Dying and rising with Christ: visualizing Christian existence in Martin Luther's 1519 devotional writings

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DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST:
VISUALIZING CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE
IN MARTIN LUTHER’S 1519 DEVOTIONAL WRITINGS

by

Timothy Todd Stoller

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Religious Studies in
the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

July 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Raymond A. Mentzer
ABSTRACT

Early in his career, Martin Luther twice published (1516 and 1518) prefaces for the anonymous German work, *Eyn deutsch Theologia*. In these prefaces, as well as in a number of letters, he repeatedly praised the work. His positive appraisal stemmed from his belief that the work replicated not only the foundational teachings of St. Paul, but was consonant with the Pauline interpretations of St. Augustine and Johannes Tauler. Young Luther found in these authors a consistent metaphor for Christian existence: dying and rising with Christ. This narrative enabled Christians to experience death and resurrection as a future hope, as well as a present existential reality within their lives. Young Luther believed that the varied narratives inherent in late medieval spirituality had placed Christ at the periphery of Christian spirituality rather than at its core. Consequently, he repeatedly sought to correct this misplacement and return Christ to the center of Christian life and piety.

This dissertation examines this Pauline metaphor, the contemplative spirituality the young Luther built upon it, and the sixteenth-century reception of this spirituality. Chapter one introduces the project and offers a short survey of the literature on Luther’s spirituality. Chapter two reviews contemplation in Scripture, then considers St. Paul’s presentation of his metaphor. It also discusses how the contemplative writings of St. Augustine, Tauler, and the Frankfurter (the anonymous author of *Eyn deutsch Theologia*), made use of this Pauline metaphor. Chapters three and four consider Luther’s creative employment of the Pauline narrative in five of his devotional works from 1519: *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*, *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*, *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe*, *Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften*, and *Tessaradecas Consolatoria pro laborantibus et oneratis*. In each case, Luther built upon existing devotional genres, yet altered their contents and/or form by importing the
Pauline metaphor. Chapter five inquires into the sixteenth-century reception of these five devotional works. Paying particular attention to interpretative clues left in correspondence, commentaries, marginal notes and illustrations by a number of publishers and translators, it demonstrates that these persons not only perceived of these writings as contemplative devotional exercises, but chose to market them explicitly as such.

It would seem that Luther’s “theology of the cross” expressed itself in a corresponding spirituality of “death and resurrection.” Although this spirituality entailed a specific contemplative progression, it was adaptable to the life circumstances of any Christian. This universality contributed to the popularity of Luther’s early spiritual writings. Young Luther’s narrative imagery along with the publishers’ additional illustrations helped to revise spiritual practices and reshape Christian piety throughout the sixteenth century.

Abstract Approved: _________________________________________

Thesis Supervisor

Title and Department

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To Michaela, Kira, Rika and Kerrick for their patience and support
& to Ditmar, Polly, Chris, David, et. al – the voices who kept me going.
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ABSTRACT

Early in his career, Martin Luther twice published (1516 and 1518) prefaces for the anonymous German work, *Eyn deutsch Theologia*. In these prefaces, as well as in a number of letters, he repeatedly praised the work. His positive appraisal stemmed from his belief that the work replicated not only the foundational teachings of St. Paul, but was consonant with the Pauline interpretations of St. Augustine and Johannes Tauler. Young Luther found in these authors a consistent metaphor for Christian existence: dying and rising with Christ. This narrative enabled Christians to experience death and resurrection as a future hope, as well as a present existential reality within their lives. Young Luther believed that the varied narratives inherent in late medieval spirituality had placed Christ at the periphery of Christian spirituality rather than at its core. Consequently, he repeatedly sought to correct this misplacement and return Christ to the center of Christian life and piety.

This dissertation examines this Pauline metaphor, the contemplative spirituality the young Luther built upon it, and the sixteenth-century reception of this spirituality. Chapter one introduces the project and offers a short survey of the literature on Luther’s spirituality. Chapter two reviews contemplation in Scripture, then considers St. Paul’s presentation of his metaphor. It also discusses how the contemplative writings of St. Augustine, Tauler, and the Frankfurter (the anonymous author of *Eyn deutsch Theologia*), made use of this Pauline metaphor. Chapters three and four consider Luther’s creative employment of the Pauline narrative in five of his devotional works from 1519: *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*, *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*, *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe*, *Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften*, and *Tessaradecas Consolatoria pro laborantibus et oneratis*. In each case, Luther built upon existing devotional genres, yet altered their contents and/or form by importing the
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It would seem that Luther’s “theology of the cross” expressed itself in a corresponding spirituality of “death and resurrection.” Although this spirituality entailed a specific contemplative progression, it was adaptable to the life circumstances of any Christian. This universality contributed to the popularity of Luther’s early spiritual writings. Young Luther’s narrative imagery along with the publishers’ additional illustrations helped to revise spiritual practices and reshape Christian piety throughout the sixteenth century.
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CHAPTER I
AN OUTLINE OF YOUNG LUTHER’S SPIRITUALITY

An Early Letter to a Fellow Friar

On April 8, 1516, Martin Luther wrote a brief letter to George Spenlein, a fellow Augustinian friar who had lived with him in the Wittenberg monastery. The occasion for the letter was Spenlein’s recent transfer to the monastery in Memmingen. Evidently, Spenlein had owed Johann Staupitz, vicar general of the Augustinian houses in Germany, some money and in order to pay his debt had asked Martin to attempt to sell some items he had left behind in Wittenberg. In his letter, Luther informed Brother George that he had succeeded in selling some of Spenlein’s possessions and had forwarded the funds to Staupitz as payment for Spenlein’s debt. ¹ Luther then proceeded to offer Spenlein some additional words of spiritual counsel.

…in our age the temptation to presumption besets many…They try to do good of themselves in order that they might stand before God clothed in their own virtues and merits. But this is impossible… Therefore, my dear Friar, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not.” Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners…Meditate on this love of his and you will see his sweet consolation. For why was it necessary for him to die if we can obtain a good conscience by our works and afflictions? Accordingly you will find peace only in him and only when you despair of yourself and your own works. Besides, you will learn from him that just as he has received you, so he has made your sins his own and has made his righteousness yours.

If you firmly believe this as you ought…, receive your untaught and hitherto erring brothers, patiently help them, make their sins yours, and, if you have any goodness, let it be theirs…if you seem to yourself to be better than they are, do not count it as booty, as if it were yours alone, but humble yourself, forget what you are and be as one of them in order that you may help them.

Cursed is the righteousness of the man who is unwilling to assist others on the ground that they are worse than he is, and who thinks of fleeing from and forsaking those whom he ought now to be helping with patience, prayer, and example...The rule of Christ is in the midst of his enemies...Pray, therefore, for whatever you lack, kneeling before the face of the Lord Jesus. He will teach you all things. Only keep your eyes fixed on what he has done for you and for all men in order that you may learn what you should do for others. If he had desired to live only among good people and to die only for his friends, for whom, I ask you, would he have died or with whom would he ever have lived? Act accordingly, my dear Friar, and pray for me...

Three aspects of the letter are especially intriguing. To begin, the letter predated Luther’s posting of the *95 Theses* on October 31, 1517, by approximately a year and a half. However, this brief epistle already contained key elements of Luther’s developing thought. Even more significantly, the letter laid out in miniature Luther’s understanding of Christian existence and proposed a specific approach to Christian piety. Luther advised Spenlein to despair of himself and to focus instead upon what Christ had done for him. Luther instructed Spenlein to do this by meditating on Christ’s passion and proposed a variety of vivid mental images: Christ hanging on the cross, Christ exchanging his righteousness for human sinfulness, Christ dwelling in – and only in – sinners, and Christ descending from heaven for sinners’ sake. Luther also urged his fellow friar to pray directly to Christ, speaking to him in an honest and friendly manner. Near the end of the letter Luther encouraged Spenlein to meditate upon Christ’s love and to find in it “sweet consolation”, telling Brother George to kneel before the face of the Lord Jesus. He will teach you all things. Only keep your eyes fixed on what he has done for you and for all men in order that you may learn what you should do for others.

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3 The original Latin title was *Disputatio pro declaracione virtutis indulgentiarum*.

4 For example, Luther’s mention of an individual exchanging his/her sin for Christ’s righteousness is a theme usually attributed to his 1520 work, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*.

5 Luther, “Letter to George Spenlein,” 111.
In this last sentence, young Luther stated what he believed to be both the purpose and shape of Christian piety. Taking his cues from the Apostle Paul, Luther asserted that the central practice of Christian piety consists of dying to self and rising to new life in Christ. Luther encouraged Spenlein to view Christ’s death and resurrection not just as a doctrinal affirmation, but as a guiding narrative for his own life, a narrative that would serve as both a general explanation of Christian existence and as a model of faithful Christian living. Dying and rising with Christ are the essential rhythms of Christian spirituality.

Narrative Spirituality


… most accounts of Paul the theologian and of Paul’s theology pay insufficient attention to his religious experience – his spirituality – and to his fondness for narrating that experience. This inattention to religious experience is a significant blind spot in New Testament scholarship generally… With respect to Paul, however, this missing element is particularly odd. Paul’s correspondence narrates and interprets the experience of the apostle and the communities to which he writes. There is no “arm-chair theology” preserved in the letters, nor is there primarily “critical reflection on religious experience” – one possible definition of theology. The purpose of Paul’s letters generally, and of the various kinds of narratives within them, is not to teach theology but to mold behavior, to affirm or – more often – to alter patterns of living, patterns of experience… Today we might speak of his goal as spiritual formation; indeed Paul himself uses the metaphor of fetal development to describe his on-going ministry with the Galatians (Gal. 4:19). It is appropriate, therefore, to consider Paul first and foremost as a pastoral or spiritual writer, rather than as a theologian (or ethicist).

The notion of narrative spirituality may at first seem odd… By it I mean a spirituality that tells a story, a dynamic life with God that corresponds in some way to the divine “story.” … “cruciformity,” is my own term for a concept commonly believed to be central to Paul’s theology and ethics: conformity to the crucified Christ… this conformity is a dynamic correspondence in daily life to the strange story of Christ crucified as the primary way of experiencing the love and grace of God. Cruciformity is, in other words, Paul’s oddly inviting, even compelling, narrative spirituality. It is, as the subtitle says, a spirituality of the cross – the focus of his gospel and life. Paul’s mission in life was to seek to “order
the lives of Christian congregations by pulling everything into the
tremendous gravitational field of the cross.6

Gorman’s assertion that Christ’s crucifixion stood at the center of Paul’s “narrative
spirituality” applies to Luther’s proposed piety as well. Christ’s cross was, for Luther, the
central reality of Christian existence and the central image of Christian piety. As he told
Brother George, “Therefore, my dear Friar, learn Christ and him crucified.”7 Young
Luther’s advice to Spenlein advocated not merely a “theology of the cross”, but also, as
Gorman attributes to Paul, a “spirituality of the cross”.8 It was informed by the biblical
narrative of the crucifixion, yet shaped to fit the specific experience of each individual.
The personalized element involved first despairing of one’s inability to be righteous or to
act freely without the influence of sin. While Luther believed this despair was a necessary
prerequisite of true repentance for all Christians, he also held that each must come
individually to this realization on his/her own. In thesis eighteen of the Heidelberg
Disputation, he stated: “It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability
before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.”9 Such despairing is not a ritual to be
performed or an ethical guideline to follow, but rather a state of mind – a form of spiritual
consciousness. Margaret R. Miles in her article, “‘The Rope Breaks When It is Tightest’
Luther on the Body, Consciousness, and the Word,” draws the following distinction
between conscience and consciousness in Luther’s thought:

“Conscience” carries connotations that emphasize a socially conditioned
sense of guilt, while “consciousness” designates a subjective activity in
which thinking and feeling are coordinated in the construction of a world

7 Luther, “Letter to George Spenlein,” 110.
8 Luther’s developed the term “theology of the cross” in his 1518 Heidelberg Disputation. In thesis twenty-
one, Luther made a distinction between a “theology of glory” and a “theology of the cross”. Theologians of
glory are those whose focus is upon the merit of human actions. Theologians of the cross, on the other
hand, are those who have realized that humanity is incapable of performing truly good or selfless works.
Instead of finding hope in human action, they are humbled by their own shortcomings and look instead to
Christ’s cross as their sole source of hope and grace. See WA 1, 354.
9 Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” in LW 31, 40. WA 1, 354.
view and self-image that govern, in turn, the formation of one’s perceptions, values, and behavior. Luther’s description of the capacity of the justification event to constellate altered and more accurate reality-oriented values, perceptions, and emotions is better described by “consciousness” than by “conscience.”

Miles proposes that Luther encouraged the cultivation not of conscience, but rather of consciousness – a consciousness of the true nature of one’s relationship to God. In the face of Christ’s cross, the individual becomes conscious both of one’s sin and of God’s judgment of that sin. Only after having experienced this consciousness – this awareness that comes as a divine gift – can one even begin to comprehend the mercy and grace of God revealed through the cross. Thus, the cross serves simultaneously as judge and liberator. The cross reshapes the Christian’s life. It strips away the lies and illusions one uses to protect oneself and makes one face the truth about oneself. In so doing, it helps one to see not only one’s need for God, but also God’s corresponding grace. In recounting Luther’s treatment of the Jonah story, Miles lifts up this personal focus.

Real understanding of the story requires that the hearer supply from his/her own life an experience resembling the form of the story. Jonah’s story, recounted by Luther, bears a striking resemblance to Luther’s story, the universal story, as Luther understood it from within his own experience, of the simultaneity of despair and faith in the justification event. Only in this psychological condition does God act to redeem.

This existential awareness of one’s own sins brings about the necessary conditions for the birth of real faith, i.e. trust in God’s grace. Yet even this trust comes as a divine gift. Cultivating this dual consciousness is, for the young Luther, one of the primary aims and practices of Christian piety. Yet, how does one go about it? Obviously, it is not something that can be universally prescribed. Rather, it is something that can only be pointed to – only illustrated metaphorically – in a variety of ways. Consequently, the primary tool for

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cultivating Christian consciousness is story. Young Luther realized that story is communicated through words, written and spoken, and through images, tangible and imagined. Although scholars have long discussed and debated Luther’s understanding and use of words, they have neglected to consider his understanding and use of both story and imagery. Yet, throughout his early spiritual writings Luther proposed numerous contemplative stories and images to assist Christians in learning to see both themselves and God in a new light.

When I first began reading through Luther’s early works, especially his sermons and spiritual writings, it became apparent that he did not so much write theology, as tell stories. He constructed alternative narratives of Christian experience. He was convinced that many of his fellow Christians, like himself, had fallen victim to a poisoned narrative—a false story—that robbed them of hope, faith, and comfort by distorting their conception of God and God’s purposes. This poisoned narrative terrified consciences and trouble hearts, as Luther himself was aware. So he sought to construct a new and different narrative, one which straightforwardly told the story of God’s gracious creation and redemption of humanity. In this new story, Christians learned to see themselves as God’s beloved, rather than as victims of God’s vindictive justice. This new narrative was “gospel”, i.e. good news. However, one became part of the good-news narrative only after having been confronted by one’s own inability to keep the demands of the divine law. The law’s function was to condemn and kill, stripping away any cause for hubris, and making one aware of one’s need of divine grace. In other words, Luther taught that only in the face of this “bad” news did anyone become aware of how “good” the good news actually could be. He utilized a variety of images or metaphors to express this law/gospel narrative, inviting people to imagine their own relationships with God in new ways. He encouraged early modern Christians to place themselves in particular scenes—to visualize themselves interacting with God through Christ. In this fashion, they would
be able to understand better and to embrace death (both literally and figuratively), while participating, as well, in Christ’s resurrection life.

Peter Matheson in his book, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*, suggests that the Reformation should be understood as an era of increased imagination.

Much of my own recent work has been devoted to the popular literature of the Reformation and the intricate and alluring tapestry of its forms, conventions, tropes, and language. This has suggested to me that the reforming process was not fundamentally about ideas in the mind or structures in church and state but indicated much more elemental changes in spiritual direction. These are signposted by the creative metaphors of the preachers and teachers, the images in literature and art, the rhythms and melodies of the popular ballads and chorales which sang the Reformation into people’s souls.

We are quite rightly impressed by the iconoclastic dimensions of the Reformation, the pruning of the liturgies and the decimation of the saints’ days, the removal of statues, paintings and even stained glass from the churches. But such iconoclasm may be eclipsed by what we can call the iconopoiac energies of the Reformation, its creativity in producing new allegories and metaphors for the divine and human which, by their novel connections and collocations, bedded together the hitherto incompatible and subverted one cosmos while paving the way for another. Metaphors which were largely drawn…from a reanimated, reactualized Bible…Perhaps what happened in the Reformation was that one imaginative architecture was replaced by another…

If, however, there is anything to be said for this argument, then we are going to have to look in quite a new way at Protestantism, which – we have generally been encouraged to believe – is inimical to the imagination.12

I find Matheson’s argument persuasive: the Reformation was, indeed, an imaginative era. Public discourse was not fueled so much by theological concepts, as by vivid and provocative images and metaphors. Contemplative devotion was very popular in the early sixteenth century and had been for some time. The young Luther was aware of this, and provided his readers with many contemplative images to exercise their imaginations and aid their devotion.

Reading through Martin Luther’s early devotional writings, I have discovered that many of them can best be understood as exercises in imagining. Creating memorable

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contemplative images seems to have been one of Luther’s unique gifts. He was able to narrate the faith in ways that stoked the fires of both imagination and heart, touching people at an existential level. This dissertation seeks to demonstrate how central narrative images were to Luther’s early devotional writings. By focusing on a representative selection of his contemplative writings from 1519, I establish not only that he had developed a consistent approach to contemplative Christian spirituality during this period, but that the images he used served to underscore the Pauline metaphor at the core of his developing thought. Recognizing, too, his reliance on existing contemplative genres helps to identify not only his assumptions about Christian spirituality, but also clarifies his own unique contributions to the contemplative genre. This study of young Luther’s contemplative spirituality fills a gap in contemporary Luther scholarship, offering a new approach for interpreting both the young reformer and his work.

**Literature Review**

Over the course of the past thirty to forty years, Reformation historiography has changed dramatically. No longer written as the story of a single unfolding movement or as a triumphant tale of a divine plan, the sixteenth century is now studied from a variety of vantage points. For example, social historians try to reconstruct popular attitudes during the Reformation era. Some have studied the rhetoric of Reformation polemics, sixteenth-century publication records, the development and/or evolution of Protestant rituals, hymnody, and sermons, among other things.13 Whether studying Lutheran visitation reports or Reformed consistory records, social historians have been able to assess how well Reformation ideas were accepted and assimilated by the general public.

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populace or specific subsets thereof. Intellectual historians, on the other hand, have studied continuities between late medieval and early modern thought, attempting to discern whether or not the Reformation was truly something unique or rather a further working out of existing medieval themes. Given the variety of foci evident not only among contemporary scholars, but among the sixteenth-century reformers themselves, the sixteenth century is now frequently referred to as an era of competing reforms.

With these broader changes in Reformation historiography have also come some accompanying changes in Luther scholarship. Topical studies have analyzed particular aspects of Luther’s life or writing. For example, Susan Karant-Nunn & Merry Wiesner-Hanks’ *Luther on Women* offers a collection of articles that consider Luther’s attitudes towards both sexes and from a variety of perspectives. Dennis Ngien’s *Luther as a Spiritual Adviser* considers how Luther attempted to alter and/or utilize pastoral care in his ministry. Austra Reinis’ *Reforming the Art of Dying* studies how Luther deviated from the medieval *ars moriendi* when offering comfort to the dying. Others such as Robert Scribner, Mark U. Edwards, Miriam Usher Chrisman, and Natalie Zemon-Davis, have considered how Luther and others made use of both texts and illustrations for polemical purposes. These various topical studies have provided new and nuanced insights into Luther’s work and personality.

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14 For example, see Gerald Strauss, *Luther’s House of Learning. Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984).


18 Dennis Ngien, *Luther as a Spiritual Adviser: The Interface of Theology and Piety in Luther’s Devotional Writings* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007).


Recent biographies of Luther, on the other hand, continue to narrate his life in a more or less traditional fashion by following his career as a university professor and monk. 21 Consider, for example, The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther which was published in 2003. The chapter entitled, “Luther’s Life” by Albrecht Beutel reiterates more or less a traditional version of Luther’s life focused primarily upon his academic and ecclesiastical accomplishments. 22 Likewise, the chronology printed on page xvii of the same work seems to suggest that Luther spent the majority of his time and ink seeking to develop a unique theology and answering his critics within ecclesiastical and/or academic circles. 23 The guiding assumption of a majority of scholars continues to be that Luther was a reformer, that he understood himself to be a reformer, and that he can be best comprehended as a reformer. 24 This assumption, however, is problematic.

To begin, it is questionable whether or not Luther saw himself, at least in the early years of his career, as a “reformer”. He did not spend most of his time seeking to change the structures of the institutional church or to persuade the leaders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to change their ways. On the contrary, he usually seemed to assume that they would be resistant to change. As Heiko Oberman points out in his biography, Martin Luther: Man Between God and the Devil,

Luther never styled himself a ‘reformer.’ He did not, however, shrink from being seen as a prophet; he wanted to spread the Gospel as an

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24 Even Martin Brecht’s magisterial three volume set Martin Luther perpetuates the standard chronology. His divisions are as follows: His Road to Reformation (1483-1521), Shaping and Defining the Reformation (1521-1532), The Preservation of the Church (1532-1546). While these divisions are helpful, the title of the first is still problematic. It continues to define his earlier life in terms of later developments.
‘evangelist’” He called himself preacher, doctor, or professor and was all of these. Yet he never presumed to be a reformer, nor did he ever claim his movement to be the ‘Reformation.’ He didn’t and he couldn’t – because ‘reformation’ is God’s ultimate intervention.25

Luther’s primary focus was upon the lived faith of the German people. He tended to write to and/or for den gemeinen Mann – assuming that his arguments from common sense would not only appeal to everyday German Christians, but would easily persuade them to agree with him. Consequently, any biography of Luther’s life that chooses to style him first and foremost as an institutional reformer exhibits its own lack of knowledge of Luther’s own self-understanding, especially during his early career.

Such biographical treatments also assume that Luther’s life is best comprehended – or only comprehended – in terms of his increasingly strained relationship with the Catholic Church. However, Luther did not choose to understand his work solely in terms of whether or not his reform was progressing. Instead, as I have already proposed, he was focused on sharing a new spiritual narrative – one he believed was faithful to the theology and spirituality of St. Paul. While this spiritual focus in Luther’s early writings is readily apparent to even the casual reader, many scholars have minimized the significance of young Luther’s piety or chosen to ignore it. They have insisted on analyzing Luther’s life and work in terms of traditional confessional and theological categories. This tendency has resulted in an on-going prejudicial attitude towards any Luther studies that don’t originate in Germany or from the pens of Lutheran scholars.26


26 Hartmut Lehmann on page 310 of Martin Luther in the American Imagination (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1988) offers the following astute commentary on this scholarly bias.

In his famous pamphlet To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, written in 1520, Luther argued that the Roman Church had protected herself with three walls. The first of these walls, as he explained, was the papal claim that civil governments had no power over the church; the second wall was the claim that no one but the pope had the right to interpret the Bible; and the third wall, according to Luther, was the claim that only the pope had the right to summon a church-council. In Luther’s view, all three of these walls should be demolished.

If we look at the way Luther’s heritage was used, and interpreted, in the past, we can also perceive three walls. The first of these walls was the claim made by many theologians that secular historians were unable to interpret Luther properly; the second
Since the early 1960s, however, there have been a few studies of Luther’s spirituality written by non-German and non-Lutheran authors that have sought to move Luther studies in a new direction. The most notable example would likely be the work of Jared Wicks. A Catholic scholar, Wicks has written extensively on various aspects of Luther’s spirituality, attempting to show that many of Luther’s works should inspire equal interest among Catholics and Protestants alike. The spiritual focus of Luther’s early writings seems incontestable to Wicks. He points out that even in his work as a professor of biblical studies, Luther focused on the practical application of scripture to everyday life, favoring tropological interpretation.

For Luther, this was a description of what God was doing in the life of the Christian man to conform him with Christ. The tropological sense focuses on the content of Christian existence, namely, on the goals, the attitudes, and the experiences of the Christian man. Since Luther came to give a clear primacy to this sense over the other senses of the text, his work in 1513-1515 resulted primarily in a spirituality. Luther’s exposition of the Psalms was, to a notable extent, an account of how the Christian life unfolds and grows under God’s hand.

Wicks notes, too, that Luther was not interested in devising speculative or theoretical anthropologies. Rather, he concentrated on the individual Christian’s lived experience of faith. Lived faith involves struggle and movement. It is a process of becoming, rather than simply a state of being. For this reason, Wicks writes that Luther’s early theology is properly characterized as a “theology of concrete Christian living, that is, [as] a spirituality.”


and struggle against concupiscence.”\(^{30}\) This fight is constant and unending. Consequently there can be no static definitions of Christian spirituality, but only repeated redefinition. Humility, then, becomes the most important of the Christian virtues, because it refuses to admit that it has arrived at any set destination or achieved any particular knowledge; it admits only its own inadequacies in the face of “God’s exalted mystery.”\(^ {31}\) Wicks summarizes Luther’s early spirituality (even as early as 1509-1510) in the following fashion.

Thus the first step in our investigation of the spirituality of Luther’s early works leads us to single out his stress on Christian living as process. It is a movement determined by the ever-repeated encounters a man has with his own concupiscent flesh and with the God who is present, inviting, and drawing him on to advance. What matters, then, are the choices a man makes in these encounters. Success in this process involves doing to death of the flesh and being open to God’s invitation. One’s spiritual center of gravity is the humanity of the incarnate word, but not as a point of rest. Rather, Christ is more the goal and the source of ever-fresh help. Proud security and self-satisfaction – especially in merely speculative knowledge – must be excluded at all costs.\(^ {32}\)

Wicks’ work was a groundbreaking study of Luther’s early spirituality. He revealed the consistency and constancy of young Luther’s thoughts throughout his early career and raised awareness of Luther’s central spiritual themes: death of the old Adam, Christ as both the goal and source of new life, and humility as a constant reassessment of one’s existential standing before God. Unfortunately, Wicks’ scholarship was long ignored by the Protestant establishment or criticized because it departed from confessional or theological interpretations of Luther’s life.

Bengt Hoffman is another scholar who has gone against the grain of traditional scholarship by focusing upon Luther’s spirituality, particularly his indebtedness to the German mystics. In his article, “Luther and the Mystical,” he traces the sources of the

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\(^{32}\) Wicks, *Man Yearning for Grace*, 40.
traditional bias against spiritual interpretations of Luther. Analyzing George Lindbeck’s critique of *Man Yearning for Grace*, Hoffman writes,

> What Lindbeck finds unsettling to commonly held Protestant views is, as far as I can see, two things. First, Wicks' proposals contradict a major tendency in both Protestant and Catholic Luther research, namely the assumption that the Reformer's fundamental positions, hammered out conceptually in his mature years, were present already before 1517. Luther's interest in a universal catholic Christian faith experience would, according to that major tradition, be ephemeral. Father Wicks turns the question around and suggests that the "Catholic riches" meant so much to the younger Luther that there is reason to believe that they indeed might have pervaded even the later period when the fundamental positions were formulated...It is, therefore, hard for [Lindbeck] to concede that Wicks is actually claiming the logically impossible in the face of the biographically possible, namely that Martin Luther at least up to his tract on indulgencies was not totally dominated by the formulations of faith as purely objective, i.e. a polemical logic which sometimes seemed to be the center of his later statements...The second disturbing thing follows from the first. Wicks and those who have pursued the same leads as Wicks in their study of Luther view the Reformer as a person centrally concerned with spirituality rather than with conceptual theology. Having been reared in the theological tradition which considers Luther's faith a "theological faith" as distinct from "actual change" in trust and love, Lindbeck looks at Wicks' study as "threatening" the "major" current of interpretation. The mystical, inner, subjective element of faith would in predominant Luther scholarship be termed non-Lutheresque, indeed heretical. By claiming spirituality for Luther, by lifting out the many indications that Luther experienced the God of healing grace, Wicks has pointed to the intimate inter-connection between "theological faith" and "actual change" in Luther's theology.33

Hoffman notes that while scholars like Wicks were successfully exploring “the experiential and spiritual elements in Luther’s thoughts on Christian faith,” an “unconscious censorship” continued to be exercised against them. He posits that this censorship arose on account of three dominant assumptions: 1) the belief that a sharp distinction must necessarily be drawn between Protestant and Catholic theological propositions at every point; 2) the tendency of Lutheran theology towards “intellectualistic doctrinairism” to maintain clear boundaries between Luther’s reformation and that of other sixteenth century figures / movements; and 3) the standard of empirical science as the yardstick of “serious” scholarship has led to a denigration of

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belief in the supernatural or in experiential faith. “Objective” description has become the new norm. As Hoffman concisely puts it,

In a world of reflection where mechanistic causality dominates, it is difficult to reckon seriously with the possibility that Luther experienced life under Word and sacrament as a life in the presence of God much the same way as the mystics—or some mystics—did.\(^{34}\)

While Hoffmann’s positive characterization of Luther as a mystic might have been somewhat overstated, his proposal has motivated additional scholars to take a fresh look at Luther’s pastoral and devotional writings and to assess their contents in new ways.

For example, Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, attempted a more nuanced interpretation of Luther in his book, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*. In the section entitled, “The Young Luther,” Williams suggested that Luther is best understood not as a philosopher, humanist or systematic theologian, but rather as one who rediscovered older spiritual traditions.

