

Liberated from the Papacy

A journey with Scripture, our Confessions, and Dr. Luther

The Antichrist in the past, present, and future, around and among us as we commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

✠ *In the name of Jesus.* ✠

In one of his last and most polemical works, Martin Luther sought, one last time, to unmask the great evil sitting within the Church leading countless souls astray. Published on the same day that the long desired church council opened in the imperial city of Trent (March 25, 1545), the title left no doubt where Luther stood: *Against the Roman Papacy: An Institution of the Devil* (LW 41:259-376).

For nearly thirty years, Dr. Luther had been preaching the gospel, thundering away at this great enemy. As he himself confessed in 1521 at the Diet of Worms, occasionally he had spoken too harshly. While not always excusing every scatological reference or the mocking and sarcastic words he used, at the same time, it can be understood. As Luther himself confessed near the end of *Against the Roman Papacy*, for him, the papacy and what it was doing was “*meine grosse Anfechtung.*” “My great anguish” (LW 41:350).

This anguish was not a purely personal matter. It is not as if Dr. Luther had an ax to grind with the papacy because of his excommunication. He made it clear; such things did not matter to him, all the way back in 1518. He knew that an unjust excommunication did not remove you from the Holy Christian Church.

Nor was it the Edict of Worms, that made him outlaw and prevented him, for example, from attending the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 or the council called by Pope Paul III, whether in

Mantua or, as it eventually settled, in Trent. He would gladly have gone to Augsburg and Trent regardless of the edict. He lived in one of his favorite psalms, “I will not die, but live” (Ps. 118:17).

Neither was it the mockery opponents aimed at his marriage to a runaway nun or how he abandoned (in their view) his monastic vows (even though he had actually been released from those vows by his ecclesiastical supervisor, John Staupitz). Scripture convinced him that marriage was a gift from God meant for all men and women because celibacy was an unkeepable vow for most everyone. Likewise, he knew that monastic vows were a thing not commanded by God, and as he said continually in the *Large Catechism*, were actually part of that self-chosen idolatry of the papal system that ignored God’s actual commands.

His anguish emanated from an understanding that the papacy, an office within the church, a shepherding office in the spirit of John 10, was actually no such thing. From 1517, when he posted his theses, until 1520, the year Luther wrote three of his most important books – *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Freedom of the Christian* – he remained convinced that the problem was not necessarily the pope himself. He writes in his theses and their explanations that if only the pope knew what was going on in his name he would put an end to it. In 1520, writing to Pope Leo X he still calls him “blessed father” (LW 31:334) and has words of praise for his life and reputation. Though, even within the

context of the flattering cover letter, he begins to speak against the papacy itself. And this because of the Word of God.

“I beg you to give me a hearing after I have vindicated myself by this letter, and believe me when I say that I have never thought ill of you personally, that I am the kind of a person who would wish you all good things eternally, and that I have no quarrel with any man concerning his morals but only concerning the word of truth. In all other matters I will yield to any man whatsoever; but I have neither the power nor the will to deny the Word of God” (LW 31:335).

This is the opening Luther uses to go after the papacy. It is the source of his anguish. The Word of God showed him what the gospel is. The Word of God showed him what a shepherd is and does. Based on that Word of God he sees that the papacy is no shepherd.

“I have truly despised your see, the Roman Curia, which, however, neither you nor anyone else can deny is more corrupt than any Babylon or Sodom ever was, and which, as far as I can see, is characterized by a completely depraved, hopeless, and notorious godlessness.... As you well know, there has been flowing from Rome these many years – like a flood covering the world – nothing but a devastation of men’s bodies and souls and possessions, the worst examples of the worst of all things. All this is clearer than day to all, and the Roman church, once the holiest of all, has become the most licentious den of thieves, the most shameless of all brothels, the kingdom of sin, death, and hell. It is so bad that even Antichrist himself, if he should come, could think of nothing to add to its wickedness” (LW 31:336).

Notice that qualifier, “even Antichrist himself, if he should come.” Luther uses that qualifier

because he wishes to be somewhat conciliatory to the Pope. So much does he wish this that he was willing to back-date the writing of this letter to Leo so that it appears he wrote it before the bull condemning his errors and threatening excommunication – *Exsurge Domine* – was published in Germany.

But even in this quite peaceful and gloriously gospel filled work, a work that deserves our careful and repeated attention, Luther could not contain himself. His great anguish flows forth. “On the other hand, there is no more terrible disaster with which the wrath of God can afflict men than a famine of the hearing of his Word, as he says in Amos” (LW 31:346). This is the very thing he identifies coming forth from the papacy in Rome. It is the “numberless mandates and precepts of pope, bishops, monasteries, churches, princes, and magistrates upon which some ignorant pastors insist as if they were necessary to righteousness and salvation” (LW 31:370). As he said in thesis 92, “Away then with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, ‘Peace, peace,’ and there is no peace” (LW 31:33).

Luther saw only false peace in the shepherding of the papacy. The papacy drove men to trust in their own hearts and in their own works. The papacy drove men, and had been driving them for centuries, as it turned out, to put their trust in an idol. To find peace in your own righteousness, Luther now knew, was an impossible thing. “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20). “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse” (Galatians 3:10).

But this is all that the papacy offered: do more. This was not just a curse, as Paul put it, but an abominable spiritual tyranny. The list

of offenses is a devastating one, and it is, again, the source of Luther's great anguish.

The papal system had, worst of all, instituted the works of man as a path to heaven. Most clearly we see that in the perversion of the Sacrament of the Altar into the sacrifice of the Mass. The dreadful canon – in which the priest prayed that God accept this sacrifice (of bread and wine, and then also of the body and blood of Christ) for the redemption of the souls of the living and the dead – constituted the most important problem in the liturgy of that day (and yet today).

Of course, it did not end there. As Luther points out in the *Smalcald Articles*, a host of other things flow from this perversion of the Mass: pilgrimages, the trade in and worship of relics, distinctions of all kinds of food and clothing, the elevation of the spiritual estate (clergy), the apparitions of Mary and the saints, the sale of Masses, masses for the dead and so on and so forth. Not to mention purgatory and indulgences. In each case, the people were taught that Christ was not sufficient, something else needed to be done, by them. This created the monstrous uncertainty that Luther wrote about in his great Galatians commentary (*LW* 26-27). If it is not about the all-sufficient, once-for-all work of Christ for you and then distributed to you through preaching and the sacraments, then you can never be sure of your salvation. You are no longer sure of God's grace, because it is no longer grace alone and faith alone.

But there is more. The Pope did not just turn the sacrament into a sacrifice. He split it in two and stole half. In the centuries previous to the Reformation, the Roman Church decreed that receiving the host was more than enough for the laity, for a body contains blood. The priests alone consumed the blood of Christ. The people received only the body of Christ.

Yet today the order of the mass reads "when communion is under both kinds." The pope graciously allows that a full reception of the sacrament includes eating and drinking, but he does not allow that to be done universally.

One of the requests of the first Lutherans, expressed already in the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology*, was that the pope allow the preaching of the gospel and provide bishops and pastors who would do that and facilitate that. Philip Melancthon went so far as to say in 1537, in his subscription to the *Smalcald Articles*, "But regarding the pope, I hold that, if he would allow the Gospel, we could agree to his superiority over the bishops" (*SA*, Subscriptions, 7).

In other words, the Lutheran Church asks the pope to act like a spiritual father (which is what "pope" means, "papa," "father"). Instead, the pope has spent centuries fighting (sometimes literal wars) to have all spiritual power. Since 1829 he and he alone appoints bishops the world over (Quinn, 122-123). Enshrined in Canon Law is the principal, "There is no appealing beyond the pope" (Canon 332, §3) Only a pope can call a General Council, approve of the documents it produces, and then dissolve it.

