgiveness and resurrection: the whole field of the world is made religious and leveled with piety.⁶²

The absence of the third use of the law is due to Luther's Christology and pneumatology, ruled by the *Absolving Word* as the proper essence and expression of God. Elert states that the *Absolving Word* "is inherent the sacramental act itself" of the Lord's Supper.⁶³ It is there that the *Absolving Word* stands alone, "There stands the Word."⁶⁴ The sacrament has great meaning in times of *Anfechtung*.⁶⁵ However, this is only because of the *Absolving Word* that carries the promise through the sacrament. It is not because of the *Anfechtung* itself. The *Absolving Word* creates the *sanctitas passiva*, which has no need

⁶² Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 144-145.

⁶³ Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos: The Foundations of the Christian Way of Life*, trans. Carl J. Schindler (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 359.

⁶⁴ Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship: An Interpretation*, trans. U. S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 93.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Gerke, "Anfechtung Und Sakrament in Martin Luthers Sermon Vom Sterben," *Theologische Blätter* 13 (1934): 203.

of the third use of the law. Heinrich Assel is correct in acknowledging that faith clings to the speech acts such as Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Absolution, and the Absolving sermon.⁶⁶ In these chosen means, the law is absent by virtue of the monergistic presence of the *Absolving Word*. Theo A. Boer writes, "For the believer who is justified by grace, the law does not play any role in guiding his actions and directing his virtues."⁶⁷ Since the *Absolving Word* excludes a function of law in the relationship between Christ alone and the one who is *simul iustus et peccator*, there is no *tertius legis*.

The Holy Spirit Creating the New Creature

The Holy Spirit creates anew in baptism through the *Absolving Word*. Saving those who cannot choose Christ via intellect is the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit.

That the baptism of infants is pleasing to Christ is sufficiently proved from his own work. God has sanctified many who have been thus baptized and has given them the Holy Spirit. Even today there still are many whose teaching and life attest that they have the Holy Spirit. Similarly by God's grace we have been given the power to interpret the Scriptures and to know Christ, which is impossible without the Holy Spirit. But if God did not accept the baptism of infants, he would not have given any of them the Holy Spirit—or any part of him. In short, all this time down to the present day there would have been no person on earth who could have been a Christian. Because God has confirmed baptism through the bestowal of his Holy Spirit, as we have perceived in some of the Fathers, such as St. Bernard, Gerson, John Huss, and others, and because the holy Christian church will not disappear until the end of the world, so they must confess that it is pleasing to God. For he cannot contradict himself, support lies and wickedness, or give his grace or Spirit for such ends. This is just about the best and strongest proof for the simple and unlearned. For no one can take from us or overthrow this article, "I believe in one holy Christian church, the communion of saints," etc.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Heinrich Assel, "Barth Und Luther Zur Repräsentation Des Kreuzes Jesu," *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 22 (2006): 44.

⁶⁷ Theo A. Boer, "Is Luther's Ethics Christian Ethics?" *Lutheran Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (2007): 415.

⁶⁸ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 462-463.

For Luther, the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit is not to save according to the strength of one's faith, but rather to create the necessary faith in the sinner.⁶⁹ Spirit does not search for an image of God, but creates the image of God. Cheryl M. Peterson is then right in stating that assurance of salvation cannot be based on inner conversion experience.⁷⁰ However, Luther moves one step further by basing assurance not on faith itself, but rather on the *Absolving Word* carried by the Holy Spirit in baptism. There are no qualifications for deserving the work of Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the *Spiritus Creator*, creating faith *ex nihilo* via the *Absolving Word* in baptism. And what the Spirit creates is faith, but it is not faith in itself, but in the Absolving Word.

For this reason, Luther rejects the enthusiasts more and more strongly as his theology developed, who sought to replace the work of the Holy Spirit with the work of human will in the form of faith in faith itself. The monergistic work of the *Absolving Word*, stood in direct opposition to those who wished for a synergistic work of human spirit with the Holy Spirit. Through his own outer experience of the *Absolving Word*, Luther worked out his pneumatology before sparring with Müntzer and Carlstadt.⁷¹ It is important to note that suffering is not the necessary work of the Holy Spirit; the *Absolving Word* is the necessary work. Luther pointedly argues against these fanatics from the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit to save infants in baptism.

In Baptism there is the promise of salvation (Mark 16:16): "He who believes, etc." If anyone denies here, as the fanatical spirits do today, that righteousness and salvation are granted to an infant as soon as he is baptized; if anyone evades this promise in this way by saying that it becomes valid when a man reaches the use of

⁶⁹ Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 1:632.