He was far more identified with those whose interests lay in the rediscovery of Scripture and primitive tradition; he read Paul and Augustine for himself. He was also, as a young friar and teacher, sympathetic to the tradition of German mystical writing of the previous century and a half, especially the writings of Tauler and the anonymous *Theologia Germanica*…Such contemporary influence on him as there was came from these non-scholastic circles. Nominalism may explain some features of his thinking, but it cannot be seen as a mainspring. Luther’s real location is among the literate “primitivist” Catholic reformers of the day, those who wished to see a wholesale cleansing of the church and its schools that would restore to theology its proper character as a discipline of interpretation, engaging with scripture and the early Fathers, not simply of analysis, the organization of the conceptual structures of late scholastic speculation.\(^{35}\)

\(^{34}\) Hoffman, “Luther and the Mystical,” 318-319.

Taking a cue from Hoffmann, Williams accentuated the influence of the German mystical tradition on Luther’s thought, noting his use of the mystical terminology *accusatio sui* (alienation from self) and *metanoia*.\(^{36}\)

…Luther was deeply influenced by the heritage of the Rhineland mystics. But what is different is the insistence that the birth of the Word in the soul can only come after the entry into dereliction. God is born out of the hell of abandonment. It is both the triumph of “experiential” theology and the wreck of a mere theology of experience.\(^ {37}\)

Here Williams picks up on the existential themes highlighted by Wicks. Interestingly, the mere inclusion of Luther in Williams’ survey of Christian spirituality serves to redefine Luther’s significance within and for the broader Christian tradition. Instead of presenting Luther as the preeminent Protestant reformer, the father of the Lutheran Church, or as a seminal cultural figure in the history of the West, Williams treats Luther’s significance in terms of his contributions to Western spirituality, a move that makes him accessible and relevant to a wider lay audience.

A more recent development in Luther studies involves the writings of the so-called “Finnish School.” For the last three decades, Finnish scholars such as Tuomo Mannermaa, Simo Puera, and Risto Saarinen have proposed a new understanding of Luther’s doctrine of justification.\(^ {38}\) Challenging traditional forensic models of justification, they have argued that Luther’s understanding of justification involved an existential experience similar to traditional Eastern Orthodox notions of “divinization” or “theosis.” In exchanging their sins for Christ’s righteousness, Christians receive not only the attributes of Christ’s righteousness, but his actual presence within their lives. This indwelling of Christ (or union with Christ) becomes the true basis of their justification and source of their sanctification. While the Finnish proposal has attempted to reunite

\(^{36}\) See Luther’s letter to Staupitz in *LW* 48, 65-67. *WA* 1, 525-527.

\(^{37}\) Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 163.

theoretical and practical interpretation of Luther, it has not been without continuing controversy and resistance.\textsuperscript{39}

In his short article, “Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality,” Scott Hendrix attempts to forge a middle route through this varied scholarship. He acknowledges the groundbreaking work of Wicks, Hoffman, and the Finnish School.\textsuperscript{40} Recognizing that each of these sought to account for Luther’s spirituality, Hendrix turns to Luther’s writing, searching the reformer’s own definition of spirituality. He comes to the conclusion that Luther didn’t use the term “spirituality” or “Geistlichkeit” very often and that when he did so, it tended to have negative connotations. However, that being said, Hendrix proposes that Luther’s primary aim was actually to root out the false, misplaced spirituality of medieval Christendom and to replace it with evangelical piety.\textsuperscript{41}

…but while Luther the reformer never intended to start a new church, from the beginning he did intend to establish a new spirituality. Although his criticism of indulgences was experimental, its critique of the penitential system and of the papacy was biting enough to grab the attention of the clerical hierarchy who immediately saw the threat to their way of being Christian.\textsuperscript{42}

As Hendrix delineates the features of Luther’s new evangelical spirituality, he focuses rather arbitrarily on Luther’s 1537 exposition of John’s Gospel. He suggests that Luther built his spirituality upon the metaphor found in John 15 of Jesus as the vine and his followers as the branches.\textsuperscript{43} Christian experience should be understood, then, in terms of

\textsuperscript{39} The Finnish interpretation makes some Lutheran scholars nervous, because it seems to alter the fundamental interpretation of Lutheranism’s central doctrinal tenet. See Carl Braaten’s response to Simon Peura in \textit{Union with Christ}, 70-75.

\textsuperscript{40} Scott Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality,” \textit{Lutheran Quarterly} 13 (1999): 249-270. He mentions Robert Stupperich’s “Luther’s Itio Spiritualis” and Regin Prenter’s \textit{Spiritus Creator} as significant contributions as well.

\textsuperscript{41} This battle over spirituality is precisely what made the Reformation an international movement. There had been other innovative theologians before. Luther took his argument outside the academy.

\textsuperscript{42} Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality,” 252-253.

\textsuperscript{43} Although Hendrix references baptism briefly, he returns repeatedly to this image of the vine as the central metaphor of Christian existence.
Christians’ connection to Christ – a connection which is given to them as a gift and which they experience as a present reality.⁴⁴ Although Hendrix claims this vine imagery served as Luther’s primary metaphor for Christian life, he is unable to demonstrate how Luther constructed a practical spirituality from it. Instead, Hendrix searches for an additional metaphor to serve this purpose. Turning to Luther’s exposition of Genesis 12:1, Hendrix considers Luther’s characterization of Abraham.⁴⁵ Just as Abraham was a stranger in a strange land, so, too, Christians journey only as guests through this world. Hendrix then attempts to link this narrative image of Abraham the guest with the visual image of Christ the vine, suggesting that Luther’s spirituality can be best characterized as “guestly spirituality”. While living as guests on Earth, Christians gain their sustenance from Christ the vine.⁴⁶ Hendrix acknowledges Luther’s recovery of Pauline theology, but he overlooks entirely the recovery of Pauline spirituality.

Soon after 1517, however, if not already in that very year, Luther realized that he was engaged in more than a reclaiming of Pauline theology alongside the removal of a few religious abuses. Indeed, within four years, Luther had issued radical condemnations of the kind of Christianity practiced by most people around him as well as the kind of Christianity he had tried to practice himself. At the same time, Luther set about to install a new piety, that is, a new way of living and practicing the Christian religion.⁴⁷

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⁴⁴ Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality,” 256. Hendrix avoids the terminology of “union with Christ” as utilized by the Finnish school because he believes it can mistakenly indicate a mystical identification with the divine nature of Christ instead of with Christ’s human nature. On the other hand, he also writes on page 258, “It is difficult to believe that Luther would use such graphic metaphorical language if he were not trying to show that the vita spiritualis of Christians (which comes from Christ alone) is participation in a divine reality which changes them.” Hendrix’s proposal of the vine is short-sighted and problematic for multiple reasons. One could argue that the image of the vine and branches is meant to be another metaphor to explain the Christian’s resurrection life together with Christ. Also, while this metaphor functions as a visualization of life in Christ, it doesn’t, in and of itself, illustrate any particular spiritual practices. What does it mean to be the vine?

⁴⁵ Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality,” 262. Luther delivered this lecture on Genesis 12 at roughly the same time as that on John 15.

⁴⁶ By what rationale he mixes these two divergent metaphors, I am uncertain.

⁴⁷ Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality,” 252.
Hendrix’s own proposal concerning Luther’s “guestly spirituality” remains, in the end, a rather odd and confusing mixed metaphor, one which continues to obscure the centrality of the Pauline metaphor of dying and rising with Christ.48

Robert Guy Erwin’s 1999 dissertation, “The Passion and Death of Christ in the Piety and Theology of the Later Middle Ages and Martin Luther” goes a step further than Hendrix.49 Asserting that Luther’s theology of the cross was central to Luther’s entire Reformation enterprise, Erwin seeks to demonstrate its presence in Luther’s passion meditation, *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*, as well as in other of Luther’s early works, both academic and devotional.50 He summarizes his task in the following fashion:

> The present study is an attempt to explore and clarify the issues that Luther raises in the Heidelberg theses and his *Sermon on Meditation*, and to compare them to the theology of and devotion to the cross in the later Middle Ages out of which they come, but which they also criticize. Our goal is to elucidate the ways Luther’s understanding and use of the cross was both shaped by and to some extent in opposition to the cross-centered piety of the fifteenth century.51

Erwin provides an incredibly detailed historical summary of the development of atonement theology, as well as of passion devotion throughout Western Christendom.52

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48 If, as Hendrix claims, the Reformation consisted of a reformation of spirituality, I fail to see how his proposed “guestly spirituality” would actually have been markedly different from existent forms of medieval spirituality. Would not most medieval Christians have seen themselves as exiles here on earth, passing through on their way to purgatory? A second problem with Hendrix’s proposal is that he offers no explanation of how “guestly spirituality” serves as an appropriate description of Christian behavior. How do Christians structure their piety as “guests?”

49 Robert Guy Erwin, “The Passion and Death of Christ in the Piety and Theology of the Later Middle Ages and Martin Luther” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1999).

50 Erwin traces Luther’s interpretation of passion devotions to St. Bernard. He also suggests that Jordan of Quedlinburg, Ludolf of Saxony, John Gerson, and the Brethren of the Common Life had already begun to reinterpret passion devotions before Luther.


52 While Erwin’s historical survey is helpful, it is surprisingly dated. He spends the majority of his time reviewing traditional stances on Luther, but references very little newer scholarship. He spends pages on Harnack and Bultmann, but rarely mentions Scribner, Kolb, or Karant-Nunn.
Erwin attacks the traditional distinctions between theology and devotion, suggesting that they have done more harm than help.

Beyond that twelfth and thirteenth century revival of devotion to the humanity and passion of Christ, it becomes difficult to distinguish in any hard and fast way between theological formulations of the passion and crucifixion as principles of redemption, as expressed in the doctrine of atonement (and later, in Luther, in the doctrine of justification); and the devotional application of the passion and crucifixion as a spur to deeper faith, as a remembrance both of the extremity of Christ’s suffering and death, and the greatness of God’s mercy. Scholars have nonetheless tended to separate these two aspects of the theologia crucis, and relegate the latter to the history of popular religion or the “theology of devotion.” This study has tried to show how unenlightening such a division between “high” and “low” is on an issue such as this one, which reaches to the center of Christian identity and faith, and informs both educated and illiterate subcultures...

Unfortunately, however, in his attempt to be thorough, Erwin himself tends to focus more on elucidating Luther’s theology than on exploring his piety. Near the end of the dissertation he states that his objective had been to answer the questions, “What was Luther actually saying, and (especially) why?” While making a compelling case for the centrality of the cross to Luther’s spirituality, Erwin, like Hendrix, does not note Luther’s reliance on the Pauline metaphor of dying and rising with Christ. Instead, he suggests that Luther’s thought exhibits certain inconsistencies and that his later focus expands to include the resurrection as well as the crucifixion.

Anna Marie Johnson in her 2008 dissertation, “Piety and Polemics: Martin Luther’s Reform of Christian Practice, 1518-1520” seeks, like Erwin, to present an alternative version of young Luther’s life. Noting that Luther’s life has typically been

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54 Erwin, “The Passion and Death of Christ,” 402.
55 For example, Erwin comments on Luther’s explication of the resurrection in Image II.7 of Tessaradecas Consolatoria, but attributes it to Luther’s growing awareness that the Passion story needed to be supplemented by the Resurrection narrative. In making this assertion, he ignores Luther’s previous acknowledgments of resurrection implied in the Pauline metaphor itself.
described in terms of the various public controversies in which he was engaged, she attempts to fill in the gaps between these controversies. Focusing on his pastoral motivations and spiritual focus, she restricts her study to Luther’s spiritual writings of 1518-1520. Johnson offers a short historical background for each of these texts, as well as an explanation of Luther’s critiques of medieval spiritual/devotional practices contained within each. One of Johnson’s more significant assertions concerns the inseparability of Luther’s piety and polemics. She points out that his devotional writings also contained general polemical attacks. As he sought to alter specific devotional practices, Luther criticized and attacked certain misconceptions and/or actions as well as those who promoted or practiced them. In her conclusion, she mentions that Luther often wrote of the need for Christians to embrace suffering. Yet, she fails to tie this into the Pauline metaphor at the heart of Luther’s theology: embracing suffering as a way through which one can die to self and rise to new life in Christ. Nonetheless, Johnson’s study offers a significant contribution to the reinterpretation of the young Luther. Consider Johnson’s final paragraph.

Thus the narrative of Luther the reformer and the narrative of Luther the pastor merge. Both are narratives of reform, and both are narratives of conflict. Luther the pastor was not a kinder, gentler version of Luther the reformer; Luther the pastor was an impassioned reformer who was so committed to the care of souls that he was willing to risk excommunication and death. The story of Luther’s attempts to reform Christian practice is more than a sidelight of his career. It was not an experiential aside to his theological cause, but rather its heart.

59 Johnson, “Piety and Polemics,” 212.
60 Johnson, “Piety and Polemics,” 214.
As these newer studies demonstrate, young Luther was deeply concerned with Christian spirituality and with the shapes it took. He had a specific, consistent vision of how this piety might best be practiced and reformed. Throughout the sixteenth century, his devotional treatises proved to be among the most popular and long-lasting of all his early writings. Luther filled these texts with narrative images. Those who chose to publish these works often chose to adorn them with Andachtsbilder, devotional images for meditation. It is the premise of this dissertation that the further study of these images – both narrative and visual, will provide new insight into this on-going reinterpretation of young Luther.

Parameters and Goals

Before continuing to outline this study, let me say a word about its parameters. My focus is not on the full range of Luther’s narrative images. That would be too big a project. Nor do I provide a detailed exploration of the historical background of medieval devotional forms. Others have already done this. Instead, I have concentrated upon the variety of contemplative images Luther used in 1519 to describe Christian life and piety. Why have I restricted my focus to this particular year?

To begin, Luther understood himself at that point in time to be a faithful Christian working within the Catholic Church and tradition. What he wrote, he wrote for the faithful everywhere. He had not yet been excommunicated by the Church or placed under

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62 For a contrasting view, see Susan Lynn Greenbaum, “Luther’s Theology of Piety, 1513--1521: A Struggle with God, the Devil, and the Conscience” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2011).

63 Another recent dissertation which considers visual images is, Roberta J. Dykema, “Lucas Cranach the Elder, Martin Luther, and the ‘Passional Christi und Antichristi’: Propaganda and prayer in an early Lutheran Flugschrift” (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2011).

64 Erwin, for example, took this approach.
the ban of the Empire, nor was there any Reformation “movement” yet in motion. In many ways, this year represented the final calm before the storm. Shortly thereafter, a papal bull would be written, delivered and burned, lines would be drawn, and Luther’s sense of ownership for the movement that began to spread in his name would increase. But in 1519, this was not yet the case.

Secondly, Luther’s works of 1519 provide us with a glimpse of what was dearest to his heart at the time. Contrary to the portrait contained in many traditional biographies, Luther’s mental focus and work during that year were not concentrated primarily upon John Eck or on the issues that the debate with Eck raised. Instead, his main focus was on the cultivation of piety and spirituality. This becomes evident by considering the titles of Luther’s 1519 writings. The majority of them could be considered a veritable “how-to” library: how to pray the Lord’s Prayer, how to confess properly, how to contemplate the Passion of Christ, how to understand marriage, how to conduct public processions, how to prepare for death, how to properly take the sacrament, and so forth. All in all, Luther wrote twenty-six pieces in 1519.

Auslegung deutsch des Vaterunsers für die einfältigen Laien
Eine kurze Unterweisung, wie man beichten soll
Luthers Unterricht auf etliche Artikel, etc.
Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi
Sermo de duplici iustitia [translated into German in 1520]
Disputatio D. Johannis eccii et P. Martini Lutheri in studio Lipsensi futura
Disputatio et excusatio adverus criminationes D. Joannis Eccii
Ein Sermon von dem ehelichen Stand
Ein Sermon von dem Gebet und Prozession in der Kreuzwoche
Resolutio Lutheriana super propositione XIII. De potestate papae
Ein Sermon gepredigt zu Leipzig auf dem Schloß am Tage Petri und Pauli
Disputatio Joh. Eccii et M. Lutheri Lipsiae habita
Resolutiones Lutheriannae super propositionibus suis Lipsiae disputationis
In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas commentarius [translated into German in 1525]
Contra malignum J. Eccii iudicium M. Lutheri defensio
Ad aegocerotem Emserianum M. Lutheri additio
Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben
Ad. J. Eccium epistola super expurgatione Ecciana
Ein Sermon von dem Sakrament der Buße
Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament
Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften
Operationes in Psalmos (1519-1521) [Partial German translations 1524/25]
(Kleiner) Sermon von Dem Wucher
Of these twenty-six works, fourteen were written in German and twelve in Latin. However, of the twelve written in Latin, only six involved his academic dispute with John Eck. While his exchanges with Eck illustrate well Luther’s growing antagonisms with the Catholic Church, they reveal little about Luther’s own interests at the time. Luther often asked friends or colleagues to translate his Latin works into German whenever he believed the works would prove beneficial to others. Yet, none of the works directed against Eck were ever translated during his lifetime. Consequently, if we remove them from the list of Luther’s 1519 Latin writings, we are left with the following six works:

- *Sermo de duplici iustitia* [translated into German in 1520]
- *Resolutio Lutheriana super propositione XIII. De potestate papae*
- *In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas commentarius* [translated into German in 1525]
- *Ad aegocerotem Emserianum M. Lutheri additio*
- *Operationes in Psalmos (1519-1521)* [Partial German translations 1524/25]
- *Conclusiones quindecium*

Only three of these six were even partially translated into German at the time. These three had pastoral significance: the commentaries on Galatians and Psalms and a sermon on two kinds of justice / righteousness. The three Latin works not translated into German were academic treatises. Thus by comparing Luther’s academic and popular writings, we discover that 85% of Luther’s works (seventeen of twenty) were intended for other than an academic audience. Clearly Luther’s attention in 1519 was upon spiritual formation. It is worth mentioning as well, that Luther’s devotional texts went through the most editions in his own lifetime. Again, comparing German and Latin texts, one hundred ninety-eight German editions of Luther’s works were published in the sixteenth century compared to only fifty-two Latin editions. These statistics enable us to better understand Luther’s

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actual *Sitz im Leben* in 1519. Succinctly put, he was engaged in the task of engendering a new Christian worldview. He had a fresh vision for Christian existence – an innovative understanding of what it meant to be a Christian. His primary task in 1519 was to lay out multiple examples of what this vision – this new world – looked like. He did this through the use of narrative images.

These images offered not only new ways of thinking about God and Christ, but about faith, the church, the sacraments, the world, and even the self. However, even as he worked to revise the dominant narrative, he did not believe he was creating new forms of piety. Rather, he believed he was clarifying the central Christian narrative. Although he grafted various contemplative images onto familiar forms of existing piety, all of them hearkened back to Paul’s narrative spirituality. To support this assertion, I will examine closely the following five works written in 1519: *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*, *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*, *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe*, *Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften*, and *Tessaradecas Consolatoria*. In traditional chronologies of Luther’s life, these texts have been relegated to a minor role. However, I would suggest that these works illustrate Luther’s consistent spiritual focus, and were as influential in shaping public opinion as were Luther’s more theological treatises. By studying the contemplative images contained in these works, we can gain a new appreciation of both Luther and his spiritual sensibilities.

Chapter 2 provides an introductory summary of contemplative devotions in the biblical tradition, making a distinction between visions and visualizations. It then considers St. Paul’s own promotion of contemplative visualizations, before tracing his repeated use of and preference for the metaphor of “dying and rising with Christ” to describe Christian existence. Luther’s other preferred authors are considered next. Numerous times throughout his early writings, Luther mentioned Augustine, Tauler, and *Eine Deutsche Theologia*. What did he think they had in common?
Chapter 3 is a detailed exploration of the form and content of four of the works that Luther wrote in 1519: *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*, *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*, *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe*, and *Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften*. It shows how each expresses in its own way continuity with as well as departure from medieval practices, pastoral techniques, and the medieval worldview itself. My specific emphasis is upon the visual imagery Luther employs within these works.

Chapter 4 focuses exclusively upon Luther’s *Tessaradecas Consolatoria pro laborantibus et oneratis*. I examine how he utilizes certain mental pictures to offer comfort to those who are suffering, encouraging and enabling them to visualize their trials and burdens in a new way. I also examine how the overall structure of *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* functions as a simple, mnemonic device for individuals to use when reflecting upon their lives and piety, asserting that the memorable central image of one’s self surrounded by seven specific goods and evils is the core of the work and the source of the treatise’s enduring popularity and publication.

In chapter 5, I test my hypothesis about these works’ central images by studying the various sixteenth-century editions and translations of these works. Did others take away from these works the themes that Luther had intended? Did translators convert not only the words of a treatise into another language, but maintain its original meaning in a new setting? I also consider whether or not publishers’ illustrations should be understood as a secondary layer of interpretation which has been hitherto overlooked.

My research has convinced me that the traditional picture of Luther needs to be revised to include the Pauline metaphor of dying and rising with Christ. Unless we take this central component of young Luther’s contemplative spirituality into account, his emphases will continue to seem fragmented. This study attempts to open new avenues for
research in Luther studies, enabling historians, theologians, and literary critics to interpret Luther in new ways - ways which are in keeping with his own emphases.
CHAPTER II
THE FOUNDATIONS OF YOUNG LUTHER’S SPIRITUALITY

In the early days of December, 1516, Luther’s first publication was printed - a preface for an anonymous manuscript that originated in East Prussia. The rather long title of this relatively short treatise was *Eyn geystlich edles Buchleynn. Von rechter unterscheyd vnd vorstand. Was der alt vn new mensche sey. Was Adams vn was gottis kind sey. un wie Adam ynn vns sterben vnnd Christus ersteen sall.*  

In his preface, Luther suggested that the booklet’s style reminded him of the writings of Johannes Tauler. He then added.

Be that as it may, here we have the true solid teaching of Holy Writ. One has to choose between calling it all a folly and becoming a fool, as the Apostle Paul indicates in I Corinthians 1: We preach Christ, a folly to the heathen but to those who are called, the wisdom of God.

Given Luther’s training as a biblical scholar, this was high praise. However, what did he mean by the expression “the true, solid teaching of Holy Writ”? He provided a partial answer to this question a few days later in a letter he sent to George Spalatin on December 14, 1516. In the letter, he offered an expanded commendation of *Eyn geystlich edles Buchleynn.*

If you want to read pure, solid theology, most akin to teachings of old, propounded in the German tongue, you should get hold of Johannes Tauler’s sermons. I herewith send you, as it were, an abridgement of his entire art of proclamation. For I have not seen, in Latin or in our own tongue, a theology which is more wholesome and more in keeping with the Gospel.

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1 In English, *A spiritually noble booklet, concerning the proper/right differentiation and understanding of what the old and new humanity is. What [Who] is Adam’s and [who] is God’s child. And how Adam should die in us and Christ shall arise.*


These comments reveal a number of Luther’s personal convictions at the time. On the one hand, his use of the terms “pure” and “solid” is a direct criticism of scholastic theology as he had come to know it. By 1516 Luther was already convinced that scholastic theology had become an exercise in missing the point – that it focused on issues extraneous to the core of the biblical narrative and that it was no longer consonant with the Gospel or the interpretations of the Church Fathers. On the other hand, Luther declared that Tauler’s sermons did not exhibit these scholastic characteristics, but rather remained faithful to the “teachings of old”. Likewise, Eyn geystlich edles Buchleynn was “wholesome and in keeping with the Gospel” precisely because it read like a summary of Tauler’s preaching.

Two years later, Luther published an expanded version of this same anonymous treatise. After the publication of the first edition, a new manuscript had been found in an Erfurt monastery and delivered to Luther. This version greatly expanded the text, adding six new chapters to its beginning and twenty-five chapters to its ending. Luther wrote a new preface and changed the title of the work to Eyn deutsch Theologia. das ist Eyn edles Buchleyn, von rechtem vorstand, was Adam vnd Christus sey, vnd wie Adam ynn uns sterben vnd Christus ersteen sall. In the new preface, he once again commended the booklet, paying it an even bigger compliment than the first edition.

…this noble little book, poor and unadorned as it is as far as wording and purely human wisdom are concerned, is all the richer and abundantly precious in true knowledge and divine wisdom. And, if I may speak with biblical foolishness: Next to the Bible and Saint Augustine no other book has come to my attention from which I have learned – and desired to learn – more concerning God, Christ, man, and what all things are.

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5 WA 1, 376.

In this second preface, Luther compared the treatise not to Tauler, but rather to the Bible and Augustine. Luther also equated the simplicity of the booklet to St. Paul’s letters. This reference to Paul should not be surprising, for Luther had recently lectured on Romans (1516), Galatians (1516-1517), and Hebrews (1517-1518).7 Luther’s positive appraisal of *Eyn deutsch Theologia* stemmed in large part from his belief that the work replicated the teachings of Paul in its interpretation of Christ.

Likewise, Luther’s esteem for Augustine arose from what he believed to be Augustine’s Pauline theology. A few months earlier in another letter to George Spalatin dated October 19, 1516, Luther mentioned his respect for Augustine. He stated that it had nothing to do with being a member of the Augustinian order, but arose from his own reading of Augustine. He recommended that Spalatin read Augustine’s *On the Letter and the Spirit*, *On Merits and Forgiveness of Sinners*, *Against the Two Letters of the Pelagians*, and *Against Julius*.8 All four were part of Augustine’s anti-Pelagian corpus. Given that Augustine’s debate with the Pelagians concerned the proper interpretation of Pauline theology, it should come as no surprise that Luther recommended these particular works. After all, many of the criticisms Luther leveled against medieval theology and spirituality had to do with what he took to be their Pelagian character. Luther’s preference for the teachings of Paul was clearly apparent at this early stage of his career. As will be shown, this preference proved especially relevant to Luther’s developing spirituality.

In his revised title, *Eyn deutsch Theologia. das ist Eyn edles Buchleyn, von rechtem vorstand, was Adam vnd Christus sey, vnd wie Adam ynn uns sterben vnd*}

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7 Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 129. Although most contemporary scholars believe the book of Hebrews is not of Pauline origin, Luther treated it as authentic. Throughout these early lectures, Luther often referenced Augustine’s *Confessions*. See, for example, his lectures on Romans.

Christus ersteen sall, Luther condensed and intensified the treatise’s original subtitle. He stated what he believed to be the central narrative of Christian existence and the central focus of Christian spirituality: the death of Adam and the resurrection of Christ. The treatise’s subtitle also claimed the work offered rechtem vorstand, i.e. the proper understanding, of Adam and Christ. This is a reference to Romans 5 and 6, as well as to I Corinthians 15. Luther recommended and praised Eyn deutsch Theologia because he believed it to be a faithful commentary on Paul’s theology. Luther’s reference in the subtitle obviously referred to the same narrative image he developed in the letter to George Spenlein: dying to self and rising to new life in Christ.

Yet, did Luther draw this image solely from the letters of Paul? Hardly. In actuality, he turned to an entire tradition of contemplative devotion – a tradition is traced back to Paul through Augustine, Tauler, and Eyn deutsch Theologia. Luther found in all these sources a consistent theological and spiritual narrative – one grounded in the Christian’s own experience of death and resurrection. However, he explored a variety of contemplative paradigms to express this central narrative of death and rebirth. In this manner, he sought to both promote and reestablish among Christians what he took to be the primary biblical and apostolic mode of Christian spirituality. Much piety of the time was focused on praying to the proper saint, i.e. on finding the correct intermediary to assist in appeasing God, on funding masses or purchasing indulgences to shorten a person’s time in purgatory, or on making pilgrimages to holy sites and venerating holy relics. For Luther, all of these practices seemed to place Christ and Christ’s cross not in the center of the narrative but at the periphery. Likewise, Luther was becoming more convinced that academic theology was guilty of the same offense in that speculative pursuits were given preference over exegetical and homiletical instruction. This troubled

9 Book titles in the early modern era book titles were often lengthy and attempted to provide a summary of a book’s content and purpose.

10 A long-standing element of crucifixion scenes in the visual arts was the presence of Adam’s skull under the cross. Its presence there indicated that Christ had been crucified atop Adam’s grave.
him and he began not only to question the status quo, but alter it. In a letter to John Lang, dated May 18, 1517, Luther explained some of the curricular changes he was instituting at the university in Wittenberg, emphasizing the biblical and Augustinian nature of these modifications.

Our theology and St. Augustine are progressing well, and with God’s help rule at our University. Aristotle is gradually falling from his throne, and his final doom is only a matter of time. It is amazing how the lectures on the *Sentences* are disdained. Indeed no one can expect to have any students if he does not want to teach this theology, that is lecture on the Bible or on St. Augustine or another teacher of ecclesiastical eminence.\(^\text{11}\)

Since Luther believed he was restoring Pauline and Augustinian theology and spirituality (as he understood them), a brief review of Paul’s spirituality of death and resurrection is in order. Likewise, a summary of certain of Augustine and Tauler’s writings, as well as of *Eyn deutsch Theologia* seems appropriate. In this manner, a clearer picture of Luther’s restoration project and his debt to the past will emerge.\(^\text{12}\)

The remainder of this chapter consists of a close reading of specific passages from a selection of Paul’s letters, Augustine’s *On the Spirit and the Letter* and *Confessions*, Tauler’s *Sermons*, and *Eyn deutsch Theologia*. In order to place Paul’s writings in a larger context, I first provide a general background on contemplative devotion within the entire biblical canon. Also, in considering Augustine’s exegesis of Pauline spirituality and his own lasting contribution to Western spirituality, I build upon John Peter Kenney’s *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine*, a persuasive treatment of Augustine’s teachings on contemplation.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{11}\) *LW* 48, 42. *WA* Br 1, 99.