The pope can, and does, insert himself into every spiritual situation, as he sees fit. He is, after all, the universal pastor of the church, and he has the fullness of power to act in that way at all times and in all places. If a national bishops conference wishes to translate the liturgy into the vernacular, it must be approved in Rome. If a commission including Roman bishops studying the viability of artificial birth control determines that such birth control can be used under certain circumstances, that commissions report can be ignored, as Pope Paul VI did in the 1960s. Documents are swept under the rug (like Pius

XI's anti-Nazi encyclical in 1938, or Paul III's reform report of 1537).

This is all to point up the absolute power demanded by the bishop of Rome, a tendency already evident in the earliest centuries, when, for example, Pope Victor excommunicated the eastern churches because they celebrated Easter on a different date. Or when Gregory VII decreed that popes cannot err, have never erred, and they cannot be judged by anyone. And they are all saints by virtue of their office. Or when Pius IX gets the first Vatican Council (1870) to decree that the pope can speak infallibly on faith and morals, on his own authority, and those words are irreformable. Or, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI told current Pope Francis, "You are the pope, you do what you like" (Tosetti). Pope Francis did. In dismissing some curial priests, he explained to one of his cardinals, Gerhard Müller, "I am the pope and I need give no reason to anyone for my decisions. I said they must go, go they must" (Tosetti).

Evidence of that thirst for absolute power colors the entire history of the papacy. I often tell people if they want to study Western Civilization, they ought to pick up a history of the popes. You will often find that those histories are light on theology and heavy on politics. Because the popes found themselves heavily involved in politics. Soon they did not just "find themselves" involved, they became involved.

It started as an accident of history. The Roman Empire began falling apart in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries after Christ. After Constantine, the center of gravity for the Roman Empire shifted east, toward Constantinople. There remained emperors in Rome and the west, but they grew progressively weaker. Meanwhile, various tribes and armies swept through Europe and

Italy waging war and claiming territory. Rome was no exception. As the emperors moved east, the bishop of Rome filled that vacuum. Pope Leo I (the Great) famously helped turn away Attila the Hun and his hordes in the fifth century. Pope Gregory I (also the Great) provided much the same service in the late sixth and early seventh century. More and more the Roman bishop became not just a religious leader, but also a secular leader.

And the popes never turned back. Once they got power, they kept it; and tried to increase it. Central Italy became the Papal States, with the pope as king. Now he was a player on the world stage. With emperors in the East, far removed, kings battled for power in what is today France and Germany. Eventually Charlemagne united much of central Europe into an empire. Then the Pope (Leo III) crowned him holy Roman emperor in 800. Never mind, as some have said, that this empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire, but here was another step on the road taking the papacy away from spiritual leadership and into temporal affairs.

Now the great debate about the two kingdoms is taken up. Boniface VIII (1294-1303) famously described the two kingdoms as two swords, and the spiritual is definitely supreme, the temporal secondary. And the temporal gets its power from the spiritual and yields to the spiritual in all things. In other words, as Boniface famously proclaimed in his bull *Unam Sanctam*, "It is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff."

Of course, that only builds on Gregory VII's (1073-1085) humbling of Emperor Henry IV in the snows of Canossa and Innocent III's (1198-1216) enfeoffing England after putting them under a devastating interdict. Then later it's Alexander VI (1492-1503) famously drawing

the line dividing the New World between Portugal and Spain.

A history of the popes like John Julius Norwich's *Absolute Monarchs* tells this tale. Over and over again you hear the refrain: the pope tries to take power and the pope loses power; the pope irritates this leader or that leader or gets irritated by this or that leader. It would be embarrassing, if it were not so commonplace, to read the scheming and plotting of popes. The plots and counterplots, the alliances formed and treaties ripped up, all sound like a broken record. And in all things, the pope's only interest seems to be to keep control of his own possessions, his own kingdom, his own power, his own prerogatives.

Luther drew that conclusion in the *Smalcald Articles*. Finally our Lutheran Confessions come face to face with the papacy and deal with it explicitly. Remember, while the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Apology*, and the *Catechisms* frankly rebuke and condemn the works righteousness of the papal system, there is no article or specific treatment of the papacy. In 1529 and 1530 some nurtured hope for reconciliation and reform. Melancthon wrote quite plainly in the transition between the chief articles and the articles dealing with abuses corrected that Lutherans teach "nothing that varies from the Scriptures, or from the Church universal, or from the Church of Rome" (AC, Summary Statement, 1). Then, "Our churches do not dissent from any article of faith held by the Church catholic" (AC, Review of Various Abuses, 1).

As Luther said, he could not tread so lightly as Master Philip did. Yet he agreed with all that the *Augustana* and *Apology* said. He wrote many of the documents that lay behind those confessions.

Seven years later things had changed somewhat. Pope Paul III finally acceded to a demand that even a faithful Catholic emperor like Charles V was making: "Give us a general council!" He called for a council to meet at Mantua. Lutheran princes debated whether they should attend. They debated whether they should even accept the invitation. Would it put them under the authority of the pope if they did?

They did decide to prepare a response, just in case one was asked for, or in case they attended. Though, even at this point it seemed attendance was fruitless. In the bull announcing the council, the pope explained how one of the goals was the "extirpation" of the Lutheran heresy. That is not a conciliatory word. Thankfully the Lutherans had Luther to turn to to write a confession of faith matching such a council's goal.

Luther saw through the pope's seeming acceptance of the Reformer's demands. He knew that nothing could actually be dealt with that needed to be dealt with. And what needed to be dealt with was the pope's tyranny over people's souls. A tyranny that began with his usurpation of the pastoral office and his perversion of the Mass Christ gave to the Church as a gift for forgiveness. Recall Luther's words in the *Large Catechism*, where he describes the work of the Holy Spirit through the Church this way: "Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the grace of the Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sins" (LC II:55). This properly explains Christ's divine call to his

apostles in John 20, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." Or, St. Paul's motto, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

The pope had long set this aside as the main thing. While forgiveness was still granted in many places, as Luther was wont to say, because of the Scripture lessons, the absolution of the priest, Baptism, the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, the Words of Institution, at the same time it was trampled upon, obscured, and removed by the words of sacrifice in the liturgy, by the teachings regarding contrition and attrition, and by the false view of works preached everywhere and most blasphemously promoted by the sale of indulgences in the 15th and 16th centuries. Luther rightly saw that this was not incidental. This was the essence of the papacy. Here he fulfills biblical prophecy. Revelation 13, "He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon." 2 Thessalonians 2, "He will oppose and exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God." And, in one of Luther's favorite passages, Matthew 24, "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation'....For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect - if that were possible."

All this caused Luther in 1537 (not for the first time, but now in a confessional way) to identify the pope as the Endchrist or Antichrist (SA 2:4:10). And in the article on the Mass he said, "This article about the Mass would completely preoccupy the council. Even if they could concede all other articles, they could not concede this.... In this, we remain eternally separated and opposed to one another. They

know well that when the Mass falls, the papacy lies in ruins. Before they will let that happen, they will, if they can, put us all to death" (SA 2:2:10).

That this was not just typical Luther hyperbole and bluster history bears out. The popes had no problem killing enemies. In 1415 the Council of Constance burned John Hus at the stake, even though he had been promised safe conduct. Of course, as some said, promises made to heretics are not valid. That council also dug up the bones of John Wycliffe and had them burned. Innocent III called for a crusade during his pontificate, not to fight Muslims and restore the Holy Land, but to wipe out Christian heretics in France. Julius II had no problem fighting against other Christians to amass land and power and, like other popes, using the power of the interdict (which puts an end to all sacramental actions except baptisms) to cow Christian opponents who stand in the way.