⁷⁰ Cheryl M. Peterson, "Pneumatology and the Cross: The Challenge of Neo-Pentecostalism to Lutheran Theology," *Dialog* 50, no. 2 (2011): 136.

⁷¹ Carlson, "Luther and the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," 136.

reason and is able to do good works and to obtain what is set forth in the promise by doing good works; if anyone says that Baptism is not a sign of the will of God toward us but only a mark that distinguishes believers from unbelievers—such a person utterly deprives Baptism of salvation and attributes salvation to works.⁷²

The Holy Spirit via the *Absolving Word* completes the work of salvation without any merit or acquiescence of the receiver. The rejection of infant baptism by fanatics is a result of their prior rejection of the external word, and so the *Absolving Word*. That is also the source of the spiritualism that rejects the sole work of the Holy Spirit in order to create room for the human will. Instead, for Luther, it is an aggressive work of the Holy Spirit that puts to death the opinion of the law in the sinner and creates a *new creation*.

The Holy Spirit ironically “keeps” the law, but does so without the law. The law itself, it becomes clear wants the works of the law to be done—without the law demanding them. But this is not possible without the full work of the Spirit through the absolving word, which Luther calls “the promise.”

Therefore “to do” is first to believe and so, through faith, to keep the Law. For we must receive the Holy Spirit; illumined and renewed by Him, we begin to keep the Law, to love God and our neighbor. But the Holy Spirit is not received through the Law—for “those who are under the Law,” says Paul, “are under a curse”—but through hearing with faith, that is, through the promise. We must be blessed solely with Abraham and by his faith in the promise. Therefore it is necessary above all to take refuge in the promise, so that we may hear the sound of blessing, that is, the Gospel. This must be believed. The sound of the promise to Abraham brings Christ; and when He has been grasped by faith, then the Holy Spirit is granted on Christ’s account. Then God and our neighbor are loved, good works are performed, and the cross is borne. This is really keeping the Law; otherwise the Law remains permanently unkept. Therefore, clearly and properly defined, “to do” is simply to believe in Jesus Christ, and when the Holy Spirit has been received through faith in Christ, to do the things that are in the Law. Nor can it be any other way, because Scripture says that outside the promise there is no blessing, not even in the Law. Hence it is impossible for us to keep the Law without the promise. The blessing, which is the proclamation about Christ, who

⁷² Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:241–242.

was promised to Abraham as the One through whom the world is to be blessed, must be present.⁷³

It is a mistake to think that Luther does not teach good works, or even the keeping of the law, but this can be done only as the sole work of the Holy Spirit, without human cooperation--that is through a new creation. This is why keeping the law is a paradox to an old sinner, for whom it is impossible. Why? Because the keeping is the work of the Holy Spirit alone, not through the law, but by means of promise of the absolution. The law does not keep the law, the promise does that. Strange indeed, but only for the legal opinion, which can only imagine that the only way to keep the law is through the law. Who would have thought that the only way to keep the law is apart from, in opposition to, and beyond the law? But who would have thought it was done solely by the Holy Spirit, and not through some human means? But such is the totality of the new brought by the Spirit through the means of the external word, the word of absolution which creates a truly new situation that was both unexpected and even abhorred by the erstwhile person trying to keep the law, with or without the help of the Holy Spirit.

It is the new creature, whose *old Adam* is now not only clinging about the neck as an old bag of maggots, but is used by the Spirit as a tool turned toward the neighbor. As Paul says, this is presenting the body as a living sacrifice to the neighbor (Romans 12). The old, common complaint of Lutheran quietism is therefore misplaced.⁷⁴ For where the Holy Spirit is present in the proclaimed *Absolving Word*, there a new creation is working for the neighbor, even in the person of the old sinner, who is now turned to be of use to

⁷³ Ibid., 26:255.