\(^{12}\) Instead of attempting to trace the unfolding of the contemplative devotional tradition by detailing a train of succession, the following analysis merely intends to demonstrate how particular forms of contemplative devotion had existed and persisted from the very beginning of Christian history till the time of Luther.

Contemplation in Scripture

Contemplative devotion has been a part of Christian spirituality and of Christian scripture from the very beginning. From the first pages of Genesis to the final pages of Revelation tales of visions, reflective images, and spiritual narratives abound. For example, one finds the Psalmist reflecting on God’s creation in Psalm 8, inquiring about humanity’s place in the cosmos.\(^{14}\) Likewise, in Matthew 6, Jesus asks the crowds who have gathered around him to reflect upon God’s provident care of the birds of the air or the lilies of the field.\(^{15}\) Indeed, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are filled with imaginative, spiritual exercises. However, these exercises often differ in purpose and content. The two most basic types of contemplative exercises found in Scripture are visions and visualizations. These can be distinguished in the following manner.

Visions are records of unique, individual revelations, which are not necessarily intended to be duplicated by others.\(^{16}\) Visualizations on the other hand, are images put

\(^{14}\) Psalm 8:3-9 (NRSV).

\(^{15}\) Matthew 6:25-34 (NRSV).

\(^{16}\) Visions can be described as either dreams or as conscious experiences. There seem to be at least four types of vision narratives in Scripture: a) Explanatory/Interpretive Visions, b) Ecstatic Visions, c) Callings, and d) Apocalyptic Visions.

a) Explanatory or interpretive visions offer comprehension of something previously hidden, unknown, or misunderstood. For instance, Peter’s vision in Acts 10:9-48 of a cloth sheet filled with animals descending from heaven serves as a metaphor which reorients his thinking about ministry to and among Gentile converts to Christianity. He understands the vision itself to be a form of divine communication which opens his mind to God’s intentions.

b) Ecstatic visions emphasize the experiential, offering the visionary a momentary opportunity to experience the divine in an enhanced or special way. Paul’s narrative in 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 about being caught up to the third heaven serves as a good illustration of this type of vision. Whether described as a trance or as an actual physical event, ecstatic visions often seem to involve experiencing God – or the divine nature – directly in some fashion or another. Such visions are often understood as a special privilege – a gift of divine grace. The story in Exodus 33:12-34:9 of God’s revealing God’s backside to Moses in a cave would be another good example of this type of narrative. The cultivation of these particular types of visions is often the stated goal of mystical devotion.

c) Callings involve being commissioned directly by God to engage in divine service. Numerous examples of this sort of story exist within both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Two obvious examples would be Isaiah 6:1-13, the prophet’s vision of God upon the throne asking, “Whom shall I send?” and the prophet responding, “Here am I; Send me!” and the story of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9:1-19. Calling narratives can involve either a direct experience of God’s presence or that of a divine messenger. In either case, the calling usually seems undeniable and/or irresistible, and leaves the character with no choice but to reorient his/her entire life around it.

d) Apocalyptic visions claim to reveal the divine perspective on or interpretation of current and/or future events. The vision of four beasts in Daniel 7:1-28 offered a symbolic characterization of four
forward by biblical authors for their readers’ personal contemplation and reflection. These images guide listeners and readers down a specific path towards a stated goal. They offer an opportunity to meditate in a specific manner on one’s relationship with God, Christ, others in the faith community, on one’s place in the universe, etc. Visualizations encourage people to put themselves into a particular picture – to become part of a certain story.

There are a great number of visualizations recorded in Scripture. Two of the most obvious metaphoric visualizations within the New Testament are putting on the full armor of God17 or having the mind of Christ.18 Although less directive and not focused on a particular object, Paul’s advice in Philippians 4 to think on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, or worthy of praise serves as a mental visualization as well. Christians are encouraged to engage in such visualizations in order to bring about certain changes: fortification against temptation or growth in virtue, for example.

A number of biblical authors affirmed that visions and dreams can be genuine and appropriate manifestations of the divine. However, some did offer cautions about the interpretation and significance of visions and dreams. Paul, for example, seemed to have taken a nuanced view of visions. On the one hand, he readily admitted to having personally had ecstatic visions19 and included among the many “gifts of the Spirit” utterances of wisdom and knowledge, prophecy, the discernment of spirits, along with tongues and their interpretation.20 On the other hand, he also taught that the interpretation differing kingdoms and John’s vision of riders on four differently-colored horses in Revelation 6:1-7 would be two obvious examples of apocalyptic visions.

17 Ephesians 6:10-17 (NRSV).
18 Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV).
19 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 (NRSV).
20 I Corinthians 12:4-11 (NRSV).
of visions needed to be tested and critically analyzed by other members of the Christian community. The mere claim of having had a vision was not self-authenticating. For example, in I Thessalonians 5:19-21, he wrote,

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Only those visions which led to the good of the community were to be validated. Paul repeated this same message in I Corinthians 13, pointing out that the various spiritual gifts were meaningless and worthless if used for anything other than the nurture of the community. Simply having a mystical experience was of little use to the congregation if one lacked a corresponding interpretation, i.e. an explanation of what the vision meant or signified. By insisting on the importance of a vision’s interpretation, Paul suggested that visions actually served a cognitive or pedagogical purpose, rather than an emotional one. This shift in focus served to downplay the significance of the experience itself. What mattered most was what use one made of the experience.²¹ Paul proposed visualizations in his correspondence more often than he related tales of personal visions. In particular, he often encouraged his listeners and readers to envision themselves dying to self and rising with Christ. This is a consistent theme throughout the Pauline canon and it is especially evident in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, one of Luther’s favorite biblical books.

Death & Resurrection Imagery in St. Paul’s Letters

After even a cursory reading of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, it is apparent that dying and rising with Christ is a central concept for the apostle. He explores the metaphor from differing vantage points, seeking to mine its riches. For example, in some passages,

²¹ Luther offers some similar warnings and comments about visions in a letter concerning the Zwickau prophets. A more detailed analysis of his view is offered in a later chapter.
he equates baptism with the death of the self; in others, he speaks of the mortification of the flesh; and in still other places he speaks of dying to the law. Likewise, Paul understands resurrection with Christ in more than one way. While a detailed investigation of Romans is not within the domain of this project, consideration of a few key passages will help to illuminate how central the notion of death and resurrection is to Paul’s understanding of Christian life and spirituality.

In Romans chapter four verse twenty-four, Paul begins an extended reflection on the significance of Christ’s death and resurrection. He declares that Jesus was “handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” This is Paul’s formal confession – his central narrative – concerning Christ’s significance. Yet, Paul is not content with a minimalistic account. On the contrary, he immediately strives to expand this narrative. According to Paul, those who have been justified – who have become a part of Christ’s story - have been reconciled with God; they have found peace with God; they stand within the grace of God and hope to share in God’s glory. These are all exalted claims that Paul’s audience likely sought to appropriate. Yet, Paul’s narrative is not yet finished. He states that the justified have been given another gift as well – the gift of suffering. Why would they want such a gift? Why should Christians conceive of suffering as a gift? Because through suffering the Christian learns to die to self; through suffering s/he experiences the birth of new character within. The death of the old (through suffering) and the birth of the new is a gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the fruit that the love of God produces within the heart. Paul establishes a connection between Christ’s death and human sin. Christ died on account of and to overcome sin. Yet, there is also a corresponding link between Christ’s resurrection and human justification. Christ rose from the dead in order that the justified might, too, experience and share a new way of living. Most simply put, Paul’s central message is this: Christians die in order to truly live. Yet, precisely because he knows that this is a difficult concept to apprehend, he

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22 This extended reflection continues at least until chapter fourteen.
seeks to flesh out these ideas and images in greater and greater detail throughout the letter: to define “death” and “resurrection” in more and more subtle ways.

For example, further along in chapter five Paul expands his narrative back to Adam, the first human being, and diagnoses the human condition. Through Adam’s sin, Paul writes, we have all inherited sin and death. This is our common human lot. Yet, sin and death are not the last word on humanity. According to Paul, God’s love for the human race was too great to allow that to happen. So, in and through Christ, God sought to create an alternative ending – a revised narrative. Whereas Adam brought condemnation and death to the human race, Christ has brought reconciliation and new life. This is God’s desire for humanity: that although we will die, we might be reborn into a new life. This is Paul’s second explication of his theme.23 We now turn to a third.

In chapter six of Romans, Paul equates Christian baptism with death. This is a startling and perhaps unsettling claim, for baptism is itself the entry point into Christian life. Thus, Paul states rather emphatically that in order to become a Christian one first has to die.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.24

In order to be raised with Christ – in order to partake of resurrection life, the “old self”, which Paul alternatively calls the “body of sin”, must perish. One cannot have the second without the first. Yet what does Paul mean here? Is he speaking literally or metaphorically?

The answer is always both. For Paul, literal death is a necessary remedy for sin. Only in death will sin come to an end. Only in death will God’s just condemnation of sin

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23In a variation on this theme, Paul speaks in I Corinthians 15 of all dying in Adam and being made alive in Christ.

24 Romans 6:3-4 (NRSV).
be carried out. This is as it must be. Yet Paul is expressing here neither a suicidal nor homicidal wish. Instead, he is simply confessing what he believes to be a fact: human beings will never stop sinning until they have been buried. Paul states that the Christian faith consists of acknowledging and embracing this fact. Since there is no other way to rid one’s self or the world of sin, Christians are committed to dying. Yet, lest his audience misunderstand what he is saying, Paul immediately strives to clarify his meaning by defining dying more specifically. Dying to self is turning one’s back on one’s self-centered ways. Whenever and wherever Christians do this, they are already in the process of dying.

Paul then introduces a new metaphor to clarify this idea, that of a taskmaster. According to Paul, sin is humanity’s current taskmaster. We are all enslaved to our own self-centered desires and will never overcome this self-centeredness during our earthly existence. Yet, whenever we oppose this selfishness – whenever we choose to act in the interest of another (God or neighbor) instead of our own interest, we die to self. As we learn to live in this new way, Paul declares that we will experience new life – a new kind of existence. In this version of Paul’s narrative, instead of being the slave of sin and one’s own self interests, the Christian turns from self-centeredness towards God and neighbor. Since all human beings are in bondage to sin, no one can act freely in this current life. Instead, we remain subject to the whims of the self. Thus, the only free action is to act for the sake of the other (whether God or neighbor). This is for Paul the definition of true freedom: acting free of one’s selfish desires.

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace…now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.25

25 Romans 6:14, 22-23 (NRSV).
Here again we see the irony of Paul’s perspective: one must die in order to live – to experience a new and different kind and quality of life. While Paul admits that Christians will continue to sin as long as they are alive, he celebrates the new ability they have been given: the ability to die to self – to decide against feeding their own desires and appetites. At the end of chapter six, Paul explicitly urged his audience to engage in a specific contemplative devotion – to make use of a particular visualization to understand this new-found relationship with God. He writes, “So you also must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Visualizing this image, believing it, making it the central narrative of one’s life – this is for Paul the primary exercise of Christian spirituality. Whenever Christians find the grace to do this, they will find themselves experiencing new life - the life that comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Paul believed that by opening one’s self to the Spirit’s presence and power, one could and would experience resurrection life even while still in the flesh.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law – indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

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26 Romans 6:11 (NRSV).
27 Romans 8:11 (NRSV).
28 Romans 8:5-11 (NRSV).
Actually, Paul makes an even stronger statement here. One is a Christian only because of
the indwelling of the Spirit, because it is the Spirit who brings new life. Here, too, Paul
recommends repeating a particular visualization: “setting one’s mind on the Spirit.” As
this passage makes clear, Paul defines Christian spirituality not in terms of an intellectual
decision, an emotional state, or a sacramental action, but in terms of this repetition of
dying to an old way of life and rising with Christ to a new form of existence. This dying
to self – the movement from death to life – involves a reorientation of one’s thinking, the
acquisition of a particular existential stance, and an ethical reordering of one’s life. Paul
does not believe this change is automatic or simple. It represents a deliberate alteration of
both values and lifestyle – one which entails suffering and struggle.

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin
might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For
whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we
believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised
from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over
him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he
lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to
God in Christ Jesus.²⁹

In Romans 12 Paul offers still another image to assist his audience in visualizing
the death of self. He suggests that Christians become “living sacrifices”. According to
Paul, they ought to sacrifice their bodies – give them up for a higher cause. One could ask
again whether Paul is speaking literally or metaphorically here, and again the answer is
both. In as much as bodily appetites dictate the contours of human existence, one should
sacrifice these appetites to a higher cause. On the other hand, Paul is speaking once again
of the old self – the old Adam. Christians should sacrifice the old Adam within
themselves. How do they go about doing this? In the very same manner Paul has
described in other places earlier in the letter: by changing their orientation towards living.
Paul writes in Romans 12:2,

²⁹ Romans 6:3-11 (NRSV).
Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This is, of course, another contemplative visualization. Paul invites his audience to rewrite perpetually their natural assumptions. The renewal of the mind happens as individuals learn to change their thought patterns. It involves giving up certain habitual patterns of thinking and acting that preference the self and following instead the model of Christ who taught love of God and neighbor.

In Romans 13:12b-14, Paul presents even more images to develop the metaphor of dying to self and rising with Christ to new life.

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

To begin with, he urges his audience to “lay aside the works of darkness.” This is, of course, another way of telling them to die to sin. He makes this clear in the next sentence when he speaks of making “no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.” They are to replace the darkness in their lives with “the armor of light”. Just what is this armor? It is Christ himself – his resurrection life. Paul tells them to “put on Christ.” At first glance, this might seem to be an entire shift of metaphor – from one of death and resurrection to one of changing clothes. However, Paul is still speaking of killing off the self. He is, however, now advocating the starvation of the old self. This is really imagery of nourishment and starvation. It is as if he is saying, “Do not feed your old appetites; starve your old self. Let it die. Instead, put on [or take in] Christ.” One can read this as a type of Eucharistic imagery. “Let Christ feed and nourish you; let him give you new life from the inside out.”

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30 Eucharistic visualizations involve not just remembering Christ, but of ingesting Christ. They call Christians to find their nourishment in Christ instead of themselves. In I Corinthians 11, Paul criticizes the Corinthian Christians for the manner in which they had been commemorating / celebrating the Lord’s Supper. It seems that certain individuals had been making use of the celebration to highlight class
Another interesting aspect of Paul’s spirituality of death and resurrection is his profession that Christ, too, died to himself. Paul insists that Christ had been unwilling to pursue his own purposes. Christ’s humanity not only acknowledged, but bowed to another reality – to God the Father.

For Christ did not please himself; but as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”

Here Paul equates humility with dying to self. This is because pride, humility’s opposite, consists of feeding the self – of keeping it alive at all costs. Humility, on the other hand, is the willingness to die to a particular way of seeing one’s self. Thus, as Christ was humble, Christians, too, should practice humility.

As should now be clear, the theme of dying to self and being reborn in and through Christ is a major leitmotiv of Romans. Paul strives over and over again to embed this image in the imagination and consciousness of his audience. He wants them to adopt it as a life metaphor. It not only summarizes the Christian’s relationship to Christ, but also provides the key for interpreting this relationship. Paul continues to promote this same spirituality in most of his other letters as well, especially Galatians and Philippians.

distinctions, social standing and wealth. Paul offers them a new way of administering / celebrating the Supper. He then urges them to adopt a particular attitude towards the event, using the language of “discerning the body”. In particular, he suggests in verses 23-26 that they remember the words of Jesus himself, and that they imagine Jesus speaking directly to them.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in [for the] remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in [for the] remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Why are communicants encouraged to imagine themselves ingesting Christ? Is the desired visualization simply that of imaging a piece of meat or a pool of blood upon one’s tongue, between one’s teeth, and within one’s stomach? What would be the utility of such a view? The image of being filled with or nourished by Christ translates to ethical behavior. Just as individuals are filled with Christ, the community (body) is to be filled by Christ and animated by him. He fills the body of death with his new life and transforms it.

31 Romans 15:3 (NRSV).
The occasion of Paul’s letter to the Galatians is the appearance among the congregation of outsiders who introduced “a different gospel” – a different narrative of Christian existence and different spiritual practices. Paul takes exception to this alternative narrative.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.  

What was this different gospel? It appears to have involved the attempt to define Christian existence not in terms of overcoming selfishness, but rather in terms of having accomplished or completed certain actions, in particular, having been circumcised. This alternative version of Christianity evidently emphasized following the tenets of the Jewish law. Instead of urging the congregation to develop humility, these other teachers were promoting the accrual of spiritual merits, which led to the development of spiritual pride. Paul recoils at this suggestion. In Paul’s mind, these other teachers were actually promoting the antithesis of the narrative he had introduced. So in this letter, Paul reminds the Galatians of his original message concerning the death of the self and of new life in Christ. He encourages them to reject a focus on self, and to concentrate on their neighbors instead. This is particularly evident in Galatians 6:14-15.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Here Paul further develops his definition of Christian freedom: doing something other than what one would normally (and selfishly) choose to do. In Christ, Christians have been given the option of freely serving their neighbors. Strangely, Paul uses the language

32 Galatians 1:6-7 (NRSV).
of slavery to explain this concept of freedom. After renouncing their slavery to themselves, he encourages his audience members to choose to be slaves of one another instead. This is how they will escape gratifying the desires of their flesh. Instead of biting and devouring one another to serve their own ends, they should feed on the Spirit. Later in verse twenty-four of this passage, Paul writes that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” This is, of course, an alternative way of referring to the death of the self. However, in this case Paul utilizes a more active and vivid image – the crucifixion of one’s passions and desires. This interpretation of crucifixion alters the significance of Christ’s own death. Crucifixion is to be understood not just as torturous punishment to be suffered or endured, but as something to be sought out for the sake of personal growth. Obviously, Paul is referencing here Christ’s own call to the crowds,

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.33

By crucifying their own wants and desires, Christians will find a new and more fruitful way of living their lives, one that will endure.34

Philippians 3:7-16 is another extended passage that develops the death and resurrection theme. Here Paul writes once again of dying to his own desires, concerns, and wants – of losing everything.

...I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but

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33 Mark 8:34b-35 (NRSV).
34 While many scholars do not acknowledge Ephesians as an authentic Pauline letter, Luther understood it as such. Yet aside from questions of authorship, the theme of dying to self and rising in Christ is certainly evident within the letter. Consider, for example, Ephesians 4:22-24 (RSV).

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.
one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based
on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the
sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I
may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained
this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own,
because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that
I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind
and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the
prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are
mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything,
this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have
attained.

Paul proclaims that he wants to know Christ and his resurrection, yet this is possible only
by becoming like him in his death. Paul makes clear that this cannot be accomplished all
at once, but is rather something that grows with time. It is a goal that one pursues like an
athlete training for a competition. One exercises one’s mind by reflection upon – by
contemplating Christ’s sufferings, death, and resurrection again, and again, and again.35

So what can we say about Paul’s spirituality? He believed that Christians were
called to understand their lives in terms of a particular narrative: that of having died with
Christ and rising again with him. Diving more and more deeply into this story is the
essence of Pauline spirituality. As Christians die to themselves, Christ comes to life
within them through the power of the Holy Spirit. This was Paul’s most basic
understanding of what it meant to be a Christian and he made repeated use of
visualizations to help his audience live into it. Did this conception (and practice) of
Christian existence persist? Indeed. It can be found further developed in the thinking of
Augustine.

**Augustinian Contemplation of Pauline Themes**

Around 410 C.E. Augustine of Hippo began a writing campaign against the
teaching of Pelagius and his followers. His opposition paralleled Paul’s own criticism of

35 In *Der kleine Katechismus* Luther writes of daily returning to baptism, quoting Romans 6:4 as his
authority.
the intruders in the Galatian congregation. Augustine believed that the Pelagians, too, had changed the central narrative of the Christian faith. Instead of starting with the admission of the perpetual need of divine grace to assist the Christian in dying to self, the Pelagians’ focus was upon human achievement. To their way of seeing things being a Christian had to do with striving for moral perfection. They denied original sin, emphasized human free will and action, and understood divine grace as an element of nature itself, rather than as a divine gift to the faithful. Augustine believed this theology and spirituality turned Christian life and practice on its head. In his work, *On the Proceedings of Pelagius*, Augustine characterized Pelagian teachings in the following manner.

...after the older heresies, there has been just now introduced, not by bishops or presbyters or any rank of the clergy, but by certain would-be monks, a heresy which disputes, under color of defending free will, against the grace of God which we have through our Lord Jesus Christ; and endeavors to overthrow the foundation of the Christian faith of which it is written, “By one man, death, and by one man the resurrection of the dead; for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive;” 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 and denies God’s help in our actions, by affirming that, “in order to avoid sin and to fulfill righteousness, human nature can be sufficient, seeing that it has been created with free will; and that God’s grace lies in the fact that we have been so created as to be able to do this by the will, and in the further fact that God has given to us the assistance of His law and commandments, and also in that He forgives their past sins when men turn to Him;” that “in these things alone is God’s grace to be regarded as consisting, not in the help He gives to us for each of our actions,”— “seeing that a man can be without sin, and keep God’s commandments easily if he wishes.”

Although Augustine admitted that the Pelagians were attempting to defend several significant philosophical and theological ideals, he declared that in the process they were guilty of overturning the “foundation of the Christian faith.” Specifically, they had rejected Paul’s narrative about dying and rising with Christ and replaced it with


37 This can be seen in Augustine’s quotation of 1 Corinthians 15:21-22.
another. Augustine asserted that Christian theology must always be understood as an exposition and interpretation of Paul’s theological narrative.

This conviction is nowhere more evident than in Augustine’s *On the Spirit and the Letter*. In this short work, Augustine comments time and again on the Pauline idea of dying and rising with Christ. The passion and resurrection of Christ is for Augustine not just the story of what happened to Christ, but serves as a paradigm of Christian existence and as the primary metaphor for Christian spirituality. In chapter twelve, Augustine provides a brief summary of the work’s intention.

For in this letter of mine we have not undertaken to expound this epistle [Romans], but only mainly on its authority, to demonstrate, so far as we are able, that we are assisted by divine aid towards the achievement of righteousness,—not merely because God has given us a law full of good and holy precepts, but because our very will without which we cannot do any good thing, is assisted and elevated by the importation of the Spirit of grace, without which help mere teaching is “the letter that killeth,” forasmuch as it rather holds them guilty of transgression, than justifies the ungodly.38

After citing Romans as his authority, Augustine states that central to the Christian message is the affirmation of the ever-present need of God’s grace. Humanity is incapable of any good works apart from such grace. Our wills are diseased and unable to desire anything other than the fulfillment of our own selfish wants. Healing comes only through death and rebirth. Just as we did not give life to ourselves but received it as a gift, the Christian’s rebirth, too, comes from outside of him/herself — as a gift of the Spirit. The Spirit brings about conversion and renewal, enabling us to love God and neighbor. Earlier in chapter six of *On the Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine lays out his basic understanding of conversion.

For there was need to prove to man how corruptly weak he was, so that against his iniquity, the holy law brought him no help towards good, but rather increased than diminished his iniquity; seeing that the law entered,

that the offence might abound; that being thus convicted and confounded, he might see not only that he needed a physician, but also God as his helper so to direct his steps that sin should not rule over him, and he might be healed by betaking himself to the help of the divine mercy; and in this way, where sin abounded grace might much more abound,—not through the merit of the sinner, but by the intervention of his Helper.39

Here Augustine writes about humanity not in a universal sense, but rather accounts for the individual. Each must come face to face with his/her own diseased will and comprehend his/her need of the Great Physician’s healing touch, i.e. each must learn of her/his need of divine mercy and grace. Without such a conversion of one’s own perspective, one will continue to assume falsely that s/he is capable on his/her own of pleasing God. This was, in Augustine’s opinion, the core of the Pelagian error. Consider the following passage from On the Spirit and the Letter. After quoting Romans 6:3-11, Augustine writes,

Now it is plain enough that here by the mystery of the Lord’s death and resurrection is figured the death of our old sinful life, and the rising of the new; and that here is shown forth the abolition of iniquity and the renewal of righteousness. Whence then arises this vast benefit to man through the letter of the law, except it be through the faith of Jesus Christ?40

Here Augustine suggests that it should be “plain enough” to recognize Christ’s death and resurrection as a figure or metaphor of Christian living. The Christian is ever called to die to his/her old sinful life and rise to a new life. This happens as sin is abolished and righteousness is renewed. Yet, according to Augustine, the law by itself is unable to bring this transformation about. It simply informs us of what needs to happen; the letter of the law kills us. It helps us die to self – to our own means of seeking self-justification. Yet dying to self is not the last word on the human condition. There is another word – the work of the Spirit. Echoing Paul, Augustine asserts that we experience new life and resurrection only through the Spirit.

What characterizes this resurrection experience – this gift of the Spirit? While clarifying in chapter thirteen the distinction between the letter that kills and the spirit that gives life, he states that the Spirit enables us to hear the law not as a menacing command, but rather as a divine gift.

What the difference between them is, I will briefly explain. What the law of works enjoins by menace, that the law of faith secures by faith. The one says, “Thou shalt not covet”; the other says, “When I perceived that nobody could be continent, except God gave it to him; and that this was the very point of wisdom, to know whose gift she was; I approached unto the Lord, and I besought Him.” This indeed is the very wisdom which is called piety, in which is worshipped “the Father of lights, from whom is every best giving and perfect gift.” This worship, however, consists in the sacrifice of praise and giving of thanks, so that the worshipper of God boasts not in himself, but in Him. Accordingly, by the law of works, God says to us, Do what I command thee; but by the law of faith we say to God, Give me what Thou commandest. Now this is the reason why the law gives its command,—to admonish us what faith ought to do, that is, that he to whom the command is given, if he is as yet unable to perform it, may know what to ask for; but if he has at once the ability, and complies with the command, he ought also to be aware from whose gift the ability comes. “For we have received not the spirit of this world,” says again that most constant preacher of grace, “but the Spirit which is of God, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.”

Conversion entails a change in one’s perception of God and of God’s action in one’s life. According to Augustine, the Spirit reveals what one cannot discover on one’s own: that one’s own transformation – one’s death and rebirth are themselves gifts of a gracious God. The Spirit’s internal movements enable the Christian to live in a new manner, i.e. without a self-centered focus. Experiencing the Spirit’s presence is itself confirmation of this new life and is an expression of divine grace. Later at the end of this same chapter, Augustine continues to make his point more explicit:

Now, having duly considered and weighed all these circumstances and testimonies, we conclude that a man is not justified by the precepts of a holy life, but by faith in Jesus Christ,—in a word, not by the law of works, but by the law of faith; not by the letter, but by the spirit; not by the merits of deeds, but by free grace.


Any human goodness – including a free will – is itself a gift of the Spirit. The faithful Christian life is never characterized by adherence to the particular moral code – whether divinely revealed or not – as the Pelagians asserted, but rather is manifested in the trust one places in God’s grace. Such trust and gratitude are what God expects – not a frantic striving for one’s own justification. Instead Christians should humbly acknowledge the human condition and entrust their lives and futures to God’s care. In the next chapter, Augustine writes about this new life or consciousness that arises in the moment when one gives up all efforts to justify one’s self and instead honestly acknowledges one’s sinful nature.

It is evident, then, that the oldness of the letter, in the absence of the newness of the spirit, instead of freeing us from sin, rather makes us guilty by the knowledge of sin. Whence it is written in another part of Scripture, “He that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow,”—not that the law is itself evil, but because the commandment has its good in the demonstration of the letter, not in the assistance of the spirit; and if this commandment is kept from the fear of punishment and not from the love of righteousness, it is servilely kept, not freely, and therefore it is not kept at all. For no fruit is good which does not grow from the root of love. If, however, that faith be present which worketh by love, then one begins to delight in the law of God after the inward man, and this delight is the gift of the spirit, not of the letter; even though there is another law in our members still warring against the law of the mind, until the old state is changed, and passes into that newness which increases from day to day in the inward man, whilst the grace of God is liberating us from the body of this death through Jesus Christ our Lord.

43 Augustine expands Paul’s understanding of freedom. True freedom is that bondage to God’s will. Consider the following statement from page 106 (chapter 30) of “On the Spirit and the Letter.”

Do we then by grace make void free will? God forbid! Nay, rather we establish free will. For even as the law by faith, so free will by grace, is not made void, but established. For neither is the law fulfilled except by free will: but by the law is the knowledge of sin, by faith the acquisition of grace against sin, by grace the healing of the soul from the disease of sin, by the health of the soul freedom of will, by free will the love of righteousness, by love of righteousness the accomplishment of the law. Accordingly, as the law is not made void, but is established through faith, since faith procures grace whereby the law is fulfilled; so free will is not made void through grace, but is established, since grace cures the will whereby righteousness is freely loved. Now all the stages which I have here connected together in their successive links, have severally their proper voices in the sacred Scriptures. The law says: “Thou shalt not covet.” Faith says: “Heal my soul, for I have sinned against Thee.” Grace says: “Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.” Heath says: “O Lord my God, I cried unto Thee, and Thou hast healed me.” Free will says: “I will freely sacrifice unto Thee.” Love of righteousness says: “Transgressors told me pleasant tales, but not according to Thy law, O Lord.”

Instead of worrying about what to do in order to secure God’s acceptance, Christians can simply love God for God’s graciousness and choose to thank God for this grace by serving their neighbors. Having been given this ability to love God, they no longer need to seek out self-preservation; they have come to realize that such efforts are not only ineffectual, but impossible. For Augustine, new life in the Spirit offers an entirely different motivation and focus in life.