More contemporary to Luther, in the 1520s, those with Lutheran sympathies had been executed as heretics in Antwerp. In Italy, some prelates with Lutheran sympathies ended up in jail. The Inquisitions (Spanish and otherwise) were active at this time doing work that one really would not expect the Church to be doing.¹ Of course there was also the Edict of Worms calling for, at the least, Luther's arrest. Lutheran princes felt reasonably sure force of arms would be brought to bear against them, and so they formed the Smalcaldic League in the 1530s. After Luther's death that war came, under the

¹ One of Mel Brooks' best jokes is Inquisition related. In *History of the World, Part 1*, a monk introduces the inquisitor Torquemada (pronouncing it "Tawk-em-out-ta."): "Do not implore him for compassion. Do not beg him for forgiveness. Do not beg him for mercy." Then: "Let's face it, you can't talk 'em outta' anything."

leadership of Charles V. Shamefully, after the infamous St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, Pope Gregory XIII ordered up a *Te Deum* in praise of the death of Protestants. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) may not always have been about Catholics and Protestants, but it was certainly a driving cause. The religious wars in France (1562-1598) were about destroying Protestantism.

All this is to say that Luther was not far off when he penned the original words of a hymn we sing often: "*Und steur des Papst und Türken Mord.*" "Restrain the murderous Pope and Turk." The pope was not, in Luther's experience, interested in solving things by Scripture. In 1518, Cardinal Cajetan met with him at Augsburg and made it clear that they were not there to debate, but for Luther to recant. In 1521, the situation was no different. The Diet presented Luther with two questions, "Are these books yours? Do you recant?" In 1537, when a group of cardinals prepared a document detailing the reforms a council should undertake (*LW* 34:231-267), one is struck by how the cardinals deal with doctrine not at all. Yes, they point out abuses that need to be fixed. Bishops should not be absent from their dioceses. Popes should not sell church offices. But the cardinals say not one word about justification by faith alone. They do not mention that the sacrament should be given in both kinds, that priests should be allowed to marry, that vows might be of questionable value, that selling masses is troubling, that purgatory is pure speculation, that the invocation of saints removes Christ from his throne, etc. etc. etc.

Already in thesis 90 Luther identified this tyrannical streak in the popes: "To repress these sharp arguments of the laity by force alone, and not to resolve them by giving reasons, is to expose the church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies and to make

Christians unhappy" (*LW* 31:33). In a preface he wrote in 1523, Luther said, "A pope ought to have quoted Scripture and stepped forward boldly, saying, 'See, here is God's Word. Luther has spoken this and that contrary to God's Word.' But he very delicately makes no mention of that, saying, 'Luther spoke thus and thus against long tradition, against custom, against the doctors [of the church],' just as if our faith stood on long tradition and custom and the word of doctors" (*LW* 59:41). After his meeting with Cardinal Cajetan, Luther reported, "I was not overly annoyed with his distortion of the Bible, knowing that he had become accustomed to that kind of interpretation through his contacts with the long-established practice of the Roman Curia and the work of scholastic quibblers. It has long been believed that whatever the Roman Church says, damns, or wants, all people must eventually say, damn, or want, and that no other reason need be given than that the Apostolic See and the Roman church hold that opinion" (*LW* 31:276).

Again, things like the Inquisition and the Crusades launched against Christian heretics and the burning of a man like John Hus prove Luther's point. The pope uses tyranny and terror to gain power and hold on to power. And he must, for his positions lack the comfort of the support of Scripture.

This too fulfills Scripture. Daniel 7 shows us a vision of four beasts. From the fourth beast – a vision of the Roman Empire – came a little horn described three times as speaking boastfully (verses 8, 11, 21). This is a key characteristic of this little horn coming out of the Roman Empire. Then that boastful horn "was waging war against the saints and defeating them" (v21). "He will speak against the Most High and oppress the saints and try to change set times and the laws" (v25). This

little horn is later described as a “king” who “will do as he pleases.” “He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods” (Daniel 11:36).

Again, we need think only of Gregory VII declaring that popes cannot and do not err and cannot be judged. Or Innocent III who uses spiritual weapons to take kingdoms. Or Boniface VIII who claims to hold all power in his hands. Or Pius IX who claims to be able to speak infallibly and irreformably from his own authority. Or Pius XII who actually uses that power (to define the assumption of Mary as a doctrine that must be believed by the faithful).

What we see time and time again is that the papacy has little to no interest in anything but its own power. It uses Matthew 16 (“You are Peter”) and John 21 (“Feed my lambs”) and Luke 22 (“When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”) as fig leaves to claim power and authority from Christ. Then it decrees and commands and mandates. It removes half the sacrament from the faithful. It commands fasting. It spends centuries with the Bible and the liturgy in a language unintelligible to most, but, no big deal, it counts as a work worked (*ex opere operato*). It turns God’s gift of forgiveness in the sacrament to a sacrifice offered by priests and people. Then it says all those things are not enough and you will be spending millennia in purgatory until you can purge yourself of your guilt. Then it graciously offers indulgences to lessen that punishment.²

No wonder then, that the scholar Bernard McGinn said that simple logic meant that at

² The two papers provided in your binders, “Revealed, not Removed – The Antichrist in Revelation” and “Can We Make a Deal with This Devil?” are meant to provide more of the specifics in terms of exegesis and examples.

some point the papacy would be identified as the Antichrist (cf. McGinn, *Antichrist*). He became an earthly ruler. Yet he remained in the “temple of God,” that is, the Church. He was a bad actor (cf. the history of the popes from 800-1600, including the dreadful “Pornocracy” of the 900s). And, as was the key issue for Luther, he opposed Scripture and the preaching of the gospel (McGinn, 207). In a fascinating twist, it was not first Luther that made this identification. It was actually Franciscan friars who did so. John Wycliffe also did. Yes, logical. Of course, we call it biblical.

The history of the papacy teaches us that nothing much has changed since the early days of the Christian Church. The first great controversy was about justification. You can read about it in Acts 10-15 and Galatians and James. Okay, and Romans too. And even though the opponents are often called “Judaizers,” and were in fact some of the early Jewish Christians, this is already the work of the Antichrist. Paul says, “For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work” (2 Thessalonians 2:7).

“Men came from James,” Paul says in Galatians. “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1). These teachers introduced the monstrous uncertainty. “Is faith alone in Christ enough? Was the work of Christ alone enough? Is grace alone enough?” They did not have Masses, indulgences, and purgatory, but they were making the same case the popes made (and make). “Christ is not enough.”

These preachers burdened the consciences of the people, just as Jesus said about the Pharisees, “They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they

themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:4). About them Paul writes, "Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh" (Galatians 6:13). Paul's answer was, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14). Or, as he said to the Philippians, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (3:7-9).

St. Peter sees through all of this as well. At the Council of Jerusalem he brings forgiveness back to the front of the Church's work. He tells them what he told the friends and family of that Gentile Cornelius, "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43). And then, "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (Acts 15:10-11).

Our Confessions make much of Peter's word. The *Apology* says, "How could this be said more clearly? Peter says we receive forgiveness of sins through Christ's name, that is, for His sake. It is not for the sake of our merits, not for the sake of our contrition, attrition, love, worship, or works. He adds: *When we believe in Him*. Peter requires faith.

For we cannot receive Christ's name except by faith. Besides, he refers to the agreement of all the prophets. This is truly to cite the authority of the Church" (IV:83).

Again, "This is the very voice unique to the Gospel, namely, that for Christ's sake, and not for the sake of our works, we obtain the forgiveness of sins through faith. Our adversaries work to suppress this voice of the Gospel by means of distorted passages, which contain the doctrine of the Law or of works. It is true that in the doctrine of repentance works are required, because certainly new life is required. But here the adversaries wrongly add that by such works we merit the forgiveness of sins, or justification" (IV:153).