⁷⁴ Jeffery K Mann, "Luther and the Holy Spirit: Why Pneumatology Still Matters," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34, no. 2 (2007): 114-115.

another. For Christ is sent by the Father and He is the Word whom is directly present.⁷⁵ This “pardoning grace overcomes.”⁷⁶ This love is free and performs what the law signifies. Haikola writes, “Freedom, however, which is Christian love, is unlimited in some sense. Christian love deals freely with all laws, so that they are consistent with the purpose of love.”⁷⁷ This faith is active in love.⁷⁸ So, finally, Luther’s teaching on absolution gives love its proper place. It is not love that fills faith, as it was for Aquinas. It is not love that makes a person righteous, and in that sense is the greater for Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. But the righteous person, on account of the absolution, is now free and the purpose of love is not his own, but the Holy Spirit’s. So, Luther’s Christological and proclamatory pneumatology also delivers a new teaching on love. Love is not the directing of one’s desires to the highest worth or goal of God’s pure goodness. Nor is it duty in the sense of disinterested love. It is the Holy Spirit’s work to preserve life in this old world, until the final work of the destruction of the old is complete and the creation of the new has commenced. This means love operates outside the law. Faith worked by the Spirit.

⁷⁵ Markus Wriedt, *Gnade Und Erwählung: Eine Untersuchung Zu Johann Von Staupitz Und Martin Luther* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1991), 57.

⁷⁶ Karl Holl, *The Distinctive Elements in Christianity*, trans. Norman V. Hope (London: T&T Clark, 1937), 22.

⁷⁷ Lauri Haikola, *Usus Legis* (Lund: Berlingska Boktryckerei, 1958), 150.

⁷⁸ George Wolfgang Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 111; Robert Benne, “Law and Gospel, Personal and Political,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2014): 251.

This turns the old creature toward service to one's neighbor rather than the legal scheme.⁷⁹ This "revolutionary" love suffers for the neighbor.⁸⁰ William H. Lazareth writes that one of the preeminent fruits of the Spirit is "to live for neighbors in service."⁸¹ However, this is the full monergistic work of the Holy Spirit, i.e. *Spiritus Creator*. He works in the *simul iustus et peccator* the works of love for neighbor by means of the *Absolving Word*. Luther writes, "having been justified by grace in this way, we then do works, yes, Christ himself does all in us."⁸² The Holy Spirit monergistically creates works of love for the neighbor, which ironically fulfills the law via the *Absolving Word*.

Luther's reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* caused his pneumatology to be an expansive and robust understanding of the all-encompassing work of the Holy Spirit. The whole of the third article is then set free from the confines of the legal scheme, and the evangelical theology is unveiled. Christ alone works His *Absolving Word* through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit interprets scripture truthfully and Christocentrically, by separating law and gospel and driving the Christ to the sinner. This Holy Spirit fully justifies and sanctifies so that we no longer have one person attempting to use the law as the means of righteousness. Instead, the proper Christian anthropology concerns two persons, the *simul iustus et peccator*, whose new creature is truly a new creation in the image of God, a child of the heavenly Father. The reformational turn of the *Absolving*

⁷⁹ Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 14.

⁸⁰ Martin Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionary?*, trans. William Klassen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 32.

⁸¹ William H. Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 202.

⁸² Luther, *Luther's Works*, 34:111.

Word pivoted Luther towards a comprehensive, abundant, and robust Christocentric pneumatology that distinguishes everything according to the distinction of law and gospel

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The *Absolving Word* is the reformational turn that developed Luther's unique theology. It is the great freedom of the Reformation.¹ The gospel is the present "forgiveness of sins" assuming the power of the "resurrection."² The *Absolving Word* moves the breakthrough from a mere spoken concept of promise, to the actual speaking person, announced gospel, real experience, and actual event of forgiveness of a sinner, while yet a sinner. Bayer is absolutely correct that this *Absolving Word* is the occasion that bestowed the promise, which changed everything.

The reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* is evident in Luther's theological development. His unique understanding of passive righteousness, the eternal gospel, and the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit emerge from the discovery and use of an unconditioned absolution. The law is removed because response of the human will is not required for the *Absolving Word*. No satisfaction and no contrition is necessary for its validation. Luther's famous teaching of the Third Article of the Creed actually gives

¹ Hermann Sasse, *We Confess Anthology*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 78.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 73-74.

away the confession of what happened to him.³ At some point he heard this *Absolving Word!* This admission is recorded in *Table Talk*.

There's something great about the employment of the keys and of private absolution when the conscience can be put to rest... For under the papacy I was always a despairing monk, even when I made the greatest efforts. Finally I received comfort from a brother through this one Word. God himself has commanded us to hope. Our salvation is faith in God. Why shouldn't we trust in God, who bids and commands us to hope? Through this Word he gave me life again.⁴

For Luther, this *Absolving Word* is the main expression of the gospel and Christ Himself.