It is therefore apparent what difference there is between the old covenant and the new,—that in the former the law is written on tables, while in the latter on hearts; so that what in the one alarms from without, in the other delights from within; and in the former man becomes a transgressor through the letter that kills, in the other a lover through the life-giving spirit. We must therefore avoid saying, that the way in which God assists us to work righteousness, and “works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure,” is by externally addressing to our faculties precepts of holiness; for He gives His increase internally, by shedding love abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given to us.45

Clearly, Augustine continues to use Paul’s imagery of death and resurrection; it remains for him the central narrative of Christian existence. Consequently, the primary task of Christian theology and Christian living consists of interpreting and living out this narrative in meaningful ways. Augustine creatively expands upon Paul’s original imagery. Making use of visualizations, he repeatedly encourages his audience to develop a spirituality of death and resurrection.

These themes become readily apparent upon reading John Peter Kenney’s The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions. Kenney demonstrates that Augustine’s Confessions develop a specifically Christian form of contemplation, which is grounded in the Pauline narrative and which serves as an alternative to other contemplative devotional practices of the day, particularly those proposed by Neo-Platonic philosophers and theologians. Kenney takes great pains to remind his readers of the challenge posed to catholic Christianity by the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus and Porphory. Neo-Platonism was not only a philosophical school, but also a sophisticated

and systematic theology, complete with accompanying spiritual practices. The goal of Neo-Platonic religion was union with the divine. This aim was achieved by practicing a particular type of mystical devotion in which the individual sought to ascend to the undivided One.

Augustine acknowledges in his *Confessions* having not only read the works of the [Neo-] Platonists, but also having adopted some of their ideas and practiced certain of their spiritual techniques. Throughout his lifetime, he accepted many of the traditional tenets of Greek anthropology. For example, he conceived of the human being as a tripartite creature, consisting of body, spirit (imagination), and intellect. Corresponding to each of these three faculties was an accompanying type of vision. In Book Twelve of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine writes,

> We experience three kinds of vision: one through the eyes, by which we see the letters, a second through the spirit, by which we think of our neighbor even when he is absent; and a third through an intuition of the mind, by which we see and understand love itself.46

Since he held the intellect to be the highest human faculty, Augustine understood contemplative devotion to be a form of intellectual vision – an exercise of the mind’s intuition of reality’s true nature.47 However, his own contemplation revealed to him something other than that which had been promised by Plotinus and his followers.48 Instead of achieving union with the One, Augustine experienced a gaping chasm between the divine and human realms. His intellectual vision revealed to him the depth of his alienation from God. Kenney explains Augustine’s vision in the following fashion.

> …Raised up to a level of reality not its own, the soul simultaneously and forcefully grasps both the eternal being of God and the contingency of its own existence. Thus the shock of contemplation proceeds as much [from]

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48 Other forms of Christian spirituality would return to this Plotinian ideal.
the recognition of the soul’s fundamental distance from God as from the disclosure of being itself. And so the essential nature of contemplation for the pilgrim soul consists paradoxically both of dissimilarity and association...[contemplation is] profoundly disquieting, exhibiting the soul’s state as a contingent and fallen being. Yet there is reassurance here as well, as the soul discerns the voice of God calling at its depth. The God who calls from afar is also attentive to the soul’s plight. Contemplation is thus represented according to a different theistic grammar than that of Plotinus. Augustine succeeds in discovering a God of Being and of Love, whose existence he will never be able thereafter to doubt. It is upon this critical insight – catalyzed by the books of the Platonists – that the subsequent theological narrative will be constructed.49

This contemplative vision exposes one to God’s reality – to God’s transcendent immanence - a reality which reorients one’s life towards God. Such a reorientation is both a death – of all former ways of seeing things, and a rebirth – of a new existence lived consciously aware of God’s presence and significance in one’s own life. As Kenney describes Augustine’s critique of the Plotinian ascent, he accentuates the Pauline roots of Augustine’s thought.

When Augustine speaks of failure in Book Seven, it is neither a failure at contemplation nor a failure to reach an ecstatic state of consciousness. It is rather a curious lack discovered in the very success of contemplation that troubles him. The pilgrim soul recognizes that knowledge of the intelligible is ultimately disappointing, for it does not, in fact, lead to the soul’s transcendent stability. Augustine presents this Pauline thesis quite clearly in Book Seven and in doing so exhibits an accurate grasp of contemplation as taught by the Plotinian school. Contemplation is both cognitive and salvific: that is the Plotinian view. For Augustine, contemplation is only cognitive in its significance. The failure uncovered in Book Seven is not an inability to achieve ecstasy, to reproduce a Plotinian state; rather it is a disappointment at the contemplative achievement itself. For contemplation, in laying out the transcendent cosmos behind the manifest world, fails to recover the soul’s fixed connection to that world. Only a mediator can do that for the Augustinian soul. This Pauline proposition is set out in the narrative as part of the pilgrim’s own recognition, as he grows in his understanding of that transcendent world first manifest at VII.x (16).50

Kenney’s most cogent insight is his rediscovery of the Augustinian link between contemplation and confession. Becoming aware of not only God’s presence and reality,


but also of human temporality and sinfulness establishes a certain relationship between the individual and God – that of confession. Confession is the second and requisite part of Christian contemplation, for it is the humble acknowledgement of the individual’s standing before God.\textsuperscript{51} To confess is to cast aside the primary sin of pride – of attributing to ourselves that which belongs to God alone and of practicing humility instead, i.e. putting ourselves in our proper place.

The act of confession, the daily recognition of the soul’s precarious and unceasing struggle for salvation, becomes for Augustine an integral and necessary element in the practice of contemplation. Contemplation is to be reformed by confession, restructured to conform to what Augustine believes is a Pauline conception of the human soul. His public confession is part of this continuing task of personal moral renewal, the effort to remove the “weight” which continues to hold him, his unresolved will to sin...A Christian revision of contemplation, a blending of spiritual ascension with continual confession, becomes the central task of the later books of the \textit{Confessions}. Augustine is at once engaged in retrospective analysis of his past life, and also reconsidering the role of contemplation in his present life as a baptized Christian. He recognizes that he still has limited knowledge of God, and surprisingly of himself. The inwardsness of contemplation has uncovered much that is opaque, in particular the darkness of his prevailing spiritual nature. But this aspect of the self, now known only to God, may one day be revealed; in the meantime only confession will suffice...\textsuperscript{52}

...confession is a distinctively Christian practice – admission of the fallen and culpable state of the soul, recognition of the reality of God’s presence, and finally, submission to the saving power of Christ. Contemplation serves to prepare for this practice, giving visionary insight, certitude, and even momentary association. But contemplation is only completed by confession. Contemplation without confession is futile and empty. But with it, contemplation offers the beginning of Christian hope that the soul will find the ‘home of bliss.’\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} Kenney, \textit{The Mysticism of Saint Augustine}. On page 137, Kenney summarizes this as a process involving ten differing aspects: 1) The truth of transcendence, of a realm outside space, time, and change, known indubitably by the soul through interior reflection 2) The shallowness of the soul, its lack of metaphysical depth, its complete embodiment within the world of space and time. 3) The soul’s consequent inability to achieve a sustained transcendence, to raise itself out of the lower world. 4) The necessity of divine assistance to effect the soul’s transcendence and to draw the soul above its embodied station. 5) The momentary, limited, and extraordinary nature of this excursion. 6) The difference between contemplative transcendence and salvation. 7) The omnipresence of divine consciousness and God’s manifest regard for the soul. 8) The soul’s conferred capacity to enter into the heavenly consciousness of the saints, a mediated consciousness of God, and an intimation of the final state of the soul. 9) A state of unmediated contact with an aspect of God, the divine Wisdom, but not union with God as a whole or absorption into God. 10) The ecclesial and communal context for the continued practice of contemplation.

\textsuperscript{52} Kenney. \textit{The Mysticism of Saint Augustine}, 96-97.

Contemplation followed by confession represents not a onetime event, but a process which is to be repeatedly continually. It serves as a regular, personal reminder and reassertion of the Pauline narrative of death and rebirth. According to Kenney, Augustine affirmed with Paul that humans are inherently unable to save themselves, incapable of doing what they know to be right. Kenney describes Augustine’s assessment of the human dilemma as follows.

The imperfection of the soul is not found in its lack of knowledge of reality, but in its inability to act upon the divine truth it knows. Its carnal desires are both sicknesses within the soul and a dissemblance before the truth. This is the prevalent character of the human condition, eradicable except through divine mercy.54

As in On the Spirit and the Letter, Augustine affirms in his Confessions that divine mercy becomes accessible to the Christian through the ministrations of the Holy Spirit. Not only does the Spirit enable the Christian to do what s/he previously could not, but it is the Spirit’s presence in the Christian’s life which enables him/her to visualize his/her existence in new ways.

…Christian contemplation, far from being an autonomous act of the pilgrim self, is actually a result of the indwelling of the Spirit of God. It is not the exercise of a native capacity discovered within the soul; it is directly the expression of divine reflection…The world can only be properly valued when it is understood to be as it is seen by God: as a direct product of God under his continual observation. This is the initial stage of contemplation, now understood to be a direct participation in the divine intellect’s knowing of created being.55

Seeing ourselves as God sees us both kills us and gives us new life. By means of this new vision of ourselves, we gain the humility and gratefulness that precludes any human striving and which is the very essence of confession.

Thus, although Augustine denies the outcome of Plotinian visions, he continues to make use of visualizations as a good and perhaps even necessary form of Christian

54 Kenney. The Mysticism of Saint Augustine, 102.
55 Kenney. The Mysticism of Saint Augustine, 106.
spirituality. According to Augustine, the personal experience of the presence of a holy and transcendent God who both judges and forgives, who kills and makes alive serves as the existential grounding of the Pauline narrative in an individual’s life. Through this experience of the otherness of God, the Christian finds hope and purpose. In the following selection from *On the Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine speaks of the importance of contemplation for comprehending and experiencing Christian life.

…This is life eternal, that they may know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.” And with this knowledge, this vision, this contemplation, shall the desire of their soul be satisfied; for it shall be enough for it to have this and nothing else,—there being nothing more for it to desire, to aspire to, or to require…

So what is Augustine’s final verdict on Christian contemplation? It must be grounded in the biblical narrative, in Paul’s narrative of death and resurrection. Kenney summarizes Augustine’s view nicely.

In Augustine’s depiction this first ascension phase of contemplation is limited in duration, largely uninvited, and not reliably catalyzed by any specific discipline or practice. For Augustine contemplative vision is brief, veridical, and rare.

That is because its value largely depends upon the second phase of contemplation, as the soul returns to itself and reflects upon what it has discerned. Here the larger meaning of contemplation emerges. For the process of opening up the significance of ascension is, for Augustine, its real purpose. That is why the final books of the *Confessions* are so important and integral to the ascension narratives. It is when the contemplative soul searches ‘the stomach of its mind,’ its memory, that it comes to understand the larger context of what it has seen intellectually. It comes to realize why its touch of divine Wisdom could not endure. And it knows too how shallow it is, how fragile is its hold on virtue, how it does not belong in essence to the transcendental. Then it can discern the inchoate longing within itself that had driven it to this moment of vision, and what love had been calling it. Then the conditions for the accomplishment of its initial visionary ascension are fully discerned, and a new representation of reality disclosed. Perhaps most importantly, the soul then discovers that it is a creature which has become immediately aware of the author of its being and the sole source of its salvation. In this it has been brought through vision to confession. That, in the end, is the real value of contemplation. This second phase of contemplation dovetails then with the quotidian tasks of Christian life. It returns the soul to the routine religious practices of life in a transient world, chastened by its understanding of its fallen state but ennobled by the surety of its knowledge. It returns it to the

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path of salvation, for the limitations of contemplation have been disclosed to it, and it is without presumption. The worth of those dramatic episodes of visionary disclosure is only secured by confession of the soul’s trust in God. They only matter because they can lead the fallen soul to renew its relationship of love with God. For Augustine that is the paradox of contemplation.57

Thus, nearly four hundred years after the time of Paul, Augustine continued to accentuate and stress Paul’s narrative and spirituality. Writing against the Pelagians and the Neo-Platonists, he strove to show why their thought and practices come up wanting. Nearly a thousand years later, Johannes Tauler would continue to explore and explicate this same Pauline narrative.

**Contemplation in Johannes Tauler’s *Sermons***

The fourteenth-century Dominican preacher and spiritual director, Johannes Tauler (c. 1300-1361), was a disciple of Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) and an acquaintance of Heinrich Suso (1295-1366).58 Tauler and Suso were noted leaders within the Friends of God (*amici Dei*) movement that arose in Basle between 1339 and 1343. Though not an officially recognized order, the popular group consisted of men and women from all ranks of society, both lay and religious, who sought to cultivate a disciplined life of inner devotion.59 Both the outbreak of plague and the development of the burgher class contributed to the growth of this spiritual impulse. Especially adept at addressing and interpreting the contemporary context to people of all classes, Tauler was a talented preacher and teacher.

As a spiritual director, as a teacher of both his Order and his town and class, he represented the new spirituality that developed dialectically parallel or even away from the monastically based asceticism. It ran

parallel to early forms of social individualism while at the same time transcending community-based aspirations and attitudes of a late medieval town and its population.  

Although many works have been attributed to Tauler, most scholars regard only his sermons as unquestionably authentic. They were first printed in Leipzig in 1498 and reprinted in Augsburg in 1505. In 1543, Petrus Canisius, the first German Jesuit, edited Tauler’s sermons and in 1548, Laurentius Surius, a Carthusian living in Cologne, translated them into Latin, bringing Tauler’s works to the attention of the broader Western church.

Tauler’s writing was relatively free of either polemics or dogmatic apologetics even though he spoke out against Brethren of the Free Spirit and Beghards. He often confronted persons with their own particular vices and discouraged them from judging others. Surius described Tauler’s style and spirituality in the following manner.

…[Tauler] never tires to encourage all, as strongly as possible, in the love of God and neighbor…he exhorts them to eradicate vice, to be attentive to their innermost ground, to strive for virtue and to deny their self-will and inordinate desires…he invites them to imitate Christ by taking up His Cross and following Him humbly but faithfully in spite of many obstacles and mortifications; until finally the soul becomes so united to Him as to be one spirit with Him, in a most wondrous way. All this is nothing else but loving God with heart and soul and mind, with all one’s strength, and one’s neighbor as oneself.

His sermons have often been categorized as “mystical” because of Tauler’s use of terms like “the ground of being”, “the divine abyss” or “divinization,” but this characterization can be misleading. To begin, Tauler’s audiences did not consist solely of 

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61 Haas, “Preface,” xiv. According to LW 48, 36 n. 16, John Lang and Luther studied together a 1508 Augsburg edition of Tauler’s sermons during the summer and fall of 1516. Haas claims the Jesuits banned Tauler in 1518; this is incorrect because the Jesuits weren’t given papal approval until 1540.


63 Josef Schmidt, “Introduction,” 6. In 1590, the Belgian Capuchins banned them and Pope Sixtus V temporarily placed them on the Roman Index.

select groups of contemplatives, but rather of a wide assortment of Christians from all stations of life. According to Schmidt, Tauler’s “main merit lies in elucidating and transforming mystical concepts of the vita contemplativa into the domain of the vita activa and publica.” For Tauler, contemplation was not intended to be merely an exercise for those who had withdrawn from the world, but rather a means for all Christians to live in and for the sake of the world. Tauler also understood that his vocabulary and teaching were consonant with the mainstream of Western spiritual teaching, and not just the mystical masters. For example, in the following passage, Tauler makes note of Augustine’s vocabulary.

Give yourself entirely to God, enter, and hide the hidden ground of your spirit, as Augustine calls it, in the hiddenness of the divine abyss.

Tauler’s message deviated considerably from that of his teacher, Meister Eckhart. Whereas Eckhart aspired in Plotinian fashion to achieving union with the Godhead, Tauler built instead on Augustinian contemplation and confession. Rather than emphasizing ecstasy and rapture as the ultimate ideal, Tauler emphasized Gelassenheit, i.e. the tranquility or contentment that comes after experiencing the soul’s separation from God.

…Tauler does not speak from the vantage point of eternity, as does “the noble Master” Eckhart. He takes a position between two extreme points, which are time and eternity. The experience which arises from such a state is one of anguish: “So this poor man feels as if he were suspended between two walls, as if there were no room for him neither here nor there.” Thus suspended between heaven and earth he now experiences sublimity and humility, knowledge and non-knowledge, security and

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65 While some of his sermons were evidently directed towards nuns within a convent, he ended most of his sermons with a phrase like “May God help us all to do this.”


68 Either of these two terms is a better translation of the term than is detachment. Tauler goes so far as to suggest that Christ himself had experienced and modeled this approach to spirituality and living, for he had experienced both the agony and ecstasy of human existence; he spoke both of being one with the Father and abandoned by God.
insecurity, peace in spirit but not in nature, imagelessness and the world of images. Although this in-between dimension causes grave anguish, it also includes the possibility of breaking through. Faith, hope, and love, above all detachment, bring about progress within the two fixed points.”

Haas goes on to point out that to Tauler the imitation of Christ’s passion and suffering was of central importance. It is only through suffering the death of the self that the Christian can hope of sharing in Christ’s resurrection life.

Thus, the decisive difference between Tauler and Eckhart has been established. It is the imitation of Christ, placing an emphasis on His humanity never to be abrogated, which makes His passion and suffering the sole model to be followed. Not that the Areopagitic and Neoplatonic language of apophasis is absent in Tauler. However, without shunning ecstasy, it only occupies the rank of an ascending movement toward God, to which corresponds paradoxically a descending movement, marked by humility and self-knowledge, as a concrete force of self-expropriation. Thus this spirituality is characterized by a decisive paradox: it is a mysticism of ascent to the same degree as it is mysticism of descent… Whoever wishes with St. Paul (2 Cor 3:18) “to be transformed into His very image from glory to glory,” has to undertake the labor of the night; light is combined with darkness in such a way that one seems to condition the other. Here we are not dealing with an empty dialectic but with a paradox grounded in the concrete experience of the passion and suffering of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, Tauler knows of no mystical leap from an incarnate to a spiritual Christ, but remarks categorically: “No one can pass beyond the example set to us by Our Lord Jesus Christ.”…Owing to this Christian penetration of the entire Neoplatonic Mysticism of Ascent, all religious modes and strategies of man have been anticipated and suspended in the concept of God’s self-kenosis and incarnation…the experience of the “infinite dissimilarity between man and God” is congruous with that other which arises from interior discord, allowing the harmony to appear all the more suitable and profound.

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...Tauler, if we read him correctly, did not experience that ultimate union which so many of his contemporaries professed to have achieved. Why, then, the incessant homiletic attempt to transmit what the spiritual counselor himself has not seen: union with and in God? It is here that Tauler moves beyond Eckhart along his own path...By clearly designating the ultimate state of being into an eschatological time and an infinite space, Tauler develops the concept of faith as nonexperience, as the recognition of human limitation. In many of his sermons he refers to a traditional stage of mystical experience: the night of desolation, isolation, and utter desertedness. He then goes on to assert that because he and others do not come into this experience during earthly life, their faith carries the Church. Nonexperience is thus thematized as mystic faith expressed in faithful preaching.
The Augustinian features of Tauler’s approach to Christian contemplation and spirituality are readily noticeable throughout his sermons. For example, in Sermon One [Christmas] Tauler begins by affirming the classic tripartite division of the human soul and explains sin in typical Augustinian fashion as a turning from the eternal towards the temporal and sensible.71

The soul has three faculties, and in these it is the true image of the Blessed Trinity – memory, understanding, and free will. With their aid, the soul is able to grasp God and to partake of Him, so that it becomes capable of receiving all that God is and can bestow. They enable the soul to contemplate eternity, for the soul is created between time and eternity. With its highest part it touches eternity, whereas with its lowest part – that of the sensible and animal powers – it is bound up with time. Now because of the way these two powers are intertwined (due to the fall), the soul has turned toward time and temporal things. Accordingly, transitory things come easily to the soul, and it tends to love itself in them, thus turning to time and away from eternity.72

He also describes this turning towards the eternal as a new birth, a birth that will first require the death of the Christian’s old way of life. Tauler, like Paul and Augustine, conceives of the death of the self in terms of the renunciation of one’s own will. In the following passage, Tauler quotes Augustine as an authority on the matter.

71 Tauler expands his Augustinian anthropology in Sermon 59 [Exaltation of the Cross II] on pages 167-168. While again suggesting that human beings are composed of three beings, he alters his definitions somewhat [in a manner reminiscent of Plato.]

If a man wishes to surrender himself to God, he should first rid himself, in a spiritual way, of every trace of self-will. Man is in a certain sense three men: an animal man who lives according to his senses, a rational man, and finally the highest man in the form of God, deiform. It is on this highest level that we should turn to God and, prostrate before the divine abyss, abandon ourselves completely and become captives of divine love…

It is interesting to note that Tauler mentions a debt of gratitude to Plato and the Neo-Platonic philosopher, Proclus, on more than one occasion, stating that they were already familiar with the ground of the soul. He also speaks of Augustine’s own commendation of the pagan philosophers as well. See page 149.

72 Tauler, “Sermon 1 [Christmas],” in Johannes Tauler Sermons, 37-38. Tauler does an even more creative job of speaking of this tendency to turn inward in Sermon 27 [Pentecost III] when exploring Jesus’ imagery of thieves breaking into the sheepfold in John 10:1. Tauler writes on page 100: “And who is the thief who steals there? It is a treacherous thorn in human nature, an abominable parasite; it is man’s despicable tendency to seize everything, to refer everything to himself, to grasp what he can from God and creatures. Such a man is full of self-will and will do anything to satisfy his own greed. It gives him the illusion that he is all-powerful…” Luther makes use of similar terminology when he using the terminology incurvatus in se.
We can see now that a reversal must necessarily take place if such a birth is to occur...Moreover, should a going forth, an elevation beyond and above ourselves ever come about, then we must renounce our own will, desire, and worldly activity, so that we can orient ourselves single-mindedly toward God, and meet Him only in complete abandonment of self...In regard to this Saint Augustine said: “Pour out that you may be filled, go out of yourself, so that you may enter.” And in another passage he comments: “Noble soul, sublime creature, why are you seeking Him outside yourself when He dwells wholly, truly, and purely within you? Why do you, a partaker of divine nature, busy yourself with what is creaturely?” If the ground in the depth of the soul has been prepared by man, then, without doubt, God must fill it wholly, or sooner the heavens would burst and fill the void. Still less does God leave anything empty, so contrary is this to His nature and to His ordinance.73

In Sermon Five [Feast of Epiphany II], Tauler speaks in more detail about the death of the self. He begins by suggesting that God has need of only one thing: to find the human soul prepared for God to do God’s own eternal work in it. This happens only after the soul has purged itself of itself. Building upon the language of the biblical text, “Surge et illuminare, Ierusalem”, Tauler consequently encourages his audience to nurture an internal longing for more than finite existence.

What, then ought we to do so that God may shine forth in this very sweet ground of the soul and perform His work there? We should rise, “surge.” The text says arise, which implies an active consent. Man must do his part and rise from everything that is not God, away from himself and all created things. And as he rises, the depth of his soul is seized by a powerful longing to be denuded and freed from everything that separates it from God. And the more he leaves behind all that is finite, the stronger his longing grows, it transcends itself, and when this denuded ground is touched, the desire often overflows into flesh and blood and bone.74

In Sermon 27 [Pentecost III], Tauler offers an even more creative image to describe how the Christian should actively seek to kill his/her own selfish inclinations. After exploring Christ’s metaphor of the thieves and robbers who try to break into the sheepfold, Tauler suggests that the Christian learn to see him/herself as the very thief who keeps him/herself from experiencing and delighting in God. The thief is our human presumption and the robber is our tendency to judge others more harshly than ourselves.


74 Tauler, “Sermon 5 [Feast of Epiphany II],” 46.
Tauler proclaims how beneficial it would be if the robber within us (this tendency towards judgment) were to discover the thief within us (the tendency towards presumption) and that in the midst of a scuffle, they would kill one another!

If a man would only look inward and be himself the robber, what judgment he would then make of himself with a sharp and discerning eye! Soon the robber will discover the thief lurking in the depth, this harmful presumption which has deprived and still is depriving the soul of God, and of His spirit, His grace and that treasure which contains all riches in itself. This thief is now brought to trial before the robber who accuses him of his grave crime; whereupon the robber captures the thief and puts him to death. If only it could happen now, as it often does, that each stabbed the other and both were dead, if the robber and the thief were slain together. What a greatly salutary event that would be! Then all judgments would die and be lost in God, in His will, in His ground, in whichever way He would choose. This would be true and essential peace, if thief and robber both lay dead.

Such a man would be blessed and would enter the sheepfold by the right door. The Doorkeeper would let him enter straight into the abyss of the Father. There he would come and go at will, finding rich pasture everywhere. He would be plunged into the depth of the Godhead in unfathomable bliss, and emerge again into a new humanity which has been divinized by Christ, in deep joy and sweet rejoicing…

In Sermon Forty [Fifth Sunday after Trinity I], Tauler seeks to explain the Christian’s existential experience of contemplation and confession. Taking his lead again from Augustine, Tauler suggests that Christian existence is a process characterized by three stages. At first, the Christian experiences a closeness to God. This is followed, however, by a period in which the soul feels abandoned by God and endures a dark night of the soul. During this time, the Christian dies to all previous conceptions of God and denies all past experience. Finally, in the third stage the Christian experiences a rebirth as his/her life is united with God in a new mode of being.

It is time now to speak of the three stages [in the mystical life], a lowest, a middle, and a highest stage. The first stage, a life of spirituality and virtue, brings us close to God’s presence, and in order to attain this, we must turn completely to the wonderful works of God and to the manifestations of the ineffable gifts which overflow from God’s hidden goodness. From this derives a state of soul named “jubilatio”. The second stage is spiritual poverty, when in a strange manner God withdraws

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Himself from the soul, leaving it anguished and denuded. The third stage is the transition into a divinized life, into a union of our created spirit with God’s uncreated one. This we may call a true transformation of the whole being…

Although Tauler’s praise for this third stage is obvious, he also admits that it continues to be bound by certain limitations, which must be acknowledged and humbly accepted. While he conceives of stage three as a rebirth, Tauler is insistent on not viewing this ascension as a human achievement. On the contrary, it is and will ever remain a gift of God’s grace. God is the one who raises up, who gives the revelation, who heals and brings peace.

For when our Lord has prepared a man’s soul by such intolerable trials – and they are a better preparation than any pious devotion – He then comes and raises the soul to the highest stage. And here our Lord gives him new eyes to see and reveals to him the truth. Now the sun rises in bright splendor and lifts the soul above all its former afflications. Such a person is returned from death to life. He is led out of himself and enters into Him, the Lord. And now God compensates him for all his anguish and heals him of all his wounds. He raises him from a human to a divine mode of being, from sorrow into a divine peace, in which man becomes so divinized that everything which he is and does, God is and does in him. Such a person is raised so far above any natural mode that he truly becomes by grace what God is essentially by nature. In this state, man feels himself lost in God. He neither knows nor feels nor experiences his former self; he knows only God’s simple essence.

Beloved, to have attained this state is truly to have reached the deepest depth of humility, for in this state we have been brought to nothing. It surpasses our powers of comprehension, for here we have reached the most perfect knowledge of our own nothingness. Deeper than this we cannot penetrate into the depth of humility, and the deeper we sink, the higher we rise, for height and depth are here identical.

For Tauler, as for Augustine, this experience of death and resurrection is not a single event, but rather a progressive revelation – a process repeated again and again. The more one dies to one’s self, the more of the divine life God will reveal to him/her.

...And as He seeks us, this entire process has to be repeated again and again. All the concepts we have ever formed of Him, all manifestations and revelations, will be turned upside down while He

76 Tauler, “Sermon 40 [Fifth Sunday after Trinity I],” 141.
77 Tauler, “Sermon 40 [Fifth Sunday after Trinity I],” 143-144.
searches for us. And if our nature could endure this reversal, day and night, a thousand times over, and if we could suffer it and surrender to it, then this would be more salutary than all the understanding and all the spiritual sweetness we have tasted up to this moment. Such a reversal, if we submit to it utterly, will lead a man infinitely higher than all the good works and spiritual exercises and endeavors he had devised for himself.\textsuperscript{78}

So how does a Christian best learn how to die to self? According to Tauler, s/he does it by engaging in regular and specific contemplative devotions. In Sermon Thirty-Nine [Fourth Sunday after Trinity II], he recommends to his audience some particular focal points for contemplation devotion.

Each time, then, when God calls you to the great feast of interior contemplation, boldly omit any external practice of piety which hinders it, because your interior life is a divine life, filled with the sweetest delectation. Let your meditation feed on any consideration which induces love: Our Lord’s Humanity, His Passion, His sacred wounds, the divine Godhead, the Blessed Trinity, God’s omnipotence, wisdom, and mercy, or all His goodness toward yourself. Whatever it is that most inspires you, give thanks for it, and let it carry you into the depth of the soul, into its inmost ground, and there await your God. Such an exercise, performed with love, enables us to receive God far more than external devotions ever could. The more inward a devotion is, the better it is: for the external always derives its power from the internal.\textsuperscript{79}

What is particularly interesting about these suggestions is the latitude that Tauler grants to each individual Christian. He does not prescribe specific exercises, but rather gives his audience the freedom to reflect upon their own personalities. Whatever inspires them and moves them towards love – should be seen as a proper motivation. He acknowledges that people’s external actions are always moved by their internal values. Consequently, he believes that cultivating the proper internal motivation is more important than performing

\textsuperscript{78} Tauler, “Sermon 37 [Third Sunday after Trinity III],” 126-127.