The *Apology* again, after citing Acts 10:43, "We would rather give agreement to this Church of the prophets than to these godless writers of the Confutation who so rudely blaspheme Christ" (XX:79).

The *Apology* one last time:

"Our adversaries cry out that they are the Church, that they are following the general agreement of the Church. But Peter also cites here in our issue the consensus of the Church, 'To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins' (Acts 10:43). The general agreement of the prophets is certainly to be judged as the general agreement of the Church universal. We admit neither to the pope nor to the Church the power to make decrees against this general agreement of the prophets. But the bull of Leo openly condemns this article, 'Repentance,' and the adversaries condemn it in the Confutation. It is clear what sort of a Church we must judge these men to be. By their decrees they not only condemn the doctrine that we obtain the forgiveness of sins through faith (not on

account of our works, but because of Christ), but they also give the command to abolish it by force and the sword and by every kind of cruelty to put to death good people who believe this way.

“They have famous authors, Scotus, Gabriel Biel, and the like, and passages of the Fathers that are quoted in a butchered form in the decrees. Certainly, if the quotations are to be counted, they win. For there is a very great crowd of most silly writers on the *Sentences*. As though they had worked together, they defend these fables about the merit of attrition and of works and other things that we have mentioned previously. But let no one be moved by the multitude of citations. There is no great weight in the testimonies of the later writers. They did not create their own writings, but only, by compiling from the writers before them, transferred these opinions from some books into others. They have exercised no judgment. Just like petty judges they have silently approved the errors of their superiors, which they have not understood. Therefore, let us not hesitate to use this saying of Peter, which summarizes the Prophets and opposes ever so many legions of the commentators on the *Sentences*. The Holy Spirit’s testimony is added to this statement of Peter. For the text speaks in this way, ‘While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word’ (Acts 10:44). Therefore, let godly consciences know that God’s command is this: They are to believe that they are freely forgiven for Christ’s sake, and not for the sake of our works. Let them sustain themselves against despair and against the terrors of sin and of death by this command of God. Let them know that this belief has existed among saints from the beginning of the world. For Peter clearly cites the general agreement of the Prophets, and the writings of the apostles

confirm that they believe the same thing” (XIIa:66-73).

That last thought is one of the keys to all of Scripture. “Let godly consciences know that God’s command is this, etc.” The Confessions make it clear over and over and over again. They are about unburdening consciences. Just as the apostles were. Go back to Acts 15. Peter asks, “Why would we put a yoke on these Christians?” Then James, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (v19).

Then Paul does the same thing as he makes pastoral judgments regarding the circumcisions of Timothy and Titus. For the sake of brothers in the faith he circumcises Timothy. For the sake of those same brothers he refuses to circumcise Titus. He will not be compelled, he tells the Galatians. This is the entire content of Romans 14 (of which more later). He cares about consciences. He cares about keeping them unburdened. That is the heart and soul of the Lutheran confession, because it is the heart and soul of Scripture. From St. Paul’s first recorded sermon: “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39).

This is what Luther did not have. Famously he tells the story of his great breakthrough near the end of his life. He talks about how he hated a God who is just and righteous and demands justice and righteousness from us that we do not have and cannot get. He wished to damn such a God who damned him. Then one day that much hated passage in Romans 1 finally clicked: “For in the gospel a righteousness *from* God is revealed, a

righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (v17). Then Romans 3 clicked, "But now a righteousness *from* God, apart from law, has been made known" (v21). Luther saw that all important preposition: "from." He said the gates of paradise opened. He poured through the Scriptures and saw how all those things he had been taught were demands, were actually gifts of God. The love that God had for him. The wisdom that God gave him. The righteousness that comes from God. This caused Luther to write to George Spenlein in 1516, "Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not" (LW 48:12).

This is what Luther did not find in papal teachings and decrees. This drove Luther inexorably to fear that he was dealing with the Antichrist. And then, finally, to say, "The pope in Rome is the very Antichrist."

This is, of course, a controversial teaching among Christians. It is not well-loved or received. Somewhat famously, while running for Congress, Michelle Bachman vigorously denied that her church (at that time the Wisconsin Synod) would teach such a thing.³ A course offered in 2006 by an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America satellite program described this teaching as a "theological catastrophe." In a world where any objection to anything seems to be bigoted and something-phobic, to declare the pope the Antichrist is bound to raise hackles. Although, some argue that one of the last acceptable bigotries is anti-Catholicism.

³ This happened in a televised debate on October 28, 2006. Bachmann said that her church "does not believe that the Pope is the Anti-Christ, that's absolutely false.... I think it's patently absurd and it's a false statement." Bachmann left the Wisconsin Synod and the Lutheran Church.

Even among those who hold this teaching, as we do, it is not widely discussed. The four lectionaries provided in our hymnal appoint only one of the classic texts for reading (1 John 4:1-11, Easter 6, Year B). I think if we spoke this prayer attributed to Luther from the altar on Sunday we'd receive some negative feedback, "O God, fill us with hatred for the papacy." As mentioned above, we do not sing Luther's original text for "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word." Instead of restraining murderous popes and Turks, we ask the Lord to "curb those who by deceit or sword" (which is not bad, by the way).

Why is this the case? Well, on the one hand, the popes are not nearly so bad as they once were, at least superficially. A fascinating read on the popes of Luther's time is Barbara Tuchman's *The March of Folly*. She dedicates a chapter to how stupid the popes of the 1400s and 1500s were. They worked against self-interest and brought the schism of the Reformation on themselves. They were venal, greedy, lazy, sexually immoral and in some cases arguably not even Christian. This was the era of the infamous Borgia pope, Alexander VI, and the warrior pope, Julius II. Luther's pope, the Medici, Leo X, supposedly said, "God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it." And then spent all the money the papacy had, so that when he died, they had to use candles left over from another prelate's funeral. During these years the pope's flaunted their bastard children, gave them red hats, and made no secret of their taste for young boys. Plus you had the Inquisition hunting heretics and the authorities burning Lutheran books and then Lutherans.

But in our lifetime and really for the last century, we have been given pretty good popes. They have been mostly moral, pious men. There has been the great theologian, Benedict XVI, and now kind-hearted Francis.

There was the lovable John XXIII and the destroyer of Communism, John Paul II. You can read the writings of these men and, in some instances, even glean interesting and useful insights. And they are not executing heretics.

Garry Wills writes in a book otherwise filled with negative assessments of the papacy:

“Happily, those kinds of corruption no longer corrode the papacy. Though there have been financial scandals in the modern papacy (especially that having to do with its involvement in Michele Sindona’s *Banco Ambrosiano*), the spectacle of individual Popes amassing huge fortunes for themselves and their families is no longer the shame that caused Dante’s disgust. Similarly, Popes no longer have secular kingdoms for which they are willing to murder and torture and conquer, in ways that Acton illuminated with the fierce light of his scholarship. Nor do sexual scandals reach as high up or deep down as when papal bastards ran the church’s bureaucracy.⁴ In the tenth century, a dissolute teenager could be elected Pope (John XII) because of his family connections and die a decade later in the bed of a married woman” (Wills, 2).

There is also the ecumenical movement to factor in. Rome has, it appears, softened its stance since Boniface VIII. He said, you will recall, that it is altogether necessary for all men to submit to the Roman Pontiff for salvation. Well, Vatican II (1962-1965) declared that there are elements of the Church in some

⁴ Though Wills does discuss some of the sexual abuse issues, his book was published in 2000, before the really big *skubula* hit the fan, revealing that this scandal really did go nearly all the way up to the top. Some speculate that part of the reason for Benedict XVI’s abdication was the effects of this scandal.

of the separated communities (read, Anglicans, Lutherans, etc.).