To preach forgiveness of sins means nothing else than to absolve and loose from sins... Here forgiveness is promised and awarded each person in particular in the name and at the Command of Christ. You should hear this absolution when and as often as you are in need of it and should accept and believe it as if you were hearing it from Christ Himself. For since it is not our absolution, but Christ's command and Word, it is just as good and effective as if you were hearing it out of His own mouth.⁵

The sermon of 1518 reflects clearly Luther's confession of his earlier awakening, which may have begun as early as 1505. Though this sermon is the megaphone for his turn, there are developmental glimpses such as *verbal reale* and *promissio* occurring prior to the sermon. These developmental glimpses are the results of Luther hearing the *Absolving Word*. The new theological descriptions in the third article are a result of an absolution that demanded neither satisfaction nor contrition. Which monk gave this absolution? We may not know, though Luther gives plenty of attention to his Father Confessor, von Staupitz. But certainly, as Luther himself later taught, this arrival of the absolution is much more concrete, definite and historical than mere trends in abstract

³ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 355.

⁴ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 54:334.

⁵ Plass, *What Luther Says*, 4.

thinking. Berndt Hamm argues that Luther's exposure to mysticism and his *Anfechtung* created the reformation process, which causes Luther's reformational turn. Luther is clear that we are not driven to God by suffering, but rather His call is driven to us.⁶ But an absolving word is a specific, external word, spoken through a preacher to a suffering hearer. This does not happen as a development of human thought, it happens when a person actually gets a preacher, and so it must have happened also for Luther, even if history cannot stipulate the time and place. But we can argue from the effect to the cause in the case of Luther. He discovered the *Absolving Word*, and that *Absolving Word* is the reformational turn itself. And since the real matter is not how the word is discovered, but how that Word discovers us, evangelical theology was born of the Holy Spirit's work to produce faith by means of hearing, and how will anyone hear without a preacher (Romans 10)?

The *Absolving Word* deconstructed the medieval understanding of absolution. This medieval understanding of absolution shaped Roman theology into a legal scheme. It should be obvious why so many were looking for mystical connections with God, as the medieval absolution provided no assurance. It based its efficacy on the value of one's contrition, attrition, or satisfaction. The love of the penitent infected the efficacy of the forgiveness. Love became the center point for both scholasticism and mysticism. After receiving the unconditional *Absolving Word*, Luther understood the absolution in an evangelical sense. The evangelical absolution removed the conditions of contrition and satisfaction, and made the person fully righteous by the simple pronouncement of God

⁶ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 355.

through the voice of one sinner to the other. From this *Absolving Word*, not only was faith created that justified the sinner, but so also love flowed to the neighbor.

The *Absolving Word* developed Luther's understanding of passive righteousness as differentiated from active righteousness. The passive righteousness is the ensuing evangelical conclusion of Luther's reformational turn of the *Absolving Word*. The Aristotelian and Thomistic description of justification made habit and active righteousness by way of the human will crucial matter rather than Christ or the Holy Spirit. Instead, for Luther, the *Absolving Word* brings the righteousness *extra nos* and *ex nihilo* to the sinner. In this way the habit alone and the active righteousness are replaced by passive righteousness. This designates active righteousness out of the divine relationship, and moves it towards human relationships. Christian righteousness becomes purely passive, and only arrives through the *Absolving Word*. This removes active righteousness as a justification requirement, and establishes apostolic authority. The *Absolving Word* is the *esse* of the church as it bestows passive righteousness. This is not a Petrine power, but is rather the divine power of God, delivered through the absolver, as attested to most clearly in John 20 and the bestowal of the spirit/office of the keys.

The passive righteousness of the *Absolving Word* establishes faith's certainty in Christ rather than the endless uncertainty of Aquinas' active righteousness. The certainty of faith was found outside the self in Christ. The free will was displaced by God's grace in the *Absolving Word*. Aquinas's systematic approach worked from the opinion of the law as the centerpiece, while Luther's systematic approach operates from the *Absolving Word* as the centerpiece. In this fashion the *Absolving Word* removes the law as the overarching category to theology and places it in subservience to the absolution. And that

really means that there is no overarching category for theology with Luther, but rather there is a constant distinction being made between law and gospel. This makes Luther's theology truly dialectical, and the dialect is specific: the law accuses and the gospel forgives. The law is placed within the proper limits of its calling of serving the neighbor, as opposed to justifying the sinner. Aquinas' metaphysical construct of grace is contingent upon the law being fulfilled in the sinner, not simply in Christ. Grace then loses its unconditional nature and certainty, because it is conditional until fulfilled by each person. The opposite is true of Luther's distinction. Grace is pure grace, because it serves under the "systematic" domain of the *Absolving Word*, which creates passive righteousness.