\textsuperscript{79} Tauler, “Sermon 39 [Fourth Sunday after Trinity II],” 132. In Sermon 33 [Feast of Corpus Christi IV] on page 109, Tauler speaks of feeding on Christ in another fashion: in the Eucharist. Once again referring to Augustine, he writes,

All the exercises of piety which man can perform by his own powers are as nothing compared with it; godly they may be, but this sacrament is God Himself; in it man is transformed in God by grace, as Saint Augustine was told by Our Lord. “You shall not change me into yourself, but into Me you shall be changed.”
acts of piety. In light of this belief, Tauler often criticizes those who seek to define their Christian accomplishments in Pelagian fashion, i.e. by defining their spirituality in terms of their own strength, power, and desires. In particular, Tauler is often hard on the religious orders of his day. Throughout his sermons, he speaks out against the laxity and/or pride that he often observed in convents and monasteries. He believes that they were filled with people who preferred to study and speculate on Scripture, choosing their own techniques, rather than to follow the humble example of Christ himself. Instead of being spiritual giants, Tauler accused them of being frauds.

Their peace is a fraudulent one, for by keeping their own counsel they have not arisen and God cannot therefore work in them. They have to abandon their presumptions and arrogant ways and begin the strenuous work of self-denial, following the steps of Our Lord Jesus Christ in humility and love. By dying to self they have to learn what it means to truly arise.

Not only was Tauler unwilling to privilege the religious simply on account of their profession, he often stated that the laity was just as capable of genuine devotion as any monk or nun. He writes in Sermon Five,

On the other hand, we encounter noble souls so steeped in truth that it shines forth in them. They permit God to prepare the ground, leaving themselves entirely to Him. By this act of self-surrender they refuse to cling to anything of their own, be it their works, their special devotions, what they undertake and what they leave aside. They accept all things from God in humble awe and refer them back to Him in total detachment, bowing lowly to the divine Will. Whatever God may send, they are well pleased to accept it...Whenever it is that He may deign to come with His divine illumination, they await Him with sweet patience.

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80 Early in his career, Luther espouses this same point of view. This is especially noticeable in his disdain for Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. He did not believe that actions lead to right values, but preferred Jesus’ saying that good trees bear good fruit.

81 Tauler, “Sermon 5 [Feast of Epiphany II],” 47.

82 See Tauler’s story of the ploughman. Tauler, “Sermon 47 [Tenth Sunday after Trinity],” 156.

83 Tauler, “Sermon 5 [Feast of Epiphany II],” 47. This parallels Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.
What sorts of conclusions can we draw about Tauler’s teachings? He continues in the tradition of Paul and Augustine. Dying to the self and rising to Christ continues to be for him the central metaphor of Christian existence. However, he does take several ideas further than Augustine had. Instead of seeing reason as the ultimate human faculty, Tauler sees it as the penultimate. As with Augustine, the senses constitute the lowest faculty. However, instead of understanding the imagination as a separate faculty, Tauler includes it with the sensory, since all the imagination can conceive of is based upon the experience of the senses themselves. Likewise, the rational is contingent upon the sensory. It provides us a way of organizing our sensory data and thoughts. Reason is not an independent authority. On the contrary, reason can keep us from experiencing God directly. For Tauler, the highest goal to which human beings can aspire is to transcend even the rational and to settle within the ground of being itself.

…Whoever wishes to discover this Kingdom – where God reigns with all His riches in His very essence and nature – he must look for it where it is: in the very depth of the soul, where God is infinitely closer to the soul, more inherent, as the soul is to itself.

This ground, however, must be sought, and it must be found. When we enter this house, everything that pertains to our sense perceptions must be left outside: all images and forms, everything which our imagination has ever acquired from the outside, all fantasies and rational distinctions, even discursive reason itself must be renounced. As soon as we enter our house to search for God there, God in His turn searches for us, and the house is turned upside down. He acts just the way we do when we search for something: throwing aside one thing after another, until we find what we are looking for…If God seeks us and turns this house upside down, all the modes and manners which have enabled us in the past to form a rational concept of Him must be abandoned, if He is going to take possession of this innermost ground. Everything must be reversed so radically as if we had never had any concept of God at all. And as He seeks us, this entire process has to be repeated again and again. All the concepts we have ever formed of Him, all manifestations and revelations, will be turned upside down while He searches for us. And if our nature could endure this reversal, day and night, a thousand times over, and if we could suffer it and surrender to it, then this would be more salutary than all the understanding and all the spiritual sweetness we have tasted up to this moment. Such a reversal, if we submit to it utterly, will lead a man infinitely higher than all the good works and spiritual exercises and endeavors he had devised for himself.84

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Tauler also continues to esteem humility as one of the preeminent Christian virtues. That Luther found continuity between Tauler, Augustine and Paul should come as no surprise. Neither should Luther’s comparison of Tauler’s sermons to *Eyn deutsch Theologia* in which on-going Augustinian themes are found as well.

**Contemplation in *Eyn deutsch Theologia***

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Luther stated in his prefaces to *Eyn deutsch Theologia* that the brief booklet served both as a summary of Tauler’s sermons as well as of Scripture itself. Having now summarized Paul, Augustine, and Tauler’s teachings on contemplation, it remains to consider Luther’s claim. How does the spirituality of *Eyn deutsch Theologia* build upon a Pauline / Augustinian / Taulerian foundation? It proposes that the Christian life should be understood primarily in terms of the death of the self and of the birth of a new self in and through Christ.

Interestingly, the work’s context has parallels to both Paul’s letter to the Galatians and Augustine’s anti-Pelagian writings in that it is directed against Brethren of the Free Spirit – just as Tauler’s *Sermons* were. The Free Spirits claimed to have direct, unmediated charismatic experiences of the divine. Consequently, they proclaimed that they were not subject to either church or scripture. The author of *Eyn deutsch Theologia*,

85 There seem to be criticisms of academic theologians in the text as well. In chapter nine, the Frankfurter considers the limitations of learning. He asserts that learning of good is of little or no benefit to the soul, because such knowledge remains outside of the soul. It does not transform it. Much to be preferred is the experience and presence of the good within the soul. See The Frankfurter, *The Book of the Perfect Life* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 39.

In short, happiness does not depend on any creature or creaturely work but solely on God and his works. This is why I ought to serve God and his work alone and abandon all creatures with all their works and, most of all, myself. Furthermore, all the works and wonders that God has performed or will perform in or through all creatures or that God himself has performed with all his goodness, as far as this exists and occurs outside me, will not make me happy, except in so far as they exist and occur in me and are understood, loved, felt, and savoured.

He returns to this theme in chapter nineteen, stating even more emphatically that no amount of study, skill or reason can bring one to Christ’s life. Only living Christ’s life will suffice.
otherwise known as “the Frankfurter,” seeks to refute these claims and to demonstrate how his own understanding of the Christian faith is not only the traditional one, but is faithful to the nature of reality – and to the human condition – itself. In making this assertion, he frequently references the writings of Paul, as well as the words of Christ, as his dominant authorities. Traces of Augustinian ideas are also present.

The work is organized around the following quotation from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “When the perfect comes, then one destroys the imperfect and what is in part.” Confessing that God is the only perfection, the Frankfurter states that everything else – all created things are imperfect and partial. However, God as the good cannot be reduced to any specific good. God is beyond all our human categories.

If God were something, this or that, then he would not be everything and beyond everything, as he actually is, and so he would not be true perfection. God therefore is, and at the same time is neither this nor that such as a creature as a creature can know or name, conceive or speak about. It follows that if God, in so far as he is good, were this good or that good, he would not be everything good and above everything good, and so he would not be the single and perfect good that he actually is.

Consequently, the goal of human existence is to reject the imperfect and partial in favor of the perfect. Christians should seek to understand, sense and savor the perfect within

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86 Around the halfway point of the treatise, the Frankfurter begins a systematic assault upon both the ideas and the spiritual practices of the Free Spirits. In chapter twenty-five, he speaks of two bad fruits that grow within them: spiritual pride and false freedom. They have become proud of their spiritual accomplishments and have presumptuously assumed that these feats have earned them the freedom to do as they please. In particular, they have declared themselves to be above and beyond the teachings, practices, and sacraments of the Church, as well as beyond the life and example of Christ. One might say he is leveling the charge of Pelagianism against them. He is equally harsh in his criticism of their belief that they can find a peace that is detached from the suffering of this world – that they can peacefully bask in God’s own perfection. The Frankfurter declares this to be a false peace, because in order to partake of God’s perfection, one needs to partake of human life as Christ did – through the experience of suffering. If Christ were unable to avoid suffering, then Christians must share the same fate. By denying their own need to follow the path of Christ in the perfection of their moral development, the free spirits have in actuality exhibited how far from God their truly are. See The Frankfurter, The Book of the Perfect Life, 48.

One should also note that in whatever people this true good is experienced, there also the life of Christ must be and remain until physical death. If anyone imagines otherwise, he is deceived, and if anyone says differently, he lies. Whatever person lacks the life of Christ, has never experienced the true good and the truth.

87 I Corinthians 13:10.

88 The Frankfurter, The Book of the Perfect Life, 63.
the soul. However, this can take place only when one dies to one’s self – to one’s own selfishness.

...For in whatever creature this perfect is to be understood, creatureliness, createdness, selfishness and selfhood must perish and become nothing. St. Paul’s words really have the following meaning: When the perfect comes, that is, when it is understood, then what is in part, that is, creatureliness, createdness, selfishness, selfhood, all that is me, must be totally rejected and regarded as nothing. As long as one holds and hangs on to any of this, the perfect is still not understood.”

In chapter two, the Frankfurter takes for granted an Augustinian definition of sin: sin equals selfishness – a turning inward away from God towards the self.

Scripture, faith and truth speak of sin as nothing but the creature’s turning away from what is unchangeably good and turning towards what is changeable, that is, turning from the perfect to what is in part and imperfect, and most of all to itself.

In the next chapter, he proposes another concept to help in defining sin’s core problem: presumption. He declares that one should not simply equate Adam’s original sin with eating an apple. On the contrary, it was Adam’s presumptuous assertion of “I”, “mine” and “me” which turned him again God.

It is said that because Adam ate the apple, he perished or fell. I maintain it was because of his presumption and his “I”, “mine”, “me” and so on. If he had eaten seven apples and the presumption had not occurred, he would not have fallen. Once the presumption occurred, he fell, whether or not he had ever eaten any apple.

All human beings continue to sin as they exercise their own presumption – as they continue to turn from God towards themselves. Like Augustine, the Frankfurter insists that turning back towards the perfect requires divine aid. However, he also asserts that God requires humanity in order to make this grace possible. Just as we are incapable of

doing anything without God’s aid, likewise God could not act without becoming human. For the Frankfurter, Christ’s incarnation was a logical necessity. In language and terminology reminiscent of Neo-Platonic philosophy, he states that because the One, i.e. God, is beyond time and incapable of interacting with us in any sort direct way, the One required human incarnation. By becoming human in Christ, God created a means by which humanity could see and comprehend God’s will.

Humankind was incapable of doing anything without God, and God could not act without humankind. Therefore God took on human nature or humanity and became human, and humankind became divine. This is how the making good happened.  

Just as God could not turn humanity back to God’s self without a concrete, individual manifestation of the divine, humanity cannot approach the divine en mass. Each individual must experience this turning back within his/her own life. Only as s/he empties him/herself and gives up his/her presumption will God fill him/her with divine life.

In this way too my fall must be made good. I cannot do it without God, and God does not or will not do it without me. For if it is to happen, God must become human in me so as to take on everything that is in me, both inwardly and outwardly, so that nothing at all remains in me that opposes God or hinders his works. If God took to himself everybody alive and became human in them and they were made divine in him, and if it did not happen in me, my fall and my turning away would never be made good, unless it happened in me too.

Returning to the language and imagery of Paul, he speaks in chapter fifteen of dying in Adam and of rising in Christ, taking the imagery to new heights. It is not merely that Christ did what Adam could not, but that the two of them exchanged their attributes.

Everything that perished and died in Adam, arose again in Christ and became alive. Everything that arose in Adam and became alive, perished in Christ and died. What, however, was and is that? I say it is true obedience and disobedience…Humanity was created for true obedience and owes it to God. This obedience perished and died in Adam and arose and became alive in Christ, and disobedience arose in Adam and lived and

died in Christ. In his humanity Christ was and existed entirely free from himself and so free from every created thing and was nothing but a house or dwelling place of God…If a person could possibly be so completely and purely lacking in selfhood and everything and were in true obedience, as Christ’s humanity was, that person would be without sin and indeed be one with Christ; that would be so by grace as Christ was by nature. People, say, however, that this cannot be so, and they also say no one is without sin. Whether or not this is so, it is still true that the nearer one is to obedience, the less the sin, and the further one is away, the greater the sin.95

In chapters four and five, the Frankfurter clarifies the Christian’s role in this exchange: s/he is to practice detachment. However, detachment should not be confused with apathetic passivity; it is not a matter of lacking desire or of simply allowing whatever happens to happen. True detachment consists of ceasing to lay claim to anything. Instead of declaring things to be one’s own possession, even one’s understanding, desire or will, the Christian should view everything as belonging to God and seek to manifest God’s will, desire, understanding, etc. in all that s/he does. Allowing God to live through one’s own life - this is the highest human end, and it can be accomplished only as one learns to die to one’s self. To do otherwise is to retain the presumptuous “I”, the “mine” and the “me”.96

In chapter fourteen, the author mentions three stages that lead to perfection: cleansing, enlightenment, and union. Although these three categories are often used to characterize the three basic stages of the mystical ascent, the Frankfurter does not make use of these categories in exactly this way.97

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96 The Frankfurter, *The Book of the Perfect Life*, 35. To assist his readers to better comprehend this notion of dying to self as well as to give them a contemplative aid, the Frankfurter proposes in chapter seven that they meditate on the metaphor of the two spiritual eyes. Human beings have two internal spiritual eyes. The right eye is turned towards eternity and the Godhead and the left eye towards this life in time. Attempting to keep a constant dual focus on both goals has proved impossible for all human beings except Christ. Only he was able to perfectly balance these two eyes. With his right eye he maintained a fixed gaze upon God which brought him perpetual joy and with the left he kept a fixed gaze upon the sin and imperfections of human existence which was for him a source of continual sorrow, for he saw our sins as God sees them. As imperfect human beings, we live most of our lives focused mainly on time with our left eye. Contemplation is the attempt to momentarily overcome this misplaced focus by temporarily favoring our right eye’s gaze upon God’s perfection, i.e. upon the good and true and perfect. Helping others to develop this right eye’s vision is one of the Frankfurter’s primary tasks in this treatise.

97 It is worth noting that he does not describe the same process as Tauler. See page 69 above.
support mystical ideals, he seems more interested in considering the actual realities of lived Christian existence. While union with God is the eventual goal of all Christians, the Frankfurter spends more time discussing how to properly cleanse oneself of sin. When referencing the more spiritually mature, he writes of “enlightened” souls rather than of souls who have achieved union with the divine. He describes the “enlightened” in a variety of ways.  

For example, in chapter twenty-six, he suggests that in opposition to the free spirits who are puffed up with spiritual pride and who revel in a false freedom, the enlightened exercise humility; they have found true freedom in following the way of Christ.

Indeed, everything previously said about poverty and humility is...proved and exemplified in the life of Christ and his words. For he practiced and perfected all the works of true humility, as one finds in his life, and he expresses it in these words: “Learn from me that I am kind have a humble heart” (Matthew 11:29)...Thus, indeed, one finds in the truth where God is man. But where Christ and his true followers are, that is where true, fundamental and spiritual humility and spiritual poverty and a submissive, inward-dwelling spirit have of necessity to be. That spirit will inwardly be full of secret, hidden sorrow and suffering up to the point of bodily death. Anyone who has a different idea is deceived and deceives others along with himself, as previously said. Thus, all nature and selfhood depart from this life and hold on to the false, separate life, as we said before.  

He also makes another intriguing claim in chapter ten about the enlightened: in their freedom they have lost any fear of hell or desire for heaven.

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98 In chapter thirty-nine, he distinguished between four types of persons, or one might say four approaches to spirituality. First there are those who do what they do because they feel forced to do so. Consequently, they do as little as possible and with a bad attitude. The second group does it does because it believes there is a reward to be earned. They define the holy person as one who does a large number of rewardable works. The third type is the person who imagine that they are perfect and not in need of any order, rules, etc. These are the free spirits. The fourth type is the truly enlightened. They do what they do out of love. They are not anxious about anything, but act at the appropriate time. They know that order, rules, etc. are not necessary but can be useful and use them as aids, aware that happiness is not dependent on their fulfillment. For example, consider the following passage from The Frankfurter, *The Book of the Perfect Life*, 71-72.

One should also note that God’s commands, his counsels and all his teaching pertain to the inner person and to the way he is to be united with God. Where that happens, the outward person will be well ordered and taught by the inner one so that he does not need any outward commands or teaching. But the commands and laws of humankind relate to the outward person, which is necessary when one knows no better. For in this case one does not know what one should do or not do and would become like dogs or beasts.

Furthermore, these people stand in a type of freedom where they have lost the fear of punishment or hell and also the hope of reward or heaven; they live in pure submission and obedience to the eternal goodness out of a free love.\(^{100}\)

However, the most defining characteristic of the enlightened is that they are entirely motivated by their love of the perfect. They pursue virtue, justice, and truth for their own sakes. Only the person who loves virtue, justice, or truth will pursue it. And only those who pursue it are virtuous, just or truthful.

This, then, is how things are with God and what pertains to God. A person may know a great deal about God and what God really is, and imagine he knows and understands what God is, but if he does not have love, he will not become godly or united with God. If, however, true love is there, a person must hold on to God. He must abandon everything that is not God or does not pertain to God. Whatever that is, he will be hostile to it and disturbed, as it causes him dismay and suffering. This love unites a person with God in such a way that he will never again be separated from such love.\(^{101}\)

This is as it was for Christ. Christ acted in love, not on account of any sense of reward.\(^{102}\)

Christ did not embrace his life for a reward, but out of love, and love makes life easy, not difficult, so that it is gladly embraced and willingly borne. But the person who does not embrace it out of love, but supposes he is embrace it for a reward, finds it difficult and would gladly be rid of it. It is typical of a hired worker that he wishes his work were over and done. A true lover, on the other hand, is not put off by toil or length of time or suffering.\(^{103}\)

It would seem that the Frankfurter understands this three-fold process of spiritual growth as an alternative way of describing the Pauline narrative of death and resurrection. Cleansing or purgation is synonymous with dying to the self. Enlightenment is the first stage of new life in the Spirit – a stage that is realized here in time. Union with God – the

\(^{100}\) The Frankfurter, *The Book of the Perfect Life*, 40.

\(^{101}\) The Frankfurter, *The Book of the Perfect Life*, 77.


\(^{103}\) The Frankfurter, *The Book of the Perfect Life*, 70. This is also obviously a critique of the spirituality of the Free Spirits.
completion of the Christian’s new life in God – the true resurrection – will only be fully realized after physical death and beyond time. Until then, very few people will achieve it, and their grasp of it will remain short-lived.

…although perhaps no person lives so fully and purely in this obedience as Christ did, it is still possible for a person to approach it so closely that he may be called divine and united with God. The closer a person approaches this and becomes divine and made into God, the more all disobedience, sin and injustice distress him and cause worse pain and are great, bitter, suffering.¹⁰⁴

However, in spite of his idealistic language, the Frankfurter shows a certain patience for human frailty and variety.

A good path and point of access to all of this is that one should realize that the best is the most loved and that one should choose the best, stick to it and unite oneself with it. First, in creatures – but what is the best in creatures? It is where the eternal, perfect good and what belongs to it most shines, is effective, understood and loved. But what is it that is God’s and pertains to him? It is everything that one rightly and truly can call good. If one can stick to the best the one can understand in creatures, remain with it and not backslide, one comes again to something better and to something better again, as long as the person understands and savors the fact that the eternal, one perfect is immeasurably and innumerably above all created good.¹⁰⁵

Nearer the end of the work, the Frankfurter seeks to remind his readers once again that he speaks in Pauline terms. Referencing Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he interprets Paul’s statement that Christ lives in him.

However much of Christ’s life there is in a person, by that much Christ is in him too, and however little of the one there is, as little there is of the other. For where Christ’s life is, there is Christ, and where his life is not, there Christ is not either. Wherever Christ’s life is or would be, there the words of St Paul apply, “I live, though not I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). This is the noblest and best life, for wherever that life is, there God himself all good is and lives. How could there be a better life? When one speaks of obedience, of a new person, the true light, the true love and Christ’s life, it is all one thing. Where one of them is, all of them are. Where one of them is lacking or not present, none of them is, for all are one truly and in essence. Whatever means might be employed to bring

¹⁰⁴ The Frankfurter, The Book of the Perfect Life, 46.

this to birth and life in an individual, he should cling to and nothing else. Whatever prevents this must be abandoned and shunned.\textsuperscript{106}

One other topic worthy of mention is the Frankfurter’s treatment of Christian freedom. Like Paul and Augustine before him he suggests that Christ offers to humanity a new definition and experience of freedom.

Now among all kinds of freedom nothing is as free as the will; whoever takes it for his own and does not leave it in its noble freedom, its free nobility and its free heritage acts wrongly. That is what the devil, Adam and all their followers do. But whoever leaves the will in its noble freedom acts rightly, and that is what Christ and all his followers do…Wherever and in whatever person the will is not taken possession of, but remain is its noble freedom, there is and will be a true, free, detached person or creature. Christ says of this person, “The truth shall make you free”, and immediately afterwards, “Whoever the Son makes free is truly free” (John 8:32, 36).\textsuperscript{107}

According to the Frankfurter, creatures exist as a place for God’s will to be expressed in actions. God wishes to will through the creature. Whenever God’s will is carried out through them, they get to experience God’s own pleasure. Likewise, if God’s will is thwarted, they can also experience God’s pain. True human freedom consists of this.

In the course of his presentation, the Frankfurter seeks to show that God’s purposes in Christ as well as the corresponding human actions are a part of the fabric of reality itself. He seeks to show not only that Christianity’s doctrines are coherent, but that they are in accord with the very structure of the universe. The unsurpassed greatness of God is manifested to the world through this correspondence. The Brethren of the Free Spirit lacked the awareness of the structure of being. They could account only for their own experience. This made their narrative inferior.

…both the devil and nature imagine they are undeceived and at their best point. That is the most wicked and damaging deception. The devil and nature are therefore one, and where nature is conquered, so the devil is conquered; and again, where nature is not conquered, so the devil is not conquered either. Whether it is turned to the worldly or to the spiritual life,

\textsuperscript{106} The Frankfurter, \textit{The Book of the Perfect Life}, 85.

\textsuperscript{107} The Frankfurter, \textit{The Book of the Perfect Life}, 91-92.
everything remains in his false deception, both in being deceived and in deceiving others along with him, where it is able to do so.

From all this one can appreciate and understand more clearly than is discerned here that whenever and wherever one speaks about Adam, disobedience, the old man, selfishness, one’s own will and willfulness, self-will, “I”, “mine”, nature, falsehood, devil and sin, it is all one and the same. It is all opposed to God and without God.  

Consequently, the Frankfurter believes that his particular narrative is not only in keeping with Scripture, but with nature itself. Near the very end of the treatise, the Frankfurter summarizes his vision of Christian spirituality and existence in the following manner:

A person must be fully aware of himself and all that is his, both inwardly and outwardly, and, as far as possible, must keep and preserve himself so that inwardly in himself no will or desire, love or affection, thought or inclination ever arises or can remain other than what would pertain to or well befit God, if God himself were human. Where one becomes aware of other things arising that do not pertain to or well befit God, one must destroy and resist them as soon and as best one can. It must be the same outwardly in doing or not doing things, in speaking, in silence, in waking, in sleeping and, in short, in every way and interaction that the person has both by himself and with other people. All this should be carefully watched so that nothing else occurs and that he does not turn to anything else or allow anything else to arise or remain in him, either inwardly or outwardly, or to occur because of him other than as pertains properly to God and would be possible and fitting, if God himself were human.

Wherever that is or might be, whatever might be or is internally or might happen externally, that is or would all be God’s, and the person is or would be a follower of Christ according to his life, as far as we can understand and tell.

The Frankfurter’s final prayer is instructive, for it shows what matters most to him: dying to self and living to God. This is the goal of Christian existence and the everyday practice of Christian spirituality.

May he help us to get rid of self, die to our own will and live only for God and his will, who yielded his will to his heavenly Father, who lives and rules eternally with God the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit in perfect Trinity. Amen.

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Summary

While scholars have long classified *Eyn deutsch Theologia*, Tauler’s *Sermons* and Augustine’s *Confession* as “mystical” works, it should now be apparent that this classification is misleading and imprecise. While these works have been read by some to inspire Plotinian visions of union with the divine, they have been understood by others to offer examples not of contemplative visions, but of contemplative visualizations. In particular, they all build upon a specific Pauline foundation: his narrative of dying and rising with Christ. This narrative permeates each of them. So central was this narrative to the authors’ conceptions of Christian spirituality that they were willing to engage in both apologetics and disputes to prevent other narratives from replacing it.

As we turn to consider some of Luther’s devotional works, it is imperative to keep this spiritual legacy in mind. Many books have been written about Luther’s Reformation discoveries and many authors have sought to accentuate all that was new in Luther’s thought. However, did Luther perceive of novelty as his goal? Or, was he simply attempting to restore to catholic Christianity its narrative core? As will presently be shown, Luther understood his primary task as both teacher and preacher to make this Pauline narrative more explicit and well-known in the wider church. Thus, he attacked trends in academic theology, lay piety, and ecclesiastical pronouncements that obscured the Pauline narrative. In a letter to John von Staupitz, dated May 30, 1518, Luther clarified his own motivations for having gotten involved in the indulgence controversy. Notice how he finds the Bible speaking to him in a manner different from that which he had learned at university. Consider how he defines repentance. Look at whom he wishes to emulate. There is a consistency here – a primary emphasis on Pauline spirituality.

Reverend Father: I remember that during your most delightful and helpful talks, through which the Lord Jesus wonderfully consoled me, you sometimes mentioned the term “poenitentia.” I was then distressed by my conscience and by the tortures of those who through endless and insupportable precepts teach the so called method of confession. Therefore
I accepted you as a messenger from heaven when you said that poenitentia is genuine only if it begins with love for justice and for God and that what they consider to be the final stage and completion is in reality rather the very beginning of poenitentia.

...I began to compare your statements with the passages of Scripture which speak of poenitentia. And behold—what a most pleasant scene! Biblical words came leaping toward me from all sides, clearly smiling and nodding assent to your statement...The commandments of God become sweet when they are read not only in books but also in the wounds of the sweetest Savior.

After this it happened that I learned...that the word poenitentia means metanoia in Greek; it is derived from meta and noun, that is, from “afterward” and “mind.” Poenitentia or metanoia, therefore, means coming to one’s right mind and a comprehension of one’s own evil after one has accepted the damage and recognized the error. This is impossible without a change in one’s disposition and [the object of one’s] love. All these definitions agree so well with Pauline theology that, at least in my opinion, almost nothing could illustrate Paul’s theology better than the way they do.

Then I progressed further and saw that metanoia could be understood as a composite not only of “afterward” and “mind,” but also of the [prefix] “trans” and “mind”...so that metanoia could mean the transformation of one’s mind and disposition. Yet it seemed to express not only the actual change of disposition but also the way by which this change is accomplished, that is, the grace of God. Such transition of the mind, that is, the most true poenitentia, is found very frequently in Holy Scripture: the old Passover foreshadowed it, and Christ made it a reality...

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

While this thought was still agitating me, behold, suddenly around us the new war trumpets of indulgences and the bugles of pardon started to sound, even to blast, but they failed to evoke in us any prompt zeal for the battle. In short, while the doctrine of the true poenitentia was neglected, they even dared to magnify not poenitentia—not even its least important part, which is called satisfaction—but only the remission of this least important part, so that one has never heard of a similar “glorification” of poenitentia. Finally they taught impious, false, and heretical things with so much authority—temerity...that if anyone muttered anything in protest he was immediately a heretic destined for the stake and guilty of eternal damnation.

Since I was not able to counteract the furor of these men, I determined modestly to take issue with them and to pronounce their teachings as open to doubt. I relied on the judgment of all the doctors and of the whole church that it is better to perform the satisfactions than to have them remitted by buying indulgences. There is no one who has ever taught differently. This is why I entered the disputation...1

How does Luther sum up Pauline theology? With the Greek word, “metanoia” which he defines as “coming to one’s right mind and a comprehension of one’s own evil after one has accepted the damage and recognized the error.” And how does he believe one does this? “By the grace of God.” Here again, Luther testifies to the centrality of the Pauline metaphor. One needs to die to one’s self – learn to truthfully comprehend one’s own sinfulness in order to live – to experience divine forgiveness. And the forgiveness that comes with this change of mind is a gift of God – a reality given to Christians by Christ himself. Chapter three will explore some of Luther’s attempts to characterize and structure Christian metanoia.
CHAPTER III
A STUDY OF LUTHER’S 1519 CONTEMPLATIVE DEVOTIONS

General Background

Luther’s devotional works written in the years before 1520 quickly became international bestsellers. Editions were printed not only in various German-speaking cities such as Wittenberg, Augsburg, and Zurich, but also in London, Paris, and Amsterdam.¹ Writing for a popular, catholic audience, Luther utilized a number of conventional devotional formats: passion meditations, sacramental reflections, the *ars moriendi*, and the like. However, he modified their contents and foci by changing their base narratives. Throughout these texts he repeatedly stated that something was amiss in popular piety which necessitated his taking up the pen. In all cases, he asserted that an alternative narrative had replaced the central narrative of the faith. While many of his criticisms were directed at the institutional church or at ecclesiastical authorities, others challenged and attacked specific lay practices or beliefs. In assessing Luther’s critique of contemporary sixteenth-century spirituality, traditional scholarship has asserted that Luther engaged primarily in theological revisioning. However, it would be more accurate to say that his emphasis was on narrative revisioning. Theology builds, after all, upon a narrative foundation.