For more than half a century, the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran Churches (mostly from the Lutheran World Federation) have been dialoguing, and in ecumenical terms, coming to “convergence.” You can read an interesting document called, *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry, Eucharist*, which offers some thoughts from the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on the progress made in those three key areas. If you are of a mind to read it, you will see that those writing the document believe that much has improved. They do not see full communion as possible yet, but they find many of the anathemas and “we condemn” to no longer apply.

A third factor is the rise of the historical-critical method.⁵ Popes like Pius IX and Pius X fought tooth and nail against what they called “modernism,” which included not only democracy and freedom of religion, but also the use of the historical critical method. It was under Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) that some doors opened allowing Catholic scholars to make use of what most Protestants had been using for well over a century. This means that Roman Catholic theology is, in many ways, at least from the theologians’ side, blurring the lines between Catholics and Protestants. It

⁵ Briefly, the historical-critical method uses the tools of scholarship to treat the Bible like any other book. Practically speaking, this means the loss of the doctrine of inerrancy and rejecting the truth that the Bible is God’s Word. The most radical application of this is the *Jesus Seminar* which votes on which words Jesus said, might have said, could have said, probably did not say, and definitely did not say. The explosion in the Missouri Synod in the 1960s and 1970s that led to Seminex hinged on the use of the historical-critical method.

also means, of course, that the Word of God is no longer really the Word of God.

How does this affect the Antichrist debate? With the historical-critical method in play, one may not hear quite so bold statements of differences as one once did. The aforementioned Lutheran-Catholic dialogues settled in the 1970s and early 1980s that most of the passages Rome uses about the pope do not apply. They said that the "Petrine office" is nice, but not biblical. The sacrifice of the mass is not spoken of in such stark, works righteous terms in these dialogues. Again, one can read *Declaration on the Way* and perhaps conclude, "Rome has come a long way towards us."

In addition, there is the well-known *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* signed in 1999. Here you have an agreement on the neuralgic issue. This is the doctrine upon which the church stands and falls. This is the doctrine that caused the Reformation. This is the doctrine that brings peace to troubled consciences. If we have convergence here, if the anathemas and condemnations no longer apply, then how can we hold on to and say that the pope remains the Antichrist? Maybe it really is just an historical judgment and no longer applies.

Maybe. Or, maybe Garry Wills was right. "Catholics have fallen out of the healthy old habit of reminding each other how sinful Popes can be" (Wills, 1). Maybe Lutherans too?

I suspect that for most Lutherans sitting in their pews here in America, they would not call the papacy, "*meine grosse Anfechtung*." And those lost words from "Lord, keep us steadfast"? Probably most would hope that they stay lost.⁶ I will confess that in my adult

⁶ Of course, we probably would want to think twice about retaining the phrase "murderous" with the

instruction courses, I tuck talk about the Pope as the Antichrist into some notes on my lesson on the "End Times." I do make sure to talk about it as we review the lesson, and I draw the exegetical conclusions for them, but I do not have a page with passages from 2 Thessalonians 2, 1 John 2 and 4, Daniel 7 and 11, and Revelation. Though, I will admit, I probably should. St. Paul was willing to talk about it with Christians during a three-week stay.⁷

Here is one of the inevitable effects of being free for so long. We have forgotten what it was like to be a slave. Dr. Luther grew up under the pope. He was a faithful son of the church. Remember his kind words to Leo X in 1520. He said of himself on another occasion, "I kept the rules of my order so strictly that I can say: if ever a monk went to heaven on account of his monkery, I should get there too...." (LW 25:476, note 5). When he posted his theses regarding indulgences, he had no

Turks, since Muslims seem intent on responding to charges of being violent with, um, violence.

⁷ Acts 17:1-2, "[T]hey came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures." Compare that with 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?"

desire to found a new church or upend the papacy. He wished to defend the honor of the popes. And then, when it became clear that the pope was indeed the Antichrist, Luther, blinders off, pulled no more punches. We have lived so long in this freedom, that we have, perhaps, forgotten what we have been freed from.

I do not claim this to be a complete or exhaustive list of our freedoms, nor do I claim to treat or touch upon all of them in the course of my brief time among you. For that I can be faulted. But let us consider some of the freedoms won for us by the Reformation that we celebrate in this quincentennial.

We are free from a false opinion of good works, that they justify and save us. "By grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We are free from the sacrifice of the mass; it is, for us, God's arrow-down gift of forgiveness. "My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28).

We are free from the micromanagement and tyranny of the popes.⁸ "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3).

⁸ I will never forget sitting with a young couple in Texas. The husband was a Lutheran (classmate from Michigan Lutheran Seminary). The wife grew up Roman Catholic. Her priest told her, "When you get married, call me. I will be there to marry you." She called him. She mentioned she was marrying a Lutheran. That was the end of the conversation.

We are free to live out our vocations and know that it is just as God-pleasing to be a husband, wife, father, mother, washer-woman, baker, banker, etc., than it is to be tonsured and married to the church as a monk or a nun (or a called worker). Think here of John's words to tax collectors and soldiers in Luke 3 or Jesus' words to Zacchaeus in Luke 19. They did not send them to monasteries. They sent them back into their lives as Christians.

We are free to criticize the church when it departs from Scripture, as Paul praised the Bereans for in Acts 17.

We are free to call and appoint our pastors and bishops (district presidents). Peter, Paul, and Barnabas display this for us in Acts and Paul commands it in Titus 1.

We are free to receive both the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament. And, to repeat, to receive it for our own personal forgiveness. "My body, for you. My blood, for you."⁹ There are few more comforting words than those we learn in catechism. "He is properly prepared who believes these words, 'Given' and 'poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins'" (SC, VI:4).

⁹ "18. But true faith says, 'I certainly believe that the Son of God suffered and arose, but he did this all for me, for my sins, of that I am certain. 19. For he died for the sins of the whole world. But it is most certain that I am some part of the world, therefore, it is most certain that he died also for my sins.'... 24. Accordingly, that 'for me' or 'for us,' if it is believed, creates that true faith and distinguishes it from all other faith, which merely hears the things done. 25. This is the faith which alone justifies us without law and works through the mercy of God shown in Christ." (LW 34:110-111).

We are free from a burdened conscience, because Christ did everything. "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18). Here are words that might rival those just mentioned for "most comforting" in the catechism, "In this Christian Church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers" (SC II:3).

We are free from exalted views of authority and the self, freed by Christ who says, "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28).

We are free from bad hermeneutics. We are free to let Scripture interpret Scripture, not the fathers or the councils. We are free to compare Matthew 16 ("You are Peter...on this rock") with 1 Corinthians 3 and Ephesians 2 and Jesus' words about being the rejected stone made a capstone. We are free to see Jesus' words connecting works and heaven (for example, Matthew 25) in the very way that our Confessions do, which is how Jesus saw them in John 3 and John 5. Works are the evidence of faith. Faith is living, busy, and active. It acts because that is what faith does. Good people do good things. That is Matthew 7 ("A good tree bears good fruit") and James 2. We *see* justification by works. We are not *justified* by works. As it turns out, much of what makes the pope the Antichrist is a hermeneutical problem.

We are free to be forgiven, for sure. We do not have to labor under the Council of Trent's anathema that says it is a great and sinful presumption to know that you are going to heaven. We can live in the indicatives of the gospel, "God so loved the world that he gave

his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). "Today, you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). "Then neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11). "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

In other words, when brothers and sisters mutually console one another with the gospel, that is, when they forgive each other, it is, as Christ says, loosed on earth and already loosed in heaven. When pastors speak a word of absolution, publicly or privately, we hear that Word as the Word of God,¹⁰ "not doubting, but firmly believing that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven" (SC, V:2). That is the divine call. "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:23). In other words, we are free to use the keys given to the Church by Christ rightly.