By embracing the eternal gospel and omitting the eternal law, the event of Luther's reformational turn of the *Absolving Word* was born. Luther's theology would not operate under the legal scheme because the *Absolving Word* replaced the central motif with the distinction between the law and the gospel at the center. The law belongs in the time of the old world, where it is to rule the sinful flesh. The gospel rules under the new time of the Spirit, which alone is eternal. The eternal law does not express God's essence or inner being. Christ is the fullness of God. The *Absolving Word* emphasizes this aspect by removing God's wrath from the sinner, and bestowing Christ alone. When Christ arrives the eternal gospel begins, and the eternal law is removed as a Christian reality. God's act of absolving the sinner reverses the legal scheme so that the law now functions to serve the gospel by exhausting itself. The gospel is the end and fulfillment of the law. It is also the end of demonic power that seeks to separate sinners from God's word. The *Absolving Word* ushers in the actual eternal victory of God by closing the

chasm between God and sinners. Unlike the law, the *Absolving Word* gives unlimited, unconditional benefit because they reside in the new, eternal creation. The *Absolving Word* creates the freedom that the law merely signifies. For Luther the gospel is eternal, while the law is temporal. Creating a new future, the logic of *Absolving Word* functions triumphantly even in spite of legal language and grammatical expressions. For Luther, sanctification rests under the *Absolving Word*, which strips away the need for the law to discipline the new creation. The law can only work on warning and restraining the *old Adam*. It cannot create new life. The *Absolving Word* links both sanctification and justification. Ending the eternal law for the Christian, the *Absolving Word* bestows evangelical righteousness as opposed to a legal righteousness. The law with its schemes to achieve virtue, righteousness, holiness, and love, comes to an end where the *Absolving Word* speaks. Law cannot create life or provide a future for the Christian. Only the *Absolving Word* can bring gospel eternally. Under the *Absolving Word*, the law must become a *lex vacua*, so the gospel can take its eternal and rightful place. When the gospel arrives by the *Absolving Word*, the law is eternally behind. The *Absolving Word* freed Luther.

The *Absolving Word* developed Luther's monergistic and Christocentric pneumatology. Under the *Absolving Word*, the Holy Spirit alone as opposed to inner revelation, brings salvation to a sinner. The Holy Spirit alone also preserves the sinner's salvation. The *Absolving Word* gives definition to one of the binding qualities of the Trinity, which is a shared mission to absolve the sinner. In this way, the Holy Spirit is the sole monergistic sanctifier of the sinner. This happens by the means of preaching, i.e. absolving the hearer. Apostolic succession happens by this *Absolving Word*, which

creates the church of absolvers and holds it together through preaching. The *Absolving Word* and Christ are inseparable. He is the *Absolving Word*. The Holy Spirit testifies to Christ alone, which creates Christ's righteousness where before there was only a sinner. A natural self-liberation into the new creation is impossible. Only the *Absolving Word* spoken by the Holy Spirit can create the image of Christ. There is no connection to the Holy Spirit without this *Absolving Word*. Likewise there is no proper understanding of law and gospel without the separation by *Absolving Word*. The *Absolving Word* places the absolving Christ at the center of the scripture, and distinguishes law and gospel. The proclamation and exclusive tone of the *Absolving Word* overcomes the opinion of the law that seeks a moral grammar.

The Holy Spirit does not bring the law for the power of salvation or sanctification, but rather brings the law to an end by the proclamation of the *Absolving Word*. The Holy Spirit allows the law to extend itself to the second function, and then drowns out the accusing voice with the absolution. The Holy Spirit overcomes the enthusiast search for synergism, i.e. cooperation with God without the *Absolving Word*, through monergistic action. In this way the law is ironically fulfilled via the *Absolving Word*. This is the down-to-earth, and yet revolutionary, love for the neighbor. Faith creates love; love does not create faith, or complete it. The *Absolving Word* creates faith, by the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit, and establishes the new creation that serves the neighbor in a law-less driven freedom.

The *Absolving Word* changed everything for Luther. It made his theology unique because the legal scheme is finally conquered and eradicated by the seed of the *Absolving*

Word that grows into the theology of distinction that we call “evangelical.” Passive righteousness, the eternal gospel, and the Holy Spirit are freed from the legal scheme.

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