In this chapter I consider four of Luther’s devotional works from 1519: *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*, *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*, *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe*, and *Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften*. Each represents a distinct, yet common form of late medieval devotion and piety. In all four

¹ See Benzing, *Lutherbibliographie*, for full listing of publication locations.
cases, Luther seeks not only to correct and revise misleading narratives, but to remind his readers of the central narrative of Christian spirituality, namely dying and rising with Christ.

There is also an interesting blend of the particular and the universal in all four of these works. On the one hand, Luther repeatedly writes of the unique circumstances of each person’s life, exhibiting an awareness of the usefulness of offering different devotional formats for different persons and situations. However, in spite of this contextual emphasis, he affirms time and again his belief in the existence of a universal conversion experience, an experience which he believed underlay all spiritual devotion: coming face to face with the troubling yet truthful realities of one’s own sin. Only after learning to stop seeking certainty for salvation in their own actions, can Christians comprehend their need to trust in a loving and gracious God. As Luther puts it in the eighteenth thesis of his 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation*.

It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.2

Utilizing specific mental visualizations, Luther sought to lead Christians deeper into the Pauline-Augustinian narrative outlined in the previous chapter. His goal was to expand early modern Christians’ consciousness of their own fallen humanity in light of the divine mercy he believed was revealed on Christ’s cross. Sometimes he urged his readers to consider the demands of the divine law – demands which they were unable to meet and which served to continuously highlight their sins. At other times he invited them to contemplate Christ’s passion, taking into account how their sins had been responsible for adding to Christ’s pain and agony on the cross. He recommended that they reflect on Christ’s gifts to them while partaking of the Eucharist and suggested they remember their sinfulness while contemplating their own deaths. Such spiritual exercises were intended

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2 LW 31, 51. WA 1, 354. “Certum est, hominem de se penitus oportere desperare, ut aptus fiat ad consequendum gratiam Christi.”
to aid Christians in arriving at a more truthful assessment of their own lives, and assist them in adopting the narrative that had the power to move them from death to life.

There is another consistent motive present in this set of writings: Luther’s desire to offer comfort to consciences oppressed by terror, guilt, and/or shame. Aware that the use and abuse of the cosmic narrative had driven many Christians to adopt a fearful stance towards God, Luther used contemplative imagery to tell a new story – to frame Christian existence in a revised way. Luther repeatedly stated Christians should move beyond merely fearing God. His reframed devotional narratives contained “good news” about their relationships with God: they could trust that God was “for them”, i.e. that God had their best interests at heart. Luther believed the Gospel changed lives, bringing the resurrection to light in individuals. Luther wanted all Christians to experience this Gospel story personally – as an existential reality in their own lives, and he made use of a number of narrative images to assist in making this a reality.

*Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*

By the mid to late medieval era, contemplative devotions had become commonplace and were no longer restricted to convents and monasteries. Lay spiritual manuals that focused Christians’ attention upon specific images of God, Christ, or episodes from the Gospels or other biblical narratives abounded. Liturgical services such as the Via Delarosa [Stations of the Cross] or community processions like Corpus Christi encouraged individual contemplation as well. Likewise, the manifold imagery in medieval churches (paintings, statuary, relics, reliquaries, and architectural designs) all provided objects for contemplation. Illustrated manuscripts and woodcut illustrations provided yet even more contemplative images. While many of these devotions were

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3 Consider, for example, how the medieval Church purposefully profited from the fear of future suffering in purgatory. I will be saying more about the medieval cosmic narrative in chapter four.
intended to aid Christians in visualizing biblical stories, others were simply intended to
provide them with the means of creatively imagining their faith, offering them the ability
to “picture” God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the communion of the saints in a more
intimate manner. They provided Christians with, among other things, the means to
imagine having a conversation with God or comprehend the relationship of their souls to
the divine. Contemplative imagery functioned to make the divine real and present in
Christians’ lives.

One of the more popular medieval devotions involved meditating on Christ’s Passion. Medieval artists created portraits of central events from Christ’s life which could be used as visual aids for Christian devotion. Early exemplars often showed Christ victorious over his enemies or arrayed in glory. However, in approximately the twelfth century, a shift in focus turned Christians’ attention from the divinity of Christ to his humanity. Instead of emphasizing his divine attributes, these newer devotions focused instead upon his suffering and his compassion. This new approach to contemplative visualization was intended to assist Christians in empathizing with Christ. Visual artists made use of narrative cycles (Christ’s nativity, mission, passion, often together with his resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances) to portray Christ’s life and/or suffering in a manner that facilitated contemplation. Of these various narrative cycles, the passion narrative was, by far, the most popular. Although the number of events illustrated in the passion cycle could vary, the entire cycle typically included the following scenes: 1) Jesus Takes Leave of His Mother, 2) Jesus Enters Jerusalem, 3) Jesus Drives Out the Money Changers, 4) Jesus Eats His Last Supper, 5) Jesus Washes His Disciples’ Feet, 6)

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4 In contemporary medicine, visualization has been studied as an effective technique to aid in healing.

5 See Holly Flora, “Poverty’s Daughters: Gender and Devotion,” in Varieties of Devotion in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. Susan Karant-Nunn (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2003), 64. Flora speaks of the use of imagery in medieval monastic devotion, mentioning specifically the “visual and descriptive nature” of the piety of the Meditationes vitae Christi.

Jesus’ Agony in the Garden, 7) Jesus is Betrayed by Judas / Jesus is Arrested, 8) Jesus is Denied by Peter, 9) Jesus before the Sanhedrin, 10) Jesus before Pontius Pilate, 11) The Flagellation, 12) Jesus is Crowned with Thorns, 13) Jesus is Mocked, 14) Ecce homo, 15) Jesus Carries the Cross, 16) Crucifixion, 17) Deposition, 18) Lamentation, 19) Epitaphios, 20) Entombment, and [infrequently] 21) the Harrowing of Hell. A good many of these scenes were intended to generate empathy within the viewer for the pains and torments which Christ endured.\textsuperscript{7}

It is precisely this shift in emphasis which Luther criticized in his \textit{Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi}. He begins the work by mentioning some of the ways in which people meditated improperly on the Passion. They used the story to stir up hatred against the Jews. They believed one could accrue merit simply by performing the exercise or by feeling sorry for Jesus. An even bigger mistake in Luther’s mind was meditating on the Passion in hopes of avoiding suffering, rather than finding in the story of Christ’s suffering resources to face one’s own hardships. Luther suggests that proper meditation on the Passion involved becoming more aware of one’s own sinfulness, and of how one’s sins had impacted Christ’s suffering. Through these personalized meditations, the Christian would be able to properly comprehend the nature of his/her relationship to Christ.

You must get this thought through your head and not doubt that you are the one who is torturing Christ thus, for your sins have surely wrought this…For every nail that pierces Christ, more than one hundred thousand should in justice pierce you, yes, they should prick you forever and ever more painfully! When Christ is tortured by nails penetrating his hands and feet, you should eternally suffer the pain they inflict and the pain of even more cruel nails, which will in truth be the lot of those who do not avail themselves of Christ’s passion. This earnest mirror, Christ, will not lie or trifle, and whatever it points out will come to pass in full measure.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{7} See Getrud Schiller, \textit{Iconography of Christian Art} (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971).

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{LW} 42, 9. \textit{WA} 2, 137.
Instead of simply feeling compassion for what Christ suffered, Luther encourages Christians to feel remorse for the pain that Christ endured on account of their sin. At the end of this passage Luther proposed imagining Christ as a mirror which reflects back to the individual the reality of the human condition, enabling one to see one’s self as one really is. This awareness of personal culpability for Christ’s suffering brings understanding of why the Christian needs to die to self. Luther states this explicitly in paragraph eight:

…the main benefit of Christ’s passion is that man sees into his own true self and that he be terrified and crushed by this. Unless we seek that knowledge, we do not derive much benefit from Christ’s passion. The real and true work of Christ’s passion is to make man conformable to Christ, so that man’s conscience is tormented by his sins in like measure as Christ was pitiably tormented in body and soul by our sins. This does not call for many words but for profound reflection and a great awe of sins.9

In the last sentence just quoted, Luther makes clear that this awareness or consciousness of sin arises only as a result of “profound reflection”. Only by putting one’s self in the story together with Christ can the Christian experience the alienating effects of sin. In other words, contemplative visualization leads to cognitive awareness and comprehension. The right story leads to right understanding.

In spite of this emphasis on the death of the self, Luther strives to make clear that this self-negation or mortification should be understood neither as an end unto itself nor as some sort of religious work – as if feeling guilty about one’s sin was primarily what God desired. Instead, self-mortification is a necessary preliminary for properly conceiving of and experiencing God’s grace. It serves as the first phase of one’s conversion – the move from death to life whereby the individual Christian experiences existentially his/her need for God’s grace, as well as its actual availability and effectiveness within his/her life.

This meditation changes man’s being and, almost like baptism, gives him a new birth. Here the passion of Christ performs its natural and noble

9 LW 42, 10. WA 2, 138.
work, strangling the old Adam and banishing all joy, delight, and confidence which man could derive from other creatures, even as Christ was forsaken by all, even by God.\(^\text{10}\)

Christians will be able to experience resurrection life only after having strangled “the old Adam.”\(^\text{11}\) However, staying focused upon one’s sins would only lead to despair. Instead, Christians should, after confronting their sins, give these very sins to Christ and let him bear them. For only by surrendering their sins to Christ will they be free of sin.\(^\text{12}\) Again, Luther encourages Christians to imagine this exchange as creatively as possible. Christians should personalize it – visualize it as a direct transaction between themselves and Christ – each and every time they make confession of their sin.

As Christians die to sin, Luther writes, they are enabled to experience resurrection life. No longer alienated from God they have been reconciled through Christ. The proof of this divine reconciliation is Christ’s resurrection itself. Luther encourages his readers not to focus upon the resurrection merely as an historical event, but rather as a testimony of God’s relationship with humanity. For Luther, Christ’s resurrection is God’s last word on sin. Although human sin caused Christ great suffering and cost him his life, still God raised Christ from the dead in spite of that sin. In other words, human sin was not enough to keep Christ dead; God’s power and love were greater than human sin. The dead Jesus who bore humanity’s sins has become the resurrected Christ who has overcome sin.

\(^\text{10}\) LW 42, 11. WA 2, 139.

\(^\text{11}\) The tradition of painting a skull at the foot of the cross dates to as early as the tenth century. Legend suggested that Christ was crucified on Adam’s grave. This is a visual representation of all dying in Adam and rising in Christ. See Crucifixion, (London: Phaidon Press, 2000).

\(^\text{12}\) Consider the following quotation from paragraph 13 (\textit{LW} 42, 12.)

\textit{You cast your sins from yourself and onto Christ when you firmly believe that his wounds and sufferings are your sins, to be borne and paid for by him, as we read in Isaiah 53 [:6], [I Pet. 2:24 and II Cor. 5:21]. You must stake everything on these and similar verses. The more your conscience torments you, the more tenaciously must you cling to them. If you do not do that, but presume to still your conscience with your contrition and penance, you will never obtain peace of mind, but will have to despair in the end. If we allow sin to remain in our conscience and try to deal with it there, or if we look at sin in our heart, it will be much too strong for us and will live on forever.}
...if we behold [sin] resting on Christ and [see it] overcome by his resurrection, and then boldly believe this, even it is dead and nullified. Sin cannot remain on Christ, since it is swallowed up by his resurrection. Now you see no wounds, no pain in him, and no sign of sin...That is to say, in his suffering Christ makes our sin known and thus destroys it, but through his resurrection he justifies us and delivers us from all sin, if we believe this.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus, according to Luther, as Christians reflect upon the divine will in Christ’s suffering, they will see that God’s heart is predisposed towards reunion with humanity rather than with its destruction. This awareness should stimulate them to love and thank God for the graciousness which has been revealed to them through Christ’s Passion.

...you must no longer contemplate the suffering of Christ (for this has already done its work and terrified you), but pass beyond that and see his friendly heart and how this heart beats with such love for you that it impels him to bear with pain your conscience and your sin. Then your heart will be filled with love for him, and the confidence of your faith will be strengthened. Now continue and rise beyond Christ’s heart to God’s heart and you will see that Christ would not have shown this love for you if God in his eternal love had not wanted this, for Christ’s love for you is due to his obedience to God. Thus you will find the divine and kind paternal heart, and, as Christ says, you will be drawn to the Father through him. Then you will understand the words of Christ, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, etc.” [John 3:16]. We know God aright when we grasp him not in his might or wisdom (for then he proves terrifying), but in his kindness and love. Then faith and confidence are able to exist, and then man is truly born anew in God.\textsuperscript{14}

Here Luther gives his readers spatial directions for focusing their contemplation. He tells them to “pass beyond [Christ’s sufferings] and see his friendly heart.” In speaking about Christ’s heart, Luther moves from a literal image to a figurative one. He encourages his readers to picture Christ as a loving and compassionate figure instead of solely as a suffering and sorrowful one. However, he leaves the specific details of this contemplative visualization up to individuals. Just how they are to imagine a compassionate Christ depends upon their own definition or experience of compassion. Luther then instructs his readers to take their contemplation further: “Now continue and rise beyond Christ’s heart

\textsuperscript{13} LW 42, 12-13. WA 2, 140.

\textsuperscript{14} LW 42, 13. WA 140-141.
to God’s heart…” Once they have properly conceived of Christ as a loving figure, Christians will also be able to imagine God primarily as a loving rather than a judgmental deity. This is, of course, not only a revisioning of Christ and God, but of the traditional salvation narrative. Luther states this clearly at the end of this very passage: “We know God aright when we grasp him not in his might or wisdom (for then he proves terrifying), but in his kindness and love.” This is not only the story Luther wants his readers to tell, but to experience. They are not only supposed to die to their sin, but to a particular way of “seeing” and comprehending God. Only by giving up erroneous views of the divine, will Christians find new life and hope in the Gospel message.

Luther moves on to assert that this form of meditating on the Passion provides Christians not only with a general understanding of Christian existence, but with a model for daily living, as well. By daily choosing to live and die as Christ did, Christians will die to more and more patterns of old behavior and discover more and more new ways of living as people of hope and faith. Quoting Paul, Luther suggests that this sort of Passion meditation is a perpetual one - a lifelong process that keeps on repeating itself – and is itself the very definition of a “true” Christian.

After your heart has thus become firm in Christ, and love, not fear of pain, has made you a foe of sin, then Christ’s passion must from that day on become a pattern for your entire life. Henceforth you will have to see his passion differently. Until now we regarded it as a sacrament which is active in us while we are passive, but now we find that we too must be active...this is how we can draw strength and encouragement from Christ against every vice and failing. That is a proper contemplation of Christ’s passion, and such are its fruits…Those who thus make Christ’s life and name a part of their own lives are true Christians. St. Paul says, “Those who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with all its desires” [Gal. 5:24]. Christ’s passion must be met not with words or forms, but with life and truth…And St. Peter, “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, strengthen and arm yourselves by meditating on this” [I Pet. 4:1]. However, such meditation has become rare, although the letters of St. Paul and St. Peter abound with it. We have transformed the essence into

15 LW 42, 13. WA 140-141.

semblance and painted our meditations on Christ’s passion on walls and made them into letters.  

At the end of this passage, Luther again bemoans the transformation of the original Pauline narrative into another one – a mere semblance of the original. Suggesting that traditional devotion had shifted the focus to the external, Luther encourages his readers to turn their focus inward again. For him, proper meditation on Christ’s passion always involves including one’s self in the picture – personally identifying with Christ’s death and resurrection. This happens not by seeking to enter into Christ’s life, but by giving Christ entrance into one’s own life. This is just one of the ways in which Luther fleshed out the Pauline emphasis on dying to self and rising with Christ. *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben* presents us with another.

**Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben**

In its first three years in print, Luther’s *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben* went through twenty-two editions. George Spalatin, Wittenberg’s court chaplain, had originally forwarded to Luther a request from Mark Schart. Schart had been struggling with distressing thoughts about death and wanted to know how he might overcome them. Luther agreed to write something on the topic, but was not able to get around to the task immediately. However, on November 1, 1519, Luther finally sent Spalatin copies of a sermon which he had written in German. Luther’s sermon represented both continuity and departure from similar medieval devotions on death. In order to better comprehend the continuity, a quick review of how medieval Christians typically combated grave illness or prepared for death is in order.

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17 *LW* 42, 13-14.

18 The German word, “Sermon” refers not to an orally-delivered sermon, but rather to a printed tract. “Predigt” is the standard word for an orally delivered address. [reference]

19 Sometimes spelled Sehart.
In chapter five of *The Reformation of Ritual: an interpretation of early modern Germany*, Susan Karant-Nunn summarizes the basic steps that a late medieval Christian took in preparation for death. 1) Seeking out possible medical remedies, so as to not be guilty of suicide. 2) Confessing one’s sins to a cleric. 3) Receiving extreme unction, i.e. holy oil applied to eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands, and feet. 4) Receiving the Eucharist. 5) Offering one’s testament and philanthropic provisions. 6) Giving instructions for one’s own funeral. After one had completed all of these steps, the priest (or another representative of the church) sought to assure the dying person that s/he had done all that was possible. The dying was then covered with a tunic and placed on a pallet of ashes, which symbolized his/her renunciation of world. They were given a crucifix and a burning taper. Other people in the room then began chanting the penitential psalms. During this time the priest spoke continually in the ear of the dying, demanding that he/she give another sign of his/her faithful perseverance. At the last moment the priest offered absolution in the hopes that this delayed action might save the person a few years in purgatory. Often the mourners left a lighted candle burning all night beside the corpse. Given the rather complex nature of this procedure, books on the art of dying (*ars moriendi*) had become popular and were readily available to assist people in dying a “good” death. These deathbed rituals placed an individual’s death in a larger context – making it part of a larger narrative in which angels and demons were fighting both for and against his/her salvation.

Luther’s *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben* can be understood as a counter or corrective to these practices. Like other manuals on dying a good death, Luther’s short treatise seeks to comfort troubled consciences and to provide hope for their

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20 Included among the penitential psalms are Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143.

eternal future. However, Luther’s emphasis varies considerably from traditional devotional literature. Although he begins with preparations for taking leave of this material life, his primary focus isn’t upon one’s deathbed actions. Rather, the majority of the treatise concerns itself with developing the proper attitude towards and understanding of death itself. This is a task that Christians should undertake while in the midst of life. Luther states that there are three images in particular which those confronting death find frightening: sin, death, and the devil. These horrifying images rob Christians of their peace in the face of death by leading them to despair.\textsuperscript{22} They have the power to control one’s imagination, plaguing a person’s conscience relentlessly.

During our lifetime, when we should constantly have our eyes fixed on the image of death, sin, and hell…the devil closes our eyes and hides these images. But in the hour of death when our eyes should see only life, grace, and salvation, he at once opens our eyes and frightens us with these untimely images so that we shall not see the true ones.\textsuperscript{23}

The image of death, for example, involves not just the concept of the cessation of life, but rather of dying painfully, of dying laboriously, of dying slowly. If one asks, “How am I going to die?” all sorts of horrific visions could appear within the mind. Luther recognizes that death’s power arises from the fear and anxiety it generates. Consequently, he seeks to change Christians’ focus - to change the story they tell about death.

Likewise, Luther suggests that the image of “sin” involves much more than the awareness of misdeeds. People remain conscious of sins they have committed and which they have tried to hide from others. In the face of death they often find themselves confronted with the realization that while they might have hidden their sins from others, they are unable to hide them from God, the ultimate judge. The thought of dying with un-confessed sins was a terrifying thought for many, terrifying enough for them to doubt

\textsuperscript{22} LW 42, 101-102.

\textsuperscript{23} LW 42, 102.
their eternal destination. So, too, Luther believed the narrative image of sin was in need of revision.

And what of the image of hell? Thinking of the eternal punishment awaiting those with un-confessed sins or who hadn’t died a “good” death petrified many early modern Christians. Luther believed that hell’s power asserted itself as people questioned and feared God’s justice. Doubting that God was merciful, they wavered in their belief concerning God’s love as well. This, in and of itself, might be another sin – the very sin that would keep them from heaven.

Luther knew that by giving any of these images free reign within the imagination, a Christian’s mind would become a slave to those images – that s/he could define his/her entire existence in terms of them. This was the problem Luther had with the entire *ars moriendi* tradition. It kept Christians’ foci upon these terrifying images, allowing them to define individuals’ relationships with God. Luther seeks in his treatise to change these narratives – to take away these images’ power.

…we must exercise all diligence not to open our homes to any of these images and not to paint the devil over the door. These foes will of themselves boldly rush in and seek to occupy the heart completely with their image, their arguments, and their signs. And when that happens man is doomed and God is entirely forgotten. The only thing to do with these pictures at that time is to combat and expel them…But he who wants to fight against them and drive them out will find that it is not enough just to wrestle and tussle and scuffle with them. They will prove too strong for him, and matters will go from bad to worse. The one and only approach is to drop them entirely and have nothing to do with them.24

So, what does Luther suggest Christians meditate upon instead? An alternative, more powerful set of images.

You must look at death while you are alive and see sin in the light of grace and hell in the light of heaven, permitting nothing to divert you from that view.25

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24 *LW* 42, 103. *WA* 2, 688.
25 *LW* 42, 103. *WA* 2, 688.
By doing this, s/he would be not only redefining the Christian cosmos, but also his/her place in it. S/he would break free of the negative images’ influence. Luther uses the rather graphic language of “engraving” new images upon one’s heart. This engraving occurs as one contemplates Christ’s passion in a particular manner. As he did in his *Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*, Luther recommends that Christians imagine Christ bearing their sin as a way of picturing God’s mercy. With such meditations Luther seeks to turn the conventional wisdom and practice of the *ars moriendi* on its head. Instead of focusing upon images which terrify an individual’s conscience, Luther recommends centering one’s thoughts – in life and in death – upon images that will bring one peace. Specifically, he recommends focusing upon what God has done for humanity in and through Christ.

[On the cross Christ] prepared himself as a threefold picture for us, to be held before the eyes of our faith against the three evil pictures with which the evil spirit and our nature would assail us to rob us of this faith. He is the living and immortal image against death, which he suffered, yet by his resurrection from the dead he vanquished death in his life. He is the image of the grace of God against sin, which he assumed, and yet overcame by his perfect obedience. He is the heavenly image, the one who was forsaken by God as damned, yet he conquered hell through his omnipotent love, thereby proving that he is the dearest Son, who gives this to us all if we but believe. 

Here Luther describes Christ as “the living and immortal image” – the interpretive lens for the Christian’s entire understanding of God. Seeing Christ properly is the key to peace, joy, and salvation; it is the key to seeing God as gracious lord rather than terrible judge. Hanging onto this image – telling oneself this story is the key to triumphing over sin, death, and the devil.

So then, gaze at the heavenly picture of Christ, who descended into hell…for your sake and was forsaken by God as one eternally damned when he spoke the words on the cross, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!”—“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”…In that picture your hell is defeated and your

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27 See Daniel Erlander, *Baptized We Live* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995). A central tenet of Erlander’s book is that Lutheranism should be understood as a way of seeing.
uncertain election is made sure. If you concern yourself solely with that and believe that it was done for you, you will surely be preserved in this same faith. Never, therefore, let this be erased from your vision. Seek yourself only in Christ and not in yourself and you will find yourself in him eternally.28

To illustrate the importance of overcoming these three dread images, Luther also narrates how Christ personally faced each of them while hanging on the cross. He suggests that the crowds who stood around the crucified Jesus sought to terrify him with taunts that centered on images of sin, death, and the devil. For example, Luther proposes that the crowd tormented Jesus with the horror and finality of death by calling out, “Here you are facing death; now you must die; nothing can save you from that.”29 The crowd also called into question Jesus’ actions, proclaiming that he had actually lived a life of sin: “His works were all fraud and deception…He never worked good, only iniquity.”30 When the crowd asks in Matthew 27:43 whether or not God will deliver Jesus from the crucifixion, Luther paraphrases their response this way; “His place is in hell; God did not elect him; he is rejected forever. All his confidence and hope will not help him. All is in vain.”31 Yet in spite of all this mockery, Christ did not succumb to the threat and horror of any of these three images, but rather overcame them.32 Consequently, he serves as a model for Christian emulation. Luther notes, too, that Christ did not attempt to respond or argue with his foes. “He acts as though he does not hear or see them and makes no reply.”33 Neither did he pay any attention to these images which others sought to force upon him. Christ recognized that these were imposed narratives which others used to advance their own agendas. He knew that adopting or assenting to these imposed

28 LW 42, 105-106. WA 2, 690.
29 LW 42, 107. WA 2, 691-692.
30 LW 42, 107. WA 2, 691-692.
31 LW 42, 108. WA 2, 692.
32 Might Luther be suggesting a three-fold parallel structure exists here like in Christ’s temptation in the wilderness? See Matthew 4:1-11.
33 LW 42, 108. WA 2, 692.
narratives would only drive him to despair. Yet, although he refused to listen to his opponents, he still, according to Luther, prayed for them.

He is so completely devoted to the dearest will of his Father that he forgets about his own death, his sin, and his hell imposed on him, and he intercedes for his enemies, for their sin, death, and hell...34

Luther then proposes that God has provided additional remedies for overcoming the power and dread of these three images: the sacraments, in particular the Eucharist. Austra Reinis correctly notes that the medieval tradition encouraged early modern Christians to picture themselves on a continuum between fear and hope.35 The problem with the *ars moriendi* tradition, according to Luther, was that it offered little hope and much fear. He believed that Christians could find in the sacraments a hope that transcends the despair of death, sin, and hell; they offer concrete images or signs of God’s promises. By trusting in the divine promises manifest in the sacraments, Christians can dare to believe that death, sin, and the devil have been overcome by and through Christ. The forgiveness and grace they offer testifies to the central Christian narrative of a loving and merciful God. They affirm God’s intentions towards humanity.

The right use of the sacraments involves nothing more than believing that all will be as the sacraments promise and pledge through God’s Word. Therefore, it is necessary not only to look at the three pictures in Christ and with these to drive out the counter-pictures, but also to have a definite sign which assures us that this has surely been given to us. That is the function of the sacraments.36

For Luther, the sacraments are ultimately penultimate – a means to another end.37 They offer Christians a way of transcending the three dread images.

34 LW 42, 108. WA 2, 692.
35 Reinis, Reforming the Art of Dying, 17.
36 LW 42, 111. WA 2, 695.
37 Reinis suggests the primary topic of *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben* is actually the Eucharist and she develops a complicated outline of the work’s rhetorical structure to support her claim. See page 52 ff. This assertion is problematic for a number of reasons. First, Luther announces early in the treatise that one should prepare for death ahead of time and not at the last minute. Since he does not recommend that one partake of the Sacrament often as the best way to prepare for death, it would seem to me that he is arguing something different than Reinis suggests. Second, Luther states that desiring the Sacrament is sufficient. Reception is preferred, but not required. Without faith, none of the sacraments have an
God promised and in his sacraments he gave me a sure sign of his grace that Christ’s life overcame my death in his death, that his obedience blotted out my sin in his suffering, that his love destroyed my hell in his forsakenness. This sign and promise of my salvation will not lie to me or deceive me. It is God who has promised it, and he cannot lie either in words or in deeds.  

While emphasizing the Pauline narrative, Luther also encourages his readers to engage in additional contemplative visualizations. These complimentary narratives serve a penultimate purpose like the sacraments themselves. One of the lengthier complimentary narratives Luther explores involves the figure of Satan. According to Luther, the devil seeks to enslave Christians to the dread images and thereby rob them of their inner peace. Consequently, Christians should become familiar with the devil’s techniques and reject them. This can be seen as a rather clever move on Luther’s part. By suggesting that certain forms of traditional devotion not only have a misplaced focus, but are often susceptible to demonic influence as well, Luther provides his readers with another compelling reason to revise their primary spiritual narrative. Consider, for example, how he describes the devil’s actions in the following passage:

Here the devil practices his ultimate, greatest, and most cunning art and power. By this he sets man above God, insofar as man seeks signs of God’s will and becomes impatient because he is not supposed to know whether he is among the elect. Man looks with suspicion upon God, so that he soon desires a different God. In brief, the devil is determined to blast God’s love from a man’s mind and to arouse thoughts of God’s wrath. The more docilely man follows the devil and accepts these thoughts, the more imperiled his position is. In the end he cannot save himself, and he falls prey to hatred and blasphemy of God. What is my desire to know whether I am chosen other than a presumption to know all that God knows and to be equal with him so that he will know no more

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38_ LW_ 42, 109. _WA_ 2, 693.
According to Luther, the devil’s primary task is also narrative revisioning. By convincing Christians that God is not a God of love, but rather of wrath, Satan stirs up not only doubt, but hatred of God. Hence, a primary task of the Christian faithful is reflecting regularly upon which stories guides their lives. Whenever and wherever Christians discover that they have followed other voices – that they have been telling other stories, they ought to die to these false and misleading narratives and return to the true, central narrative of the faith.