And, as mentioned above, we are free from the "many vermin and a multitude of idolatries" begotten by "this dragon's tail, that is, the Mass" (SA II:2:11): purgatory, apparitions of saints and Mary, pilgrimages, monastic societies, relics, indulgences. "For Christ's merit is obtained not by our works or pennies, but from grace through faith, without money and merit. It is offered not through the pope's power, but through the preaching of God's Word" (SA II:2:24). That is just St. Paul. "And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Romans 11:6).

In the article on Good Works in the *Augsburg Confession*, we confess:

¹⁰ "Our people are taught that they should highly prize the Absolution as being God's voice and pronounced by God's command" (AC XXV:3).

“Before now, preachers taught very little about these things. They encouraged only childish and needless works, such as particular holy days, particular fasts, brotherhoods, pilgrimages, services in honor of the saints, the use of rosaries, monasticism, and such things. Since our adversaries have been admonished about these things, they are now unlearning them. They do not preach these unhelpful works as much as they used to. In the past, there was only stunning silence about faith, but now they are beginning to mention it. They do not teach that we are justified only by works. They join faith and works together, and say that we are justified by faith and works. This teaching is more tolerable than the former one. It can offer more consolation than their old teaching” (AC XX:3-7).

I have always liked that second last sentence: “At least they’re a little better than before on this matter.” And notice, Melancthon returns to the main theme of the Scriptures and our Confessions, the theme of the Reformation: “It can offer more consolation than their old teaching.” The preaching of the gospel comforts consciences.

Like Dr. Luther and our Confessions, we confess frankly and forthrightly that the Christian Church is found where the Word is taught and the Sacraments administered. So, we know there are believers in Christ within the Roman Church. This is one of the key points often missed in a discussion of the Antichrist. We say, “The pope is the Antichrist,” and people hear, “Roman Catholics are the Antichrist.” No. The office is the antichristian thing. The pope is the man of lawlessness and false prophet. Those under his care are either oppressed sheep, or, as is the case sadly for many, willing co-conspirators. “They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a

powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie” (2 Thessalonians 2:10-11). When asked if I am damning all Catholics or saying that they are the Antichrist, I say, “I believe that there are many millions of Christians in the Roman Catholic Church, but if they confess what their catechism says, then they are in trouble. For their catechism takes them away from Christ.”

And so, while the popes may be more moral than they used to be, and they are not burning heretics at the stake anymore, and while ecumenical dialogues may have discovered some things that were caricatured or softened some rough theological edges, it is, at the same time, beyond question, that the pope remains the Antichrist. And we must not, to paraphrase Wills, forget just how badly the popes sin.

All those freedoms mentioned above are things that are not free in the Roman Church under the popes. The Mass remains a sacrifice, as the order approved in the 2010 *Roman Missal* makes plain. And while there is gospel in that liturgy, and even a spoken general absolution, it is blended together with the words of sacrifice and the prayers to the saints and Mary that are also a part of it.

In a fascinating article recently republished at the *First Things* website, “Return to Form: The Fate of the Rite is the Fate of the Church,” Martin Mosebach argues for the return of the Latin Rite of the Mass, the Tridentine Latin Rite. He says some interesting things that reflect a Catholicism that is opposed to the reforms and openness of Vatican II and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, when discussing the liturgy in the vernacular, he makes the claim that a correct understanding of the Mass is “entirely independent of a capacity to follow its literal expression.” That is to say, it does not matter

if you can understand the words being spoken in the Mass.

He points to the Latin Rite as something with “no latitude whatever for encroachments or modifications of any kind.” The key area for this is in the offertory of the Mass. “These prayers over the bread and wine make clear the priestly and sacrificial character of the Mass and are therefore essential.” In what he calls a mistranslation of the *Verba*, where the priest reads “for all” instead of “poured out for many” he adds a parenthetical quote calling that change “a reprehensible presumption of salvation.” This is nothing but a return to the Tridentine view that claiming to have confidence of your salvation by faith alone is anathema.

In the rite for ordination in 1962, the bishop told the priest, “Receive the power to offer sacrifice to God and to celebrate Masses for the living and the dead.” The most recent rite I could find, revised by John Paul II watered down that line to read, “to offer sacrifice to God,” but I would still offer into evidence the card I received at my grandmother’s funeral from a Catholic relative assuring me that masses were being said for the repose of my (Lutheran) grandmother’s soul.

In the much heralded *Joint Declaration on Justification*, it is interesting to note that all the Roman Catholic footnotes refer to documents from Vatican II and recent Lutheran-Catholic dialogues. They studiously refrain from referring to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* prepared by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) under John Paul II or the actual decrees of the Council of Trent in question. This led to a follow-up document, an explanation, or response, to the *JDDJ* by the Catholic Church, which explained that many of the items were not as solved as the *JDDJ* indicated, specifically saying that Rome does

not accept the truth of the *simul justus et peccator*, because concupiscence (the inclination to sin) is not sin, just as Trent taught (teaches). So that is still anathematized. In addition, they are troubled by the use of the phrase “merely passive” or “purely passive” when it comes to faith and grace. Perhaps it is just a defense of the sanctified life, that, as the Formula says, the new man does cooperate in Christian living. But it is hard not to read it as saying, “Yes, we signed this document, but no, we do not teach any differently than we have ever taught.”

As proof, Pope John Paul II issued an indulgence in the jubilee year of 2000 right after signing the document. Pope Benedict XVI did as well during his pontificate. Recently (2013), Pope Francis offered plenary indulgences to those who could not attend the Youth World Day, but followed the events as possible, including on social media (leading to hilarious headlines about the pope offering time off purgatory if you follow him on Twitter). It should be noted that Pope Francis made it clear that this indulgence is “applicable also to the souls of deceased faithful.” The only difference with indulgences today is that they are not for sale. I have a Bible on my shelf where Pope Pius XII assures me that for fifteen minutes of Bible reading I can get three years out of purgatory. If I only read a few Scriptures, kiss the gospels, and then pray, “May the reading of the Gospel be our salvation and protection,” the pope graciously allows 500 days off. If I do it for a month, I get the plenary indulgence.

The gospel remains obscured. Consciences remain burdened by fasting, sacrifices, and indulgences. Justification is blurred together with sanctification, so that the catechism of the Roman Church says that grace gets you so far, and then your works finish meriting you

eternal life (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2010).

And though the pope seems like a pretty nice guy, he remains the tyrant he always was. A former Roman Catholic archbishop, John Quinn, wrote a book about reforming the papacy in 1999. There he discussed that reform document Pope Paul III ordered in 1537. That document leaked out and Luther got his hands on it and published it. Quinn writes, "This led Rome to fear that any kind of criticism within the Church would play into the hands of the Church's enemies, give grounds to attack, confuse the people, and risk injury to their faith" (Quinn, 48). Further, "This resistance to all criticism led to an inflated idea of the holiness and perfection of the Church so that any form of criticism came to be viewed as an act of disloyalty, a breaching of the ramparts" (Quinn, 48).

This culminated in the decree on infallibility in 1870 at Vatican I. Pius IX had already made an infallible decree, declaring that it is necessary for the faithful to believe that Mary was immaculately conceived. This was in 1854. That served as a test balloon. As his temporal power shrunk, the pope needed to expand his spiritual power. He won this battle at the council. He can speak irreformably, from his own authority, and bind the faithful. Significantly it has only been done once since then. Again, it was the Marian dogma referred to above under Pius XII.