While it might seem at first glance that this tract doesn’t fit the mold of dying to self and rising with Christ, it actually does. Luther begins the treatise by focusing on death itself. Affirming that death is the end of this life, he proclaims the beginning of another life – the resurrected life made known to Christians through Christ.

…since everyone must depart, we must turn our eyes to God, to whom the path of death leads and directs us. Here we find the beginning of the narrow gate and of the straight path to life… All must joyfully venture forth on this path, for though the gate is quite narrow, the path is not long. Just as an infant is born with peril and pain from the small abode of its mother’s womb into this immense heaven and earth, that is, into this world, so man departs this life through the narrow gate of death. And although the heavens and the earth in which we dwell at present seem large and wide to us, they are nevertheless much narrower and smaller than the mother’s womb in comparison with the future heaven. Therefore, the death of the dear saints is called a new birth, and their feast day is known in Latin as natale, that is, the day of their birth. However, the narrow passage of death makes us think of this life as expansive and the life beyond as confined. Therefore, we must believe this and learn a lesson from the physical birth of a child, as Christ declares, “When a woman is in travail she has sorrow; but when she has recovered, she no longer remembers the anguish, since a child is born by her into the world” [John 16:21]. So it is that in dying we must bear this anguish and know that a large mansion and joy will follow [John 14:2].

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39 LW 42, 102-103. WA 2, 688.
40 LW 42, 99-100. WA 2, 685-686.
Luther continues here to make use here of Paul’s narrative. He tells his readers to imagine death as the narrow gate that leads to life. He makes a comparison with the journey of a child through the birth canal out into this life. Just as the child feels it getting narrower and likely wishes not to continue the journey, the Christian might be inclined to fear or avoid death, yet death leads to new life. Given that the emergence from death to life is Luther’s first contemplative image, it seems clear that Paul’s metaphor remains the operative narrative of this treatise, too. In using this image, Luther also draws attention to the mother’s experience. Just as she forgets her birth pangs, so the Christian will forget about the anxiety of death once s/he arrives on the other side. Throughout most of the tract Luther presupposes that his readers have already reached the point of finding no help in themselves. They have already died. They are looking and longing for resurrection life, yet lack the awareness of where to look. By pointing them in the direction of baptism and its imagery of death and new birth (literally) Luther believes he is giving them access to this new life. It is when they lose sight of this imagery that they find themselves plagued by the three dread images of sin, death, and the devil.

The Sacramental Trilogy

In 1519, Luther wrote a set of three teaching sermons dealing with the sacraments of penance, baptism, and communion. Luther dedicated all three tracts to Duchess Margaret of Brunswick. In his dedicatory letter he gives his reason for writing. First he states that he was asked by friends to dedicate some “spiritual and Christian writing” to Her Grace. However later in the letter, he mentions another motive.

For I considered that many consciences are troubled and pained, and I have found people here who do not know the holy and full grace of the sacraments nor how to use them; but alas! Presume to seek peace rather in

41 He had already begun to question whether or not marriage, ordination, confirmation, and extreme unction were sacraments.
their own works than in the holy sacrament of God’s grace. For doctrines of men have hidden and taken from us the holy sacraments…  

He completed the first, *Ein Sermon von dem Sakrament der Buße*, in mid-October, the second, *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe* was published on November 9, 1519, and the third, *Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften* around December 24. All three tracts proved extremely popular and went through multiple editions. *Ein Sermon von dem Sakrament der Buße* went through fourteen editions in three years, *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe* saw sixteen different German editions between 1519 and 1523, and *Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften* saw fourteen German editions published by 1525. For the purposes of the present study, I have chosen to restrict my analysis to only the second and third tracts in this series. The sermon on penance is more didactic than contemplative. However, it is worth noting that Luther proposes a consistent definition of a sacrament in all three works. He asserts that a sacrament consists of three parts: its sign (physical manifestation), its significance, and the accompanying faith that believes the sacrament offers what it promises, i.e. divine grace and favor.

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42 “Luther to Margaret, Duchess of Brunswick,” in *Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, 227. *WA* 2, 713.


Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe

Of the three works in the sacramental trilogy, this particular treatise makes the most direct and obvious use of the language of dying to self and rising with Christ as Luther explores the imagery of baptism. He begins studying the etymology of the word baptism. Hearkening back to the original Greek “baptismos” and Latin words, “mersio”, Luther states that a baptism is literally plunging “something completely into the water, so that the water covers it.” However, this is only the first part of the baptismal action. The second part of the image is the drawing back out of the water. Together these two actions comprise baptism, corresponding with death, burial, and the resurrection of the dead. Luther laments the common practice of baptizing simply by pouring water and recommends a return to the ancient (and Eastern) practice of dipping an entire naked child into the font. He recommends this particular change for a couple of reasons.

First and foremost, Luther is concerned with narrative consistency. As he himself puts it, “We should therefore do justice to its meaning and make baptism a true and complete sign of the thing it signifies.” Luther was convinced that the action of baptism no longer corresponded to its own central metaphor: dying to sin and rising to new life. The pouring or sprinkling of water signifies neither burial nor new birth. Although Luther mentions St. Paul’s reference to baptism as a “washing of regeneration” in Titus, he chose to accentuate regeneration rather than washing in discussing the passage, and continued to speak of baptism as a new birth.

In a further exploration of the idea of baptism as the origin of new life, Luther suggests that the font be visualized as a uterus - the place where new life starts. The newly born emerges from a watery womb. Once again, immersion baptism serves as the

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47 LW 35, 29. WA 2, 727.
48 LW 35, 29. WA 2, 727.
best vehicle for this imagery. For Luther, a child should emerge from the baptismal womb just as it emerged from its mother’s womb: naked and fighting for life.

For just as a child is drawn out of his mother’s womb and is born, and through this fleshly birth is a sinful person and a child of wrath, so one is drawn out of baptism and is born spiritually.49

Luther then introduces another metaphor to explain the action of immersion baptism – that of a potter re-throwing a spoiled pot. From the fallen mass of clay arises a new creation – a better and more perfect piece of pottery.

“So,” says God, “are you in my hands.” In the first birth we are spoiled; therefore he thrusts us into the earth again by death, and makes us over at the Last Day, that we may be perfect and without sin.50

While this image moves a step away from the literal image of death, burial and resurrection, it still incorporates the idea of the destruction of one body and the new birth of another. Just as human beings are not able to rebirth themselves, likewise a pot is not able to re-throw itself, but needs the hands of its creator to refashion it. Yet again, this image can only be fully understood or explored in reference to immersion baptism.51

To assist with this reimaging of baptism, Luther seeks to demonstrate that this drowning of the old and sinful self, while a judgment of God, is also simultaneously a gracious and merciful act as well. Rather than leaving the self in its sin or condemned to death or hell forever, God has instead devised a way of killing it, i.e. bringing it to an end, and of creating a new self. This new life has nothing to do with anything one has previously done but is solely a gift of divine grace. This is his restatement of the Pauline/Augustinian narrative mentioned in the last chapter.

49 LW 35, 30. WA 2, 728.
50 LW 35, 32. WA 2, 729.
51 Luther also refers to baptism as a flood which kills, comparing it to Noah’s flood. He attempts to say that baptism has killed more people than the original flood. However, with this image, he wanders from his original metaphor and the significance of baptism for the individual Christian gets lost. See LW 35, 31-32. WA 2, 729.
The significance of baptism is a blessed dying unto sin and a resurrection in the grace of God, so that the old man, conceived and born in sin, is there drowned, and a new man, born in grace, comes forth and rises.52

Thus, the Christian life is to be understood from baptism to the grave as a process of dying and being made new.53 For Luther, this is more than a mere illustration. It is the very rhythm of Christian existence. Christians live out their baptisms every day. They die and rise again and again and again. This is as it is and must be. Why? Because although baptism happens but once in time, the dying to and/or drowning of sin is not completely fulfilled at the time of baptism. Instead, it will continue through life and not be completed until one dies.

Similarly the lifting up out of the baptismal water is quickly done, but the thing it signifies – the spiritual birth and the increase of grace and righteousness – even though it begins in baptism, lasts until death, indeed until the Last Day. Only then will that be finished which the lifting up out of baptism signifies. Then shall we arise from death, from sins, and from all evil, pure in body and soul, and then shall we live eternally.54

Here Luther anticipates the question about baptism’s utility: what good is it – how does it help, if it does not altogether blot out and remove sin? He responds by claiming that God allies God’s self with you in baptism and “becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort.”55 This “becoming one with God” is not a mystical union with the Godhead. Rather it is a divine-human exchange - the same sort of exchange Luther will speak of in his well known pamphlet of 1520, Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen. Through Christ, God has made God’s lot with the Christian. Consequently, all that Christ has becomes the Christian’s own possession and inheritance. Likewise, all of the Christian’s sins become Christ’s and he bears them to death, suffering their penalty, on the Christian’s behalf. Consequently, Christians should, in light of this divine-human

52 LW 35, 30. WA 2, 727.
53 LW 35, 30-31. WA 2, 728-729.
54 LW 35, 31. WA 2, 728-729.
55 LW 35, 33. WA 2, 730.
exchange, adopt the proper attitude towards and appropriation of their baptisms. They should make use of baptism, allowing it to work in their lives.

In the first place you give yourself up to the sacrament of baptism and to what it signifies. That is, you desire to die, together with your sins, and to be made new at the Last Day…God accepts this desire at your hands and grants you baptism. From that hour he begins to make you a new person. He pours into you his grace and Holy Spirit, who begins to slay nature and sin, and to prepare you for death and the resurrection at the Last Day.

In the second place, you pledge yourself to continue in this desire, and to slay your sin more and more as long as you live, even until your dying day. This too God accepts. He trains and tests you all your life long, with many good works and with all kinds of sufferings. Thereby he accomplishes what you in baptism have desired, namely, that you may become free from sin, die, and rise again at the Last Day, and so fulfill your baptism.56

Should Christians, however, be unwilling to pledge themselves to this perpetual dying to self, they will remain the same old persons and will “invalidate” their baptisms. On the other hand, if they consent to allowing God to kill and make them new, they will experience new life here and now.57 Luther makes clear that baptism is not just about the forgiveness of sin, but of sin’s destruction. This awareness should cheer Christians rather than terrify them.

Therefore there is no greater comfort on earth than baptism. For it is through baptism that we come under the judgment of grace and mercy, which does not condemn our sins but drives them out by many trials…For this reason no one should be terrified if he feels evil lust or love, nor should he despair even if he falls. Rather he should remember his baptism, and comfort himself joyfully with the fact that God has there pledged himself to slay his sin for him and not to count it a cause for condemnation, if only he does not say Yes to sin or remain in it. 58

56 LW 35, 33-34. WA 2, 730-731.

57 Luther still seems to speak of cooperation at this point in time. If we do our part, God will do God’s part. Consider the following passage from paragraph 10. [LW 35, 34. WA 2, 731.]

So long as you keep your pledge to God, he in turn gives you his grace. He pledges himself not to impute to you the sins which remain in your nature after baptism, neither to take them into account nor to condemn you because of them. He is satisfied and well pleased if you are constantly striving and desiring to conquer these sins and at your death to be rid of them…The one condition is that you rise again and enter again into the covenant.

58 LW 35, 35. WA 2, 731.
Luther flips the traditional narrative about death on its head. Instead of viewing it as just a wrathful judgment, he suggests that Christians understand it as a “judgment of grace and mercy.” God graciously puts sinful flesh to death so humanity doesn’t have to deal with sin forever.

Again in this treatise, Luther writes of the false narratives which mislead Christians. He rails against those narratives which rob baptism of its true meaning. He condemns the view that suggests that baptism eliminates all sin, making a person pure. The problem with this point of view is that it nurtures ignorance of one’s true condition. Such a person doesn’t recognize his/her sin, nor attempt to kill it. This renders his/her baptism ineffective, for s/he is no longer dying to him/herself. Luther goes so far as to say that those who do not attempt to strive against sin will not be forgiven their sins, because they do not live in accordance with their baptisms.\footnote{LW 35, 36-37. \textit{WA} 2, 731.} He also criticizes those who presume to blot out their sin by “satisfaction”. They have lost faith in the grace of baptism and have fallen back upon their own efforts. Becoming enamored with themselves, they seek to avoid dying rather than embracing it as the path to new life. Luther insists that they will find no peace in this approach, but will become victims of their own terrified consciences. Instead of despairing of their sin, they should again turn to baptism and claim the forgiveness offered there. Whenever they do this, “baptism again goes into force and operation.” \footnote{LW 35, 37. \textit{WA} 2, 731.}

In paragraph seventeen, Luther suggests that God makes use of the many human vocations to teach Christians how to die to self and rise with Christ. He makes mention of each person’s station in life and suggests that God utilizes them all. Through the suffering they endure God humbles Christians and teaches them to suffer and die to self. In his treatment of this subject he acknowledges that there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach
to Christian spirituality. Although the process can be described in a universal manner, i.e.
all must suffer and die, how one experiences this death will vary from person to person.
Each Christian must look at the particulars of his/her own life and discover what the
particular temptations, sins, and vices are that need to die.

God has given every saint a special way and a special grace for living according
to his baptism. But baptism and its significance God has set as a common
standard for everyone. Each of us is to examine himself according to his station in
life and is to find what is the best way for him to fulfill the work and purpose of
his baptism, namely, to slay sin and to die in order that Christ’s burden may thus
grow light and easy and not be carried with worry and care.61

…in baptism we all make one and the same vow: to slay sin and to become holy
through the work and grace of God, to whom we yield and offer ourselves, as clay
to the potter. In this no one is any better than another. But for a life in accordance
with baptism, for the slaying of sin, there can be no one method and no special
estate in life…there is no vow higher, better, or greater than the vow of baptism.
What more can we promise than to drive out sin, to die, to hate this life, and to
become holy?62

Instead of suggesting that a Christian grows through the external imposition of prescribed
penalties by a priest, Luther suggests that one grows as one learns to be more honest in
assessing one’s own life. Prescribed penalties were useless in reforming the individual.
They did not change anyone’s character, nor did they truly lead to the death of the self,
but rather caused the individual to forget about or ignore the task of dying to self. Instead
of seeing the need of dying, the Christian could buy back his/her innocence – an idea
which Luther found abhorrent.

We have thought that we are not to trust God until we are righteous and have
made satisfaction for our sin, as though we would buy God’s grace from him or
pay him for it.63

Luther believed that the commonplace narrative of personal satisfaction led to individual
presumption. Instead of taking one’s need of grace, forgiveness and new life, one dared

61 LW 35, 40. WA 2, 735.
62 LW 35, 41. WA 2, 735-736.
63 LW 35, 42. WA 2, 736-7376.
to believe that his/her sinfulness was not that extreme or problematic and could be easily remedied. Luther denied this.

Baptism is indeed that great a thing, that if you turn again from sins and appeal to covenant of baptism, your sins are forgiven. But watch out, if you thus wickedly and wantonly sin [and go presuming] on God’s grace, that the judgment does not lay hold upon you and anticipate your turning back. Beware lest, even if you then desired to believe or trust in your baptism, your trial [Anfechtung] be, by God’s decree, so great that your faith is not able to stand. If they scarcely remain who do not sin or who only all because of sheer weakness, where shall your wickedness remain, which has tempted and mocked God’s grace?64

In baptism, the Christian has proof of God’s commitment to eradicating sin. Yet this judgment is not one to be feared, but to be welcomed, for baptism prefigures not just death but also resurrection.

As Luther moves on to a discussion of faith, the third aspect of the sacrament, he lays out the narrative to which faith clings: the sacrament signifies death and resurrection; the sacrament begins and achieves what it signifies; it establishes a covenant between the Christian and God to the effect that the Christian agrees to fight against sin and slay it, and God agrees to be merciful to him/her. Being aware of this covenant should be a source of great comfort to the Christian for God has promised to impute Christ’s righteousness to us.

For the sin which remains after baptism makes it impossible for any good works to be pure before God. For this reason we must boldly and without fear hold fast to our baptism, and set it high against all sins and terrors of conscience. We must humbly admit, “I know full well that I cannot do a single thing that is pure. But I am baptized, and through my baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound himself in a covenant with me. He will not count my sin against me, but will slay it and blot it out.”65

One of Luther’s favorite devices for aiding contemplation is the invention of suggestive dialog. He uses this technique in almost all of the works under consideration. Often putting words into the mouth of God, Christ, the priest, the godparent, or even the

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64 LW 35, 43. WA 2, 737.
65 LW 35, 36. WA 2, 732.
individual soul, Luther writes, “It is as if so-and-so were to say,…”. For example, he writes about the priest’s role at a baptism,

> It is as if the priest, when he baptizes were to say, “Lo, you are sinful flesh. Therefore I drown you in God’s name and in his name condemn you to death, so that with you all your sins may die and be destroyed.”

or in confession,

> It is as if the priest, in the absolution, were saying, “Lo, God has now forgiven you your sin, as he long since promised you in baptism; and now he has commanded me, by the power of the keys, to assure you of this forgiveness. Therefore you now come again into that which baptism is and does. Believe and you have it. Doubt, and you are lost.

Similarly, he offers another dialog on behalf of the godparents present at a baptism.

> It is as if the sponsors, when they lift the child up out of baptism, were to say, “Lo, your sins are now drowned, and we receive you in God’s name into an eternal life of innocence.”

Through such invented dialogue the individual could meditate not just upon a set image, but could rather imagine being part of a conversation – part of an on-going narrative. Through this sort of contemplation, the reader might come to an understanding or appreciation of God, Christ, faith, etc. which they would find more comforting and more easily trusted.

_Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften_

This was the final treatise in Luther’s sacramental trilogy of 1519. It was published at some point before December 24 of that year. Fourteen German editions

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66 LW 35, 30. WA 2, 728.

67 LW 35, 38. WA 2, 733.

68 LW 35, 31. WA 2, 728.
appeared by 1525.69 There are obvious continuities with the previous two tracts. Luther remains very consistent in his definition of a sacrament, once again mentioning the threefold sign, significance, and faith.70 In a manner similar to his reasoning in *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe*, he advocates for distributing communion in both kinds. Doing so would allow communicants to more fully appreciate the true significance of the sacrament as they partake of it.71 This treatise, however, differs from the other two in the trilogy because it considers not only the sacrament’s individual dimensions, but also its communal aspects. Luther asserts that Holy Communion’s significance involves not just the individual Christian’s relationship with Christ, but with the entire community of faith.

He begins by considering etymology. Reflecting upon both the Greek and Latin words for communion, he points out that both *synaxis* and *communion* mean fellowship. Consequently, Luther declares that the sacrament’s primary focus is upon the fellowship of the saints. Referring to the image of a city and its citizens, he describes the communion of saints as the body of Christ or as the eternal city of God. The sacrament serves as a sign of one’s incorporation into this fellowship.72 Just as a citizen of a city might receive a document or token of his/her citizenship, so, too, the bread and wine bear witness to one’s citizenship in the communion of the saints. Given that a city’s citizens share with one another the city’s “name, honor, freedom, trade, customs, usages, support, protection and the like,” so, too, Christians share common merits within the communion of the saints.73

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70 *LW* 35, 49. *WA* 2, 742.
72 *LW* 35, 50-51. *WA* 2, 743.
This fellowship consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament. Again all sufferings and sins also become common property; and thus love engenders love in return and [mutual love] unites.\(^{74}\)

Luther links this conception of the communion of the saints back to St. Paul’s image in I Corinthians 12 of the inter-related parts of the physical body. Luther reminds his readers that Christians should, on account of their interconnectedness, care for one another. Writing in a somewhat humorous fashion, he asserts,

…if anyone’s foot hurts him, yes, even the little toe, the eye at once looks at it, the fingers grasp it, the face puckers, the whole body bends over to it, and all are concerned with this small member; again once it is cared for all the other members are benefited.\(^{75}\)

Luther goes on to remind his readers that sharing in the benefits of the community is only one side of the equation. Citizens also must share in the dangers and burdens of the community, including taxation, as well. Should there be fire or flood, an enemy attack or a plague, all citizens are equally at risk and are obligated to come to one another’s aid.\(^{76}\) Likewise in the sacrament of communion, the Christian not only asks Christ and the saints to bear his/her own ill, but must prove willing to bear with their suffering as well.

In this sacrament…man is given through the priest a sure sign from God himself that he is thus united with Christ and his saints and has all things in common [with them], that Christ’s sufferings and life are his own, together with the lives and sufferings of all the saints. Therefore whoever does injury to [the believer], does injury to Christ and all the saints…On the other hand whoever does him a kindness does it to Christ and all his saints…Again, man must be willing to share all the burdens and misfortunes of Christ and his saints, the cost and well as the profit.\(^{77}\)

There are a number of things to be said about this image. To begin, Luther is reinterpreting the meaning of the sacrament. This is a new and different narrative. His

\(^{74}\) LW 35, 51. WA 2, 743.

\(^{75}\) LW 35, 52. WA 2, 743-744.

\(^{76}\) LW 35, 51-52. WA 2, 743.

\(^{77}\) LW 35, 52-53. WA 2, 744.
focus is neither upon the transubstantiated elements nor upon the priest’s role in transforming them. He is not asking the Christian to adore or revere the elements. Instead, he points beyond the elements themselves to the narrative image of the communion of the saints. Once again, Luther strives to show that the alternative narrative he proposes is consonant with the ancient catholic tradition. He criticizes the practice of withholding the cup from the laity. According to him, this practice accentuated a narrative that made the distinction between clergy and laity itself the focus of the sacrament, thereby obscuring the fellowship which all Christians share. By advocating the distribution of communion in both kinds Luther sought to restore to the sacrament its primary narrative. Luther also believed that by accentuating the communion of the saints as the primary narrative of the sacrament, Holy Communion would become a more cherished source of comfort and consolation for Christians.  

Through participation in the sacrament, they would remember that they are not alone – Christ and the saints stand with them and offer them assistance through the sacrament.

God gives us this sacrament, as much as to say, “Look, many kinds of sin are assailing you; take this sign by which I give you my pledge that this sin is assailing not only you but also my Son, Christ, and all his saints in heaven and on earth. Therefore take heart and be bold. You are not fighting alone. Great help and support are all around you.”

As he did in *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*, Luther mentions again in this treatise the three dread images of sin, death, and hell, suggesting again that God provides

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78 In a manner somewhat reminiscent of Thesis 18 of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther states in paragraph eleven of this treatise that in order for the Christian to take comfort in the sacrament, s/he must first become aware of his/her need of comfort. Luther retells the story of the Last Supper, suggesting that Christ purposefully forced his disciples to contemplate his upcoming death and departure before sharing the sacrament of his body and blood with them for the first time. This revelation of his upcoming Passion troubled the disciples. The additional revelation that one of them would betray him terrified them. Only after reaching this point, according to Luther, were the disciples ready to receive the sacrament and the strength that it offered. Likewise he believes the Passover liturgy with its requirement to eat the meal “with bitter herbs, standing, and with haste” served a similar function. By first alerting its celebrants of the gravity of the original situation, they were better prepared to appreciate and give thanks for their promised salvation. See *LW 35*, 55-56. *WA 2*, 746.

this sacrament to calm sin-stricken consciences and help them to overcome the terror of death and hell.\textsuperscript{80}

Luther also spends time reflecting on the sacramental elements themselves and encourages his readers to do the same. Just as many grains of wheat are ground together into flour to make one loaf of bread and many grapes and drops of wine come together in one, so, too, many individuals come together to form the one Christian community; they are bound together in one communion with one common purpose.

Christ with all saints, by his love, takes upon himself our form, fights with us against sin, death, and all evil. This enkindles in us such love that we take on his form, rely upon his righteousness, life, and blessedness. And through the interchange of his blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common. O this is a great sacrament, says St. Paul, that Christ and the church are one flesh and bone. Again through this same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own; we are to take upon ourselves their form and their necessity, and all the good that is within our power we are to make theirs, that they may profit from it. That is real fellowship, and that is the true significance of this sacrament. In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love. Without love there can be no such change.\textsuperscript{81}

The next image Luther explores is the literal incorporation of food into the body. Just as the food we eat becomes a part of our body itself, so, too, Christ becomes a part of the Christian as s/he ingests Christ’s body and blood. Luther encourages his reader to visualize this in a literal way before seeking to understand it spiritually.

Christ appointed these two forms of bread and wine, rather than any other, as a further indication of the very union and fellowship which is in this sacrament. For there is no more intimate, deep, and indivisible union that the union of the food with him who is fed. Other unions, achieved by such things as nails, glue, cords, and the like, do not make one indivisible substance of the objects joined together. Thus in the sacrament we too become united with Christ and are made one body with all the saints, so that Christ cares for us and acts in our behalf. As if he were what we are, he makes whatever concerns us to concern him as well, and even more than it does us. In turn we so care for Christ, as if we were what he is, which indeed we shall finally be – we shall be conformed to his

\textsuperscript{80} LW 35, 58. WA 2, 748.

\textsuperscript{81} LW 35, 58. WA 2, 748.
likeness...So deep and complete is the fellowship of Christ and all the saints with us. Thus our sins assail him, while his righteousness protects us. For the union makes all things common, until at last Christ completely destroys sin in us and makes us like himself, at the Last Day. Likewise by the same love we are to be united with our neighbors, we in them and they in us.82

While Luther’s choice of words here is somewhat reminiscent of mystical language, his narrative does not fit traditional mystical narratives. Rather than advocating a present mystical union with God or Christ, he recommends visualizing instead Christ’s redemptive and healing presence entering one’s body. He expresses this in terms of an exchange of attributes. As Christ becomes a part of the Christian’s life, he will replace the Christian’s sinful flesh with his own righteous and pure body and blood. Someday when this exchange is fully complete, the Christian will be fully righteous like Christ, and all of the Christian’s sins will have been assumed and subsumed by Christ. In this exchange, the individual’s personality is not extinguished or replaced, but rather perfected. Luther believes that this image of a divine-human exchange will bring great comfort to his readers, and he urges them to visualize it in a literal and graphic fashion. As they die, Christ renews them from within by Christ’s own active redemptive presence. Christians becomes Christ-like not through individual effort, but by allowing Christ to take root within them.

This image sheds light on Luther’s insistence on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. If the primary metaphor for Christian existence is dying and rising [being joined] with Christ, then visualizing this indivisible union of food and body serves as a potent illustration of Christ’s presence within the Christian. By insisting on the real presence of Christ, Luther affirms not merely that Christ is present with Christians as they commune, but that Christ is taking up residence within each one of them as they

82 LW 35, 59. WA 2, 748-749.
ingest Christ’s body and blood. In this act, Christ is at work, building himself up within them, replacing their diseased and sinful bodies bit by bit with his own.

Luther presses this imagery even further, returning to the sacrament’s social dimension. Just as Christ gives himself to build up Christians, so they should do the same for their neighbors. For Luther, the communion of the saints is not just an expression of the hope of a common eternal destiny, nor simply is it a synonym for the church. Rather, it is a lived reality, i.e. an actual present community, though extended through space and time. Christians exist in and through one another and are bound together by love. Without such love, there is no true community. Luther’s manifold critiques of the contemporary church throughout the treatise concern this lack of true fellowship and love within the church. Turning to Scripture (and church history), he asserts that in times past Christians rightly comprehended the fellowship of the sacrament when they gathered food and materials goods in the church and distributed them to the needy.

Christians cared for one another, supported one another, sympathized with one another, bore one another’s burdens and affliction. This has all disappeared, and now there remain only the many masses and the many who receive this sacrament without in the least understanding or practicing what it signifies.

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83 *LW 35*, 59-60. *WA 2*, 749. In speaking of the imagery of the communion elements, Luther suggests that Christ’s body and blood each indicate different things. Christ’s body represents what he accomplished while in the flesh, i.e. his teaching and works. His blood, on the other hand, testifies to his Passion and suffering. Luther claims Christians should not only remain cognizant of both aspects, but receive both elements.

84 If one reflects upon the practice of organ transplantation in our own day and time, the intent of this image makes more sense. Often family members give their consent to organ transplantation because they take comfort in the thought of their loved one’s organs being transplanted into many different recipients. In this way, the victim will continue to live on in all of the recipients. His/Her heart will keep someone else’s blood pumping; his/her eyes will allow someone else to see; etc. Likewise, Christ’s own body becomes a part of those who feed upon him by faith. Christ becomes not just proximally present to the communing Christian, but rather bodily present within him/her.

85 This is likely a reference to Colossians 3:12-15.

86 *LW 35*, 55-56. *WA 2*, 748. Ironically, though, the communion of the saints here on earth will always remain hidden and invisible. Were it otherwise, Christians would look to the transient and temporal for comfort instead of to God. The sacrament of communion then bears witness to the eternal and asks of Christians their faith in the moment. However, in the future, death will remove them from the realm of the visible and transport them into realm of the eternal. See *LW 35*, 65-66. *WA 2*, 752-753.

87 *LW 35*, 57. *WA 2*, 747.
Likewise, in the present, Christians should live their lives for the sake of one another. Communion, then is not simply something for Christians to receive, but is rather a mode or manner of living in which one dies to self and lives for the sake of the neighbor.