Hans Küng, a Roman Catholic priest and theologian, because he questioned the pope's infallibility (among other things), lost his ability to teach in the Roman Church. But he agrees with Quinn's assessment and is living proof of it. Just as Pope Francis said to Cardinal Müller, "I am the pope and I need give no reason to anyone for my decisions," so too popes said much the same to Küng, and

have treated their bishops in the same way. In a 2003 history of the Roman Church, Küng writes about the occasional Synods of Bishops held in Rome. They "are often more like totalitarian party congresses than assemblies of leaders of our church moved by the Spirit of Christ" (Küng, *The Catholic Church*, 212).

Küng notes that both the Reformation and the Enlightenment failed to produce any actual reform. From those movements came a threefold tyranny from the popes: an absolutist primacy, a total subjection of the laity to the clergy, and the absolute and unnegotiable law of celibacy for the clergy. Both John Quinn and Marco Tosatti (who wrote about Cardinal Müller's run-ins with Pope Francis) would agree. There is no consultation with the bishops or the people. The pope holds all things in his heart and decides. Again, Canon Law supports this. There is no appealing a decision of the pope. It is said that as bishops argued against Pius IX's wish to define infallibility, they appealed to tradition. Allegedly, Pius roared, "I am tradition" (Hasler, 91; Wills, 254).

So, despite the opening of the windows at Vatican II, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger can write in the early 21st century that churches outside of Rome are still not really churches. Boniface VIII still breathes. At the same time, Vatican II did blow this breeze into the church (and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* includes it): those who do not know Christ (by no fault of their own) and do their best, can attain eternal life. This is a rehashing of the old, "God will not deny you grace if you do what is in you," (*facere quod in se est*) that troubled Luther so. But now it is Roman dogma. So the popes exclude Christians on the one hand as not really the church, but on the other hand proclaim as dogma a universalism of the worst kind.

"O pope, o pope, enough is enough.... Observe how the pope tries to be God" (LW 32:65-66)! In other words, the Scriptural truths taught in 2 Thessalonians 2 about a man of lawlessness and his false miracles, wonders, and signs, in 1 Timothy 4 about one forbidding marriage, in Daniel about the boastful speaking and the war against the saints by a man who does what he pleases, they all remain true. The pope looks more like a lamb (or The Lamb) than ever, and he continues to speak like the Dragon (Revelation 13:11).

The great problem Luther saw here, a theme he elaborated on in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Freedom of the Christian* is that God is simple. He speaks clear, simple words. We make it complex. God says, "Be cleansed. Eat. Drink. Believe." We pile up systems and rules. We get bewitched (cf. Galatians 3:1ff). This is where our problems come in. And Satan works hard to help. Writing in 1522, Luther spoke about Satan's work: "Now that he sees he cannot subdue us from the left side, he rushes over to the right side. Formerly he made us too papistic; now he wants to make us too evangelical" (LW 36:237).

This is the great danger that faces us as we look at the present and into the future. We rejoice that we have identified the pope as the Antichrist. It is good to know who your enemies are, is it not? But, remember, St. John talks of both the Antichrist and antichrists in his letters. That makes this a warning to us. Just because we have identified the Antichrist does not get us off the hook. As Luther says, we are tempted towards the side of the Antichrist and the side of being "too evangelical." Both can end up opposing Christ or putting ourselves into his place.

Regarding this danger St. Peter wrote quite vividly: "It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: 'A dog returns to its vomit,' and, 'A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud'" (2 Peter 2:21-22). Or perhaps you think of those challenging words in Hebrews that suggest the re-crucifixion of Christ. "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace" (Hebrews 6:4-6).

We do not wish to return to the Antichrist's fold or to establish ourselves as new and horrible antichrists. This would be to deny and betray Christ, to join in league with the devil, to make *him* our father (cf. John 8:44).¹¹ In what way is this a danger? It is, of course, in the misuse, abuse, or loss of our freedoms won by Christ, many of which were briefly discussed above.

I do not wish to devote immense time to this. I have already tried your patience and may already be up against my time limit. But it is worth drawing some conclusions or issuing some warnings based on the life of the church today.

First, there is of course, the danger of simple ingratitude. When he titled his work, *The*

¹¹ In his prefaces, Luther used the colorful terms "Roman Iscariot" or "Iscariot popes" (LW 60:144, 60:205). In *Against the Papacy*, he addressed the pope as "Most Hellish Father."

Babylonian Captivity of the Church, one wonders if Luther was subtly hinting that this is an earned captivity, as it was for Israel. The Babylonians came and smashed them for their idolatry and spiritual adultery. He says as much there and in his *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* written in 1521, a response to his threatened excommunication. He blames our “godless ingratitude” for the rise of the Roman Antichrist (LW 36:28, 32:61). When we despise grace, when we despise preaching and his Word, well, then we bring the papacy on ourselves. As C.S. Lewis said, the worst thing God can say to you is, “Thy will be done” (*The Great Divorce*, p72). When we treat the means of grace like options in our life, we despise God. We despise Christ. We make his death of no value and no account (cf. Galatians 2:20). When we make no use of the free thing, little wonder when God takes the free thing away.

Another source of trouble is when we let the Lutheran reformation become a revolution that eats its own children. St. Paul wrote three letters to Timothy and Titus and repeatedly, over and over again, not once, not twice, not three times, commanded his pastors to avoid godless, foolish, stupid, divisive talk, arguments, debates. He warned them not to be and warned them against “mere talkers.” We seem to excel at getting into arguments and debates. This is not a Lutheran thing, but a human thing. But we Lutherans do it quite well, almost as well as our potluck cooking. Our social media age has only exacerbated this. We seem to have almost no regard for (or perhaps have never heard) the prayer of St. Francis:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is

sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life” (*Christian Worship*, p138).

When love for our neighbor turns only into love for ourselves, then the Antichrist and antichrists are not too far away. This is the essence of Romans 14, is it not?

St. Paul discusses love as the fulfillment of the law in Romans 13, and then launches into an impassioned plea for us to love one another.

“Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters” (v1).

“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died” (v13-15).

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (v17).

“So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves” (v22).

This is not to make the classic Matthew 7 mistake (“Do not judge”) and say, “Who are you to judge? You can’t judge me?”, be yourself, do what you want, your truth is your

truth and my truth is my truth. No, Paul and Jesus are not post-modern hippie gurus. Obviously.

The striking thing about immersing yourself in Luther on this topic, is that after the doctrine of justification (which brings in its wake the sacrifice of the mass, the false view of works, etc.), the other issue to wrestle with is that great bugbear of our time: adiaphora, freedom, our true choices.

It is stunning to read Luther on this. Again and again in 1520, 1521, and 1522 he advises people to live under the tyranny of the pope to the best of their ability. In 1522, he says that if you are convinced that you should receive the sacrament in both kinds and your parish does not, or you are at a parish that does not, then take the one kind so as not to destroy your brother. He even says to keep your mouth shut about it until you are asked (*LW* 36:255). In other words, love your brother. That love – that is, receiving in only one kind – comes to an end at some point, but that point is probably far later, and far less radically accomplished than you think. As Luther said in 1521, “I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer, etc.” (*LW* 51:77). Or, St. Paul, “What is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow” (1 Corinthians 3:5-6).

To make the demand, either for or against something, becomes a danger. To reinstate laws is our natural inclination. To think of ourselves and our preferences, this is what we do, ignoring again the words of Christ, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And then there are the self-chosen and self-imposed works. Without getting into deep discussions of any

of these areas, or condemning or supporting any particular point of view, things that come to mind in this discussion that have been or are being discussed among us include things like forms of ministry, who does what in the Divine Service, communion frequency, clerical garb, translations of the Bible, specific rites and liturgies, specific language for hymns, catechisms, Bibles, how we organize our congregations and our church polity. It interests me that so much of this comes back to worship, to rites and ceremonies. But that is not new. You get that same sense from Luther’s writing and our Confessions. It also makes sense. This is the most public thing we do, with the most people, most often. It is an area for the devil to attack and for our pride to hold on to. No wonder all our discussions and debates end up here.

Some final thoughts on these things will bring our discussion to an end. When you watch Jesus in his ministry, when you observe the new situation the Lord gave to St. Peter in Acts 10-15, when you listen to Paul in Romans, Galatians, and Colossians, you cannot help but see that in all things, God overwhelms us with Christ. Paul overwhelms all the heresies in Colossae with Christ: The fullness of the Deity dwells in him; he is the reality, all else is shadow. The righteousness that Jews and Gentiles need and search after, Paul says, is found only in Christ. The hope of forgiveness that Peter must deliver to Cornelius is not found in clean and unclean animals. It is in Christ. That does not minimize those things. Paul says he is a Jew with Jews and a Gentile with Gentiles. That is not to say all things are free so do as you please, it is to recognize how important our rites and ceremonies are, and in an act of love I will respect and love my brother enough to care for him more than I care for myself. That might mean eating pork with a Gentile, or not drinking beer with a

Baptist, or singing off a screen with a friend, or observing the Mass weekly.

I think we would be surprised, as perhaps you were by Luther's advice to take communion in one kind, at Luther's vision for the Church in some of these areas. If you read the volume of his works on worship and the liturgy (volume 53 in the American Edition) and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (esp. *LW* 36:52), you will find that his dream seems to be worship in house churches. This is even as he writes liturgies for the Divine Service. He will in no way abolish them, but as he says in the *Large Catechism*, all these things (days, times, season, calendars, lectionaries, Sunday itself) these are really for us in our weakness and sin. We would not schedule time for the Word, so through the Church God does. But we do not need those things. As Paul says in Romans 14, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating, drinking, etc." What we need is God's Word preached and Sacraments to bathe in and feast upon. We need Christ and his forgiveness delivered to us.

Now, because we are human, that will take on forms and rites and ceremonies. You will note that our Confessions assume that in their handling of forms and rites and ceremonies (e.g. *Augustana* VII, XV, XX, XIV, XXV, XXVIII). So, what we discover is that the Lutheran Church advocates neither total freedom nor a total mandate of every detail. We stand in the long line of the Church and proclaim the Gospel as she has done. So we maintain vestments, lectionaries, calendars, etc. But we also know that division in these areas is not, like divisions in fasting, divisive of fellowship.

Something worth more time and study among us would be that other great 1520 writing of Luther's, *The Freedom of a Christian*. It is acknowledged as a classic. So I have not discovered something new for you. But again,

what you discover is Luther the pastor who wants you to be justified by faith and not let anything get in the way of that. You discover the Luther who famously says that you are a free lord, subject to no one (cf. Galatians 5:1), but a dutiful servant subject to everyone at the same time (cf. Romans 6:18, "slaves of righteousness").

In a stunning section near the end of his essay, Luther takes up the issue of ceremonies (*LW* 31:371-376). He notes that our faith does not free us from works, but only the false opinion of works. So we fight against the wolves and their false commands binding our conscience, and we, at the same time, observe those laws with the weak.

He writes:

"In brief, as wealth is the test of poverty, business the test of faithfulness, honors the test of humility, feasts the test of temperance, pleasures the test of chastity, so ceremonies are the test of the righteousness of faith. 'Can a man,' asks Solomon, 'carry fire in his bosom and his clothes and not be burned?' [Prov. 6:27]. Yet as a man must live in the midst of wealth, business, honors, pleasures, and feasts, so also must he live in the midst of ceremonies, that is, in the midst of dangers.

"Hence ceremonies are to be given the same place in the life of a Christian as models and plans have among builders and artisans. They are prepared, not as a permanent structure, but because without them nothing could be built or made. When the structure is complete the models and plans are laid aside. You see, they are not despised, rather they are greatly sought after; but what we despise is the false estimate of them since no one holds them to be the real and permanent structure. If any man were so flagrantly foolish as to care for nothing all his life long except the most costly,

Careful, and persistent preparation of plans and models and never to think of the structure itself, and were satisfied with his work in producing such plans and mere aids to work, and boasted of it, would not all men pity his insanity and think that something great might have been built with what he has wasted? Thus we do not despise ceremonies and works, but we set great store by them; but we despise the false estimate placed upon works in order that no one may think that they are true righteousness, as those hypocrites believe who spend and lose their whole lives in zeal for works and never reach that goal for the sake of which the works are to be done....They seem to wish to build, they make their preparations, and yet they never build. Thus they remain caught in the form of religion and do not attain unto its power."

As I said, I think this is worthy of more study. The distinction he makes is between works and ceremonies commanded to justify you by the doing of them and works for the sake of preaching the gospel that justifies you. Our Confessions do the same. As do the Scriptures. The Old Testament ceremonies did not justify you by the doing of them. They taught and proclaimed sin and grace, that is, the Christ who justifies you by his works and faith in them. And the objection raised by people on both sides of this issue (contemporary/traditional) is that we are not commanding ceremonies and saying they merit anything, therefore the anathemas do not apply. That may be, and among us I think is, true.

But that image of architectural plans and the building still strikes the reader. Just as St. Paul's image of shadows and reality strikes us in Colossians 2. It is ever so easy to get bogged down in the superficial, the style, and forget the substance that that style, that form, is meant to communicate or preach. I am

reminded of Bo Giertz's novel, *The Hammer of God*. In the first novella, Pastor Savonius "comes to Jesus" and becomes a raging Pietist. He is against everything. He shames the dean's daughter for wearing a brooch, an obviously sinful female adornment in contradiction to 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Peter 3. The dean sees his daughter's burdened conscience and finally says to her: "You must so fully trust in Jesus that you may know that your salvation depends only on him."

"I know that, Father."

"No, my child, you do not know it. If you did, you would not believe that he becomes a less merciful Savior because you wear the brooch your mother received on the tenth anniversary of her marriage and which she continued to wear for fourteen years with good conscience and sincere faith.... Go to your room, therefore, and put on your mother's brooch, and say to the Savior, 'I treasure thy grace so highly, Lord, that I dare to carry this ornament just as my mother did'" (Giertz, 58).¹²

In other words, I guess I would be careful to say what Luther would do. I would be careful not to turn speculations (preferences?) into assertions. That was the great Roman error Luther pointed out in his theses and the explanations of his theses when it comes to purgatory and indulgences. "Why would you speak so certainly about things that Scripture does not?" Luther may not be as much on either side of an issue as you think, especially the issues of our freedom.

What we can say with certainty though, is that in his long battle with the papal Antichrist, our Lord used Dr. Luther to make shine that most

¹² The page reference is to the revised edition published by Augsburg in 2005.

brilliant light, our Lord Christ. Just as St. Paul confronted St. Peter, so too did Dr. Luther stand before the beast from the earth, the false prophet, the man of lawlessness, the Antichrist, and he proclaimed; "We...know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified....I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (Galatians 2:15-16, 20-22).

Christ did not die for nothing. He died to unburden your conscience. He died to dispel the terror of your sin. He died so that you can fall before him, like that prodigal son, and say, "I have sinned against heaven and against you." And we have, grievously, by our own fault. We have sinned the sins mentioned above. We have not loved our neighbors. We carry a selfish pride within ourselves. We demonstrate ingratitude towards our God and his gospel. We work to rebuild and reinstitute laws, rules, and commands. We have sinned.

And Christ wraps his arms around you. Not because of anything in or about you, but because of himself. He wrapped your sins so tightly around himself. He became the great sinner against heaven, against his Father. He, though being God, made himself nothing and became obedient to death. Then he crushed death by rising from the dead. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you

will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). See that? He liberated you.

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Return to Wittenberg Conference
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"Liberated", July 18-21, 2017

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