See to it also that you give yourself to everyone in fellowship and by no means exclude anyone in hatred or anger. For this sacrament of fellowship, love, and unity cannot tolerate discord and disunity. You must take to heart the infirmities and needs of others, as if they were your own. Then offer to others your strength, as if it were their own, just as Christ does for you in the sacrament. This is what it means to be changed into one another through love, out of many particles to become one bread and drink, to lose one’s own form and take on that which is common to all.\(^88\)

He then offers a stern warning. Should Christians think that they can avoid doing for their neighbors what they themselves seek from Christ, they will receive only death in the sacrament.\(^89\)

But Christ has given his holy body for this purpose, that the thing signified by the sacrament – the fellowship, the change wrought by love – may be put into practice. And Christ values his spiritual body, which is the fellowship of his saints, more than his own natural body. To him it is more important, especially in this sacrament, that faith in the fellowship with him and with his saints may be properly exercised and become strong in us; and that we, in keeping with it, may properly exercise our fellowship with one another...It is more needful that you discern the spiritual than the natural body of Christ; and faith in the spiritual body is more necessary than faith in the natural body. For the natural without the spiritual profits us nothing in this sacrament; a change must occur [in the communicant] and be exercised through love.\(^90\)

Here Luther reminds his readers once again that the significance of a sacrament is more important than its sign. Interestingly, he states that the true significance of Holy Communion is not Christ’s physical body, but rather the fellowship of the saints. Christ

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\(^89\) *LW* 35, 62-63. *WA* 2, 751-752. Consider as well, the following passage from paragraph 13: [*LW* 35, 57-58. *WA* 2, 747-748.]

They are self-seeking persons, whom this sacrament does not benefit...we on our part must make the evil of others our own, if we desire Christ and his saints to make our evil their own. Then will the fellowship be complete, and justice be done to the sacrament. For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he is made one with all others.

\(^90\) *LW* 35, 62. *WA* 2, 750-751.
suffered pain and death not only so Christians might feel sorry or guilty about it, but also that they might learn to be Christ’s body for one another. Loving each other as Christ has loved them is the intended goal of Christian community. At the end of the treatise, Luther reflects upon the fraternal brotherhoods that existed in his day. Though not a part of the institutional hierarchy, these groups supposedly existed to strengthen Christian fellowship and promote piety. Luther asserts that the brotherhoods, to the contrary, used the pretense of spiritual fellowship as an excuse to justify immoral and unchristian behavior. They did not work together for the common good. They did not bear with one another’s burdens. Instead of encouraging the death of the self, the brotherhoods took pride in their religious accomplishments. Their supposedly pious actions were self-serving. Making use of a false narrative, they drew people away from true fellowship.

Consequently, Luther seeks to redirect their focus back to the core.

…since the Christian fellowship is at present in a bad way, such as it has never been before, and is daily growing worse, especially among those in high places, and since all places are full of sin and shame, you should be concerned not about how many masses are said, or how often the sacrament is celebrated—for this will make things worse rather than better—but about how much you and others increase in that which the sacrament signifies and in the faith which it demands. For therein alone lies improvement. And the more you find yourself being incorporated into the fellowship of Christ and his saints, the better it is with you.⁹¹

In an effort to support his reinterpretation of communion, Luther returns to a short discussion of baptism. He states again that baptism is the “taking up or entering upon a new life.”⁹² While this new birth happens but once, the trials and adversities of life are constant. Accordingly, Holy Communion provides the necessary on-going support and assistance.⁹³ This is why he encourages frequent communion – that Christians might be

⁹¹ LW 35, 72. WA 2, 757.
⁹² LW 35, 55. WA 2, 746.
⁹³ LW 35, 55. WA 2, 746. He offers a number of further contemplative images for the Christian’s meditation in paragraph 21, suggesting that Holy Communion can be visualized as “a ford, a bridge, a door, a ship, and a stretcher, by which and in which we pass from this world into eternal life.” See LW 35, 66. WA 2, 753.
oft reminded of their true place within the communion of saints. In paragraph 22, Luther further illustrates the inter-relationship of baptism and communion. He reaffirms that baptism kills and makes alive and that communion nourishes and strengthens the Christian.

We have, therefore, two principal sacraments in the church, baptism and the bread. Baptism leads us into a new life on earth; the bread guides us through death into eternal life. And the two are signified by the Red Sea and the Jordan, and by the two lands, one beyond and one on this side of the Jordan. This is why our Lord said at the Last Supper, “I shall not drink again of this wine until I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” [Matt. 26:29]. So entirely is this sacrament intended and instituted for a strengthening against death and an entrance into eternal life.94

Making use of the stories of the Israelites passing through the Red Sea in the book of Exodus and through the Jordan River in the book of Joshua, Luther explicates the sacraments in Pauline fashion in this same paragraph.

This was signified long ago in Joshua 3[:14–17]. After the children of Israel had gone dry-shod through the Red Sea [Exod. 14:21–22]—in which [event] baptism was typified—they went through the Jordan also in like manner. But the priests stood with the ark in the Jordan, and the water below them was cut off, while the water above them rose up like a mountain—in which [event] this sacrament is typified. The priests hold and carry the ark in the Jordan when, in the hour of our death or peril, they preach and administer to us this sacrament, the fellowship of Christ and all saints. If we then believe, the waters below us depart; that is, the things that are seen and transient do nothing but flee from us. The waters above us, however, well up high; that is, the horrible torments of the other world, which we envision at the hour of death, terrify us as if they would overwhelm us. If, however, we pay no attention to them, and walk over with a firm faith, then we shall enter dry-shod and unharmed into eternal life.95

Here it would seem that Luther’s understanding of the Eucharist reverts back to an individualistic understanding of communion. He references not the communion of saints, but simply the comfort and strength to face death. However, when one remembers how he understands this comfort, i.e. in terms of the communion of the saints who await

94 LW 35, 67. WA 2, 754.
95 LW 35, 66-67. WA 2, 753.
and support the dying Christian, Luther’s images remain consistent. Also, while it might appear that Luther has wandered in this tract from his primary metaphor of dying to self and rising with Christ, this is not the case. On the contrary, he affirms at the conclusion of the main body of the text that communion exists to assist Christians in crucifying the old self and rising to new life – a new social existence in which they live for the sake of one another instead of merely for themselves. The sacrament bears witness not only to the new life which animates them, but of which they have become a part as a member of the body of Christ.

Thus by means of this sacrament, all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all; and through the change wrought by love there is one bread, one drink, one body, one community. This is the true unity of Christian brethren.96

The communion of the saints is, for Luther, not simply an invisible, ontic relationship that will become apparent only in the next life, but is rather a current, existential reality. Christ has given to his members a new way to live life – a way that moves them beyond the bondages of life as they’ve known them before. This new life in Christ is a consciousness of one’s changed status before God that gives one the courage to live life in a new way. No longer do doubt, guilt, and shame keep one from loving God or neighbor. No longer do these things remain barriers to faith. Instead, Christians have been freed to love by the awareness of God’s awesome and undeserved generosity. By utilizing this new narrative, Luther seeks to ground Christians’ identity not in an individual’s merits (or lack thereof), but rather in Christ and in the other Christians who are part of his body. By visualizing their existence in this manner, Luther believed Christians would not only gain a clearer and more comforting understanding of themselves, but would be returning to and exercising the primary Christian narrative. He makes clear that mere intellectual knowledge of doctrine is not enough. Neither is

96 LW 35, 67. WA 2, 754.
speculative theology helpful. On the contrary, what matters most is that one possesses the existential trust in the divine promises.

There are those who practice their arts and subtleties by trying [to fathom] what becomes of the bread when it is changed into Christ’s flesh and of the wine when it is changed into his blood and how the whole Christ, his flesh and blood, can be encompassed in so small a portion of bread and wine. It does not matter if you do not see [seek] it. It is enough to know that it is a divine sign in which Christ’s flesh and blood are truly present. The how and the where, we leave to him.\(^97\)

Although he makes a distinction between an *opus operatum*, a work completed, and an *opus operantis*, a work made use of, in paragraph twenty, he suggests in the end that it would be better to give up using these sorts of technical definitions altogether: “…such expressions as *opus operatum* and *opus operantis* are vain words of men, more of a hindrance than a help.\(^98\) Instead he urges his readers simply to desire the sacrament and believe that it offers them what it promises.

…to receive the sacrament is nothing else than to desire all [that it imparts] and firmly to believe that it is done…it is not enough to know what the sacrament is and signifies. It is not enough that you know it is a fellowship and a gracious exchange or blending of our sin and suffering with the righteousness of Christ and his saints. You must also desire it and firmly believe that you have received it.\(^99\)

This is an intriguing statement. Luther says it is not enough to know the literal Passion narrative. Neither is it enough to comprehend the significance of that narrative. Rather, one must desire its benefits in order to experience them. When Christians grasp that God is for them, that Christ has suffered for them, that the sacrament has been provided for them, they will find comfort and consolation.

The next chapter will consider Luther’s devotional treatise, *Tessaradecas consolatoria pro laborantibus et oneratis*. Although this piece would have been

\(^97\) *LW* 35, 60-61. *WA* 2, 749-750.

\(^98\) *LW* 35, 63. *WA* 2, 751-752. I’m not convinced that Luther’s argument is sound. The traditional understanding still required one to believe that the work performed by the priest had divine legitimation and sanction.

\(^99\) *LW* 35, 60. *WA* 2, 749-750.
understood as a form of consolation literature, Luther gave this contemplation a new and creative form. He also continued to make use of the Pauline narrative. Luther urges his readers to place themselves in the center of space and time in order that they might acquire a new vision of the cosmos and their place in it.
CHAPTER IV
A STUDY OF LUTHER’S TESSARADECAS CONSOLATORIA

All four of Luther’s devotional works considered in the previous chapter were based upon common medieval devotional forms: passion and sacramental devotions and the *ars moriendi*. This chapter explores Luther’s *Tessaradecas Consolatoria pro laborantibus et onerantis*, commonly known in English as *Fourteen Consolations*. *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* differs from the other four works in several key respects. While treatises of spiritual consolation, especially for the infirm and dying, were common in the medieval era, popular devotions usually encouraged petitioning specific saints. In *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* Luther deliberately moves away from this traditional devotional practice towards a new one of his own design. Consequently, *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* is more creative and original than the other four works. Another distinction of *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* is its focus. Its central contemplative image or anchor is oneself – suspended in space and time. Instead of beginning with biblical or ecclesiastical images or characters, Luther calls upon his readers to reflect upon their own lives by imagining the actual goods and evils they have experienced or continue to experience. This involves considering not only their individual places in the world, but within the entire range of their relationships. These distinctive features, among others, make *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* deserving of a detailed study.

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1 At a forum I presented in January 2011, someone suggested that Luther’s directional imagery might be taken from St. Patrick’s Breastplate. [“Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ in breadth, Christ in length, Christ in height, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.”] While there is indeed a similar directional focus, the image of Christ all around is a bit different than Luther’s emphasis on the evils and goods which surround the Christian.
At the center of early modern Catholic spirituality stood a large, complex, and universal image/narrative: the medieval cosmos. Multi-tiered, it consisted not only of earth and the visible celestial bodies, but of heaven, hell, and purgatory as well. This larger world was inhabited by diverse personages who were linked to one another in an extended web of relationships. Atop this web was the Trinity, along with Mary, the mother of God and bride of Christ. Below them were angelic beings of differing species: cherubim, seraphim, etc., who served as divine emissaries. The heavenly realm was also populated by the saints – noble human beings who had been elevated to serve as mediators between heaven and earth on account of their great virtue. All of these characters represented the positive side of the cosmos; yet the web of relationships included evil elements. The devil and an army of demons also inhabited the medieval world, intervening in human affairs and disturbing God’s order and intentions. In addition, aside from the saints in heaven, the remainder of human beings who had already lived and died made up still another part of the cosmic web. Most of these deceased found themselves in purgatory – a sort of temporary way-station dedicated to the thorough cleansing of souls – a cleansing which ordinarily took an exceedingly long time. There remained, as well, those exceptionally unfortunate souls who had been condemned to eternal torture in hell. Medieval Christians saw themselves standing in relationship to all these characters.

In his book, The Reformation of the Dead, Craig Koslofsky writes of this perceived continuity between the world of the living and that of the dead. The dead, though not tangible (usually) to the senses, simply passed into another social grouping. For the living, souls in purgatory were accessible in a way not at all unlike those living in a distant country. They believed that the deaths of others hadn’t severed their relationships with the living, but had only separated them spatially from one another.
Since death did not end these relationships, the living continued to bear a responsibility to the dead: namely to pray for them, underwrite masses on their behalf, purchase indulgences for them in order to shorten their time in purgatory, and tend to their graves. This continuity between the living and the dead was tangible in the churchyards. In addition to being places of burial, they were also often places of community and commerce.²

Medieval Christians also believed that the saintly dead owed to the living the responsibility of interceding for them in heaven and assisting them with their earthly problems. Therefore, they invoked the heavenly saints for blessings and/or specific requests. They asked Mary to use her position to influence either the Father or the Son on their behalfs. They sometimes turned to angels for protection. They made use of sacramentals, material items thought to contain spiritual power, and went on pilgrimages to distant sites in the hope of finding divine favor there.³ If none of these practices offered them the assistance they were seeking, they even turned to demons and/or the devil for help in changing the status quo. In other words, medieval Christians sought to optimize as many relationships throughout the cosmic web as possible.

Images abounded in churches to assist Christians in visualizing this complicated cosmos, as well as remembering the intricacies of its many relationships. Cosmic characters were represented in statuary, stained glass, and woodcarvings. They were ever present in the feast days of the Christian calendar, in parish liturgies, local festivals and popular legends. Certain religious commemorations were linked to annual agrarian cycles. Many believed that the success or failure of a community’s agricultural production was tied to the health and/or status of the community’s relationship to a patron saint or other divine figure. Thus, ignoring one’s responsibilities to the divine realm


could result in dire consequences. Consequently, many medieval devotional forms involved contemplation of or interaction with these various cosmic personages. Simply put, medieval Christians sought to take advantage of whatever means they could to please or placate divine or demonic beings throughout their lives, and in their last living moments. After having done as much as they could on their own, the dying would call upon a representative of the Church to mediate between heaven and earth as they drew near death’s door.

While this extended cosmic narrative was intended to engender hope and faith within the hearts and minds of medieval Christians, it often aroused fear and despair instead. Some clerics, religious, and spiritual authors explicitly made use of the cosmic narrative to generate fear. They believed fear functioned as an appropriate motivator to stimulate good behavior: those who were afraid of hell, a lengthy sojourn in purgatory, or the assaults of the devil and his minions supposedly would refrain from those activities which would lead to such ends. However, early in his career Martin Luther became convinced that fear tactics were usually counter-productive and could not deliver the good behavior they were supposed to produce. On the contrary, they actually led to more fear, despair, and/or cynicism, robbing people of true faith. Luther’s attack on indulgences in 1517 was more than a critique of suspect ecclesiastical practice and bad theology. It called into question the entire cosmic narrative upon which medieval Catholic spirituality had come to be based, specifically its motivational basis. Luther became convinced that what was most needed was a recasting of the central narrative, and he believed this could be best accomplished by reinterpreting traditional devotional forms. Thus, he sought in a variety of ways to convince early modern Christians that

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they should trust rather than fear God. This shift in narrative is readily apparent in *Tessaradecas Consolatoria*.

**The Historical Context of *Tessaradecas Consolatoria***

When Luther inadvertently became embroiled in controversy in the late fall of 1517, he was fortunate enough to enjoy the protection of Duke Frederick, Elector of Saxony. Frederick seemed to like the notoriety Luther brought to his newly-founded university. With controversy came attention; and with attention came new students, eager to see and hear what was happening. As Luther’s conflict with the church hierarchy continued to intensify over the next couple of years, Wittenberg remained still a relatively good and safe place for him to be. However, this all threatened to change in 1519.

Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor, died on January 12, 1519. As elector of Saxony, Duke Frederick would vote for the next emperor at the imperial diet. In June, he traveled to the Diet of Frankfurt. After a series of complicated negotiations, the diet elected Charles V of Spain as the new Holy Roman Emperor on June 28. Upon Frederick’s return to Torgau from the Diet, he grew seriously ill with fever, gout, and kidney stones – sick enough some feared he would die.

The prospect of his death was both a perceived and a real threat to Luther. Without the duke’s protection, Luther’s ability to continue to teach and preach openly might have been quickly curtailed. His personal safety would have been at risk, too. George Spalatin, the duke’s personal chaplain and a friend of Luther, asked Luther to write a devotional tract for Frederick. Spalatin evidently thought that it would bring

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6 *LW* 42, 119.

comfort and encouragement to Frederick to know that his university’s most famous scholar was thinking about him during his illness. Luther agreed to take on the task, though he did not begin writing until August. He finished a short treatise on August 29, but didn’t forward it to Spalatin until nearly a month later, i.e. on September 22.⁸ He requested that Spalatin translate it from Latin into German for the duke’s sake.⁹ Spalatin completed his translation near the end of November.

In formatting *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* Luther walked a fine line. He knew he needed to provide Duke Frederick not only with appropriate material for contemplation, but also with accessible and familiar devotions as well. He was aware, too, that Frederick had for some time been acquiring a massive collection of relics in the hopes of turning Wittenberg into a pilgrimage destination.¹⁰ Referencing some of these relics would have been a natural choice for Luther. However, he was already beginning to question the appropriateness of the veneration of relics and saints.

Luther chose to begin his treatise by referring to a work of visual art with which Frederick was familiar: a panel from the altarpiece of the Torgau Marienkirche. Frederick and his brother Duke John had commissioned Lucas Cranach to paint this particular piece in 1503.¹¹ Luther knew Duke Frederick would have seen this painting regularly when worshipping there. The two side panels of the screen contain portraits of the two dukes; the middle panel shows the Holy Family. On the predella is a painting of the Vierzehn Nothelfer, a collection of saints popular in Germany. Luther references this particular painting in his dedicatory letter.

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⁸ It was about this very same time that Luther wrote *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*. There are obvious similarities between the two works and the one likely provided material for the other.

⁹ *LW* 42,115.

¹⁰ Heckel, “Einleitung,” x. A Wittenberg register from 1518 numbered the city’s collection at 17, 443 pieces. According to Heckel, viewing these relics was supposed to free one from 127, 799 years and 116 days in purgatory!

¹¹ Heckel states that Hans Preuss was the first to suggest that the altar screen in the Marienkirche in Torgau served as Luther’s inspiration and starting point.
I have put together these fourteen chapters after the fashion of an altar screen and have given them the name Fourteen Consolations. They are to replace the fourteen saints whom our superstition has invented and called “The Defenders Against All Evils.”

Although the earliest references to Vierzehn Nothelfer extend back to the ninth century, the cult grew in popularity especially during the fourteenth century during outbreaks of the plague. For example, an altar in the parish church of Krems, Austria, dates to 1284 and another in Munich’s St. Peter’s Church to 1348. However, the usual legend concerning the group’s collective veneration involved a series of apparitions in 1445-1446.

According to the legend, the shepherd-boy of the Cistercian Abbey of Langheim in Frankenthal was commanded to build a church to honor these fourteen saints. The community built and consecrated a chapel by 1448 and it quickly became a pilgrimage site. In 1466 Pope Paul II sanctioned a brotherhood which was devoted to the cult. While each of the fourteen saints was venerated for his/her own distinctive divine assistance, devotion to the entire group was believed to be even more effective. Devotion to the cult spread to Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Bohemia, Moravia, Galicia, and even North America.

In Cranach’s painting, St. Christopher the martyr is pictured in the center. Barely visible behind him sits the Christ child. To Christopher’s left are Blaise (or Blasius), bishop and martyr; Pantaleon, another bishop martyr and the patron saint of physicians; Mauritius (Achatius or Acacius), a martyr invoked against headaches; George, the soldier

12 LW 42, 123. WA 6, 106.
15 The fourteen angels mentioned in the lost children's prayer in Engelbert Humperdinck's opera, Hansel und Gretel, are the Fourteen Helpers. During the reform of the liturgy in 1969, the Roman Catholic Church removed five of the saints from the list of universal veneration on the grounds that they were mythical. The collective feast day on August 8 was dropped as well. See http://saints.sqpn.com/fourteen-holy-helpers/.
martyr who was petitioned for the health of domestic animals; and Eustachius (or Eustace), another martyr who was invoked against family discord. On Christopher’s right hand are Denis (or Dionysius), another bishop martyr invoked against headache as well; Giles (or Agidius), hermit and abbot invoked against plague and/or for a good confession; Cyriac, the deacon martyr, invoked against temptation on one’s death bed; Vitus (or Guy), a martyr invoked against leprosy; Erasmus (or Elmo), a bishop martyr invoked against intestinal ailments; Barbara, virgin martyr invoked against fever and sudden death; and Margaret the virgin martyr, invoked in childbirth.16

Figure 1. 14 Nothelfer

Source: Lucas Cranach the Elder, oil painting (1507)

After mentioning the painting in the dedicatory letter, Luther rather surprisingly pokes fun at the idea of turning to this particular grouping of saints as a source of contemplation, declaring such a devotion to be a superstitious invention.17 Instead he puts

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17 Cranach’s painting is a rather odd picture; the fourteen saints don’t appear all that holy or helpful.
forward fourteen alternate images and in so doing creates an entirely new devotional form.

Now this is a spiritual screen and not made of silver. The book is not meant to adorn the walls of churches, but to uplift and strengthen the pious heart. I trust that it will be a great help to your Lordship in your present condition. The book consists of two parts: the first part deals with the seven images of evil, a contemplation of which will make the troubles of the present lighter. The second part also has seven images, but of blessings, gathered together for the same purpose.18

Luther suggests that these pictures are meant to be hung internally in one’s heart rather than on the walls of a church. This inward shift is significant. Luther’s goal is no longer to seek the correct means to please or placate the appropriate divine or demonic beings. Rather, he advises the Elector to develop the right mindset towards his suffering. Luther seeks to portray suffering not primarily in terms of external conflicts, but in terms of internal dynamics. The cosmic battle is not being fought “out there” in the larger world so much as within one’s own anxious and troubled mind. Since the battle is internal, so is the remedy. According to Luther, the solution to suffering consists of calming one’s troubled mind. By learning to put one’s sufferings into the proper internal perspective and by shifting one’s focus from the evils one is suffering to the divine blessings one is receiving or will receive, Luther believes the Elector will find consolation for his troubles. Heckel describes Luther’s method nicely.

[Luther] doesn’t leave the contemplative in the role of an observer, as an outsider who can behave either this way or that, but instead builds the images around the person and uses them like a mirror, in which the person sees truth and reality in accordance with proper degrees and values... The image of the Fourteen Holy Helpers no longer constitutes the center, but instead the image of God’s reality – hidden under being and suffering and revealed by faith – becomes central. The escape to intermediaries is cut off; one must face up to reality. The question of suffering, illness, death, i.e. of evils (but also of goods), is a highly personal matter rather than simply a natural or material-magical one that can be passed off on others. Here one must face oneself. The transformation from sensory-material

18 LW 42, 123, WA 6, 106.
piety into personal, spiritual, realistic piety gives the concept [of suffering] a new shape. This change is more than a psychological method and more than an external form, it is inherent in the new content of the question.\textsuperscript{19}

In spite of moving away from a contemplative focus upon a piece of visual art, \textit{Tessaradecas Consolatoria} remains in many ways a “visual work”, geared towards the mind’s eye.\textsuperscript{20} Luther calls each of his reflections a “spectrum”, though he uses the term “imago” frequently as well.\textsuperscript{21} In each of these fourteen images, Luther encourages the elector to visualize himself in space and time. He surrounds him with particular evils and blessings. By means of this technique, Luther shifts the elector’s focus from the cosmic web of relationships to the state of his own internal world. While on the surface Luther’s \textit{Tessaradecas Consolatoria} appears to offer simple expressions of conventional piety, in actuality it is a series of subtle, intellectual spiritual exercises. There are layers of interpretation that make the work accessible to a wide range of readers with differing levels of comprehension. This accessibility likely contributed to its popular appeal. Many of the themes present in the four works considered in the previous chapter are also present in \textit{Tessaradecas Consolatoria} as well: death and new birth, the happy exchange,

\textsuperscript{19} Heckel, “Einleitung,” xiv-xv. My translation.


\textsuperscript{20} See Carl C. Christensen, \textit{Art and the Reformation in Germany}, Studies in the Reformation, vol. 2. (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1981). Christensen offers a nice summary of Reformation iconoclasm and Luther’s theology on the creation of art, as well as a history of the major Lutheran artists of the Reformation period.

\textsuperscript{21} “Spectrum” is an interesting term, for it often designates an apparition or ghost. One wonders if Luther might have chosen this term to reference narratives that haunt, i.e. that generate fear.
fear of sin, death, and the devil, etc. However Luther’s contemplation of them rises here to new levels.

The Structure of Tessaradecas Consolatoria

*Tessaradecas Consolatoria* has of five distinct sections. The first is the dedicatory letter to Duke Frederick. In this letter, Luther pays respect to his patron and gives information on the treatise’s origin and form. The second section is a short introduction in which Luther details the treatise’s structure and offer instructions to the Elector about how to use it as a contemplative exercise. The next two sections each consist of seven images, images which mirror each other. The first of these focuses on the evils which are always a part of Christians’ lives. The second considers the good which both surrounds and fills Christians’ lives. Both of these sections make use of the same central, contemplative device: the self suspended in time and space. Figure 2 illustrates the relative locations of each of these representative evils and goods. The fifth and final section of the work is its short concluding paragraph expressing Luther’s hope that his treatise has pleased the duke.

In order to simplify references to the fourteen images contained in sections three and four, I have designated each with a dual numeral. First, a Roman numeral I or II signifies whether the image comes from the first or second set of images. This is followed by an Arabic numeral from 1-7, which marks the particular image in the set. Thus, the treatise’s overall eighth image will be referred to as II.1.
Dedicatory Letter

Luther begins his dedicatory letter to Duke Frederick with the reminder that not only did Christ command his followers to render humanitarian service to others, he himself performed works of mercy. Thus, Christians should take his words and example to heart and do the same, especially if they want a favorable outcome on the day of judgment. Luther states that the treatise’s intention is to provide assistance to the duke. He had heard Frederick was ill, and as a faithful Christian, felt the need to offer aid. Luther then suggests that not only is the Elector sick, but Christ himself is sick within the Elector as well. Thus, offering the Elector assistance is the same as offering aid to Christ, an obvious reference to Matthew 25:40. Luther mentions some additional biblical passages, and in language reminiscent of Romans 12:5, declares that since the elector is the head of his domains, his subjects suffer with him in his illness since they are a part of

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22 Luther uses some fear-based rhetoric here, but does not dwell on it.
his body. He also calls Duke Frederick “another Naaman” whom God was using to bring “deliverance to Germany”. Engaging in further political hyperbole, Luther equates Frederick with the entire Holy Roman Empire and even calls him the “father of the fatherland”, a “symbol of the entire empire”, and the “armament and protector, particularly of the German nation.” While Luther likely sought to appeal to the ill duke’s ego with this exaggerated rhetoric, these metaphors seem also to express Luther’s awareness of his own need of the Elector’s protection. Luther writes that since he is already especially indebted to Frederick, it is appropriate for him to express his gratitude in a special manner. After declaring that he has little to offer the duke, Luther formally presents him with the treatise, explaining its format and the significance of its name. Luther hopes the booklet will please the duke, and he encourages him not only to read it diligently, but to contemplate its images carefully. Luther hopes this contemplation will bring the duke comfort.

Introduction

Luther begins the introduction with the assertion that spiritual consolation is to be drawn from Scripture, which presents good and evil “wholesomely intermingled.” As proof for his assertion, he quotes Sirach 11:26

In the day of good things be not unmindful of evils: and in the day of evils be not unmindful of good things…

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23 LW 42, 123. WA 6, 105. One wonders how the Holy Roman Emperor would have responded to this language.

24 In other words, Luther intended for the treatise not just to be read, but to be pondered and used as a spiritual exercise.

25 The work is replete with scriptural references. Throughout Tessaradecas Consolatoria Luther turns specifically to themes from biblical wisdom literature, quoting often from Ecclesiastes, Job, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon. Just as many passages in these biblical books serve as extended reflections upon the trials of life and their meaning, so, too, Luther provides extended meditations upon life’s struggles and burdens in the face of death’s immanence.

26 Douay-Rheims Bible, accessed on June 27, 2011, http://www.drbo.org/chapter/26011.htm. The NRSV does not follow the Vulgate, which Luther was quoting, but instead translates the passage as a passive
Here Luther urges the duke to consider the role of perception. He states that the
perception of blessing or curse is namely that – a perception, a personal perspective about
a particular set of circumstances.

\[
\text{…a thing has only such value and meaning to a man as he assigns to it in his thoughts. Whatever he regards as trivial and of no value will affect him only slightly, whether it be love when it comes to him or pain when it goes away.}^{27}\]

While Frederick might not be able to change his life circumstances, he certainly is
capable of changing his attitude towards those circumstances. He should realize that
things are only as important or as unimportant as he chooses to see them. The key to
overcoming oppressive thoughts is to reorient his thinking – to rethink his suffering.
Luther encourages the elector to move towards a certain form of indifference.\(^28\) Luther
even states that the Holy Spirit will assist Christians with this task, detaching them from
too close an attachment to the wrong things.\(^29\) Throughout the rest of the treatise, he
labors to show Frederick how to alter the narrative of his suffering – how to tell a
different story. He repeatedly asserts that Christians are called to die to one mode of
perception and to rise to another. In this reorientation of perceptions, the Pauline
metaphor of death and rebirth surfaces.

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\(^{27}\) LW 42, 124. WA 6, 106.

\(^{28}\) Luther’s counsel seems somewhat parallel to Stoic indifference or Buddhist lack of attachment.

\(^{29}\) LW 42, 124. WA 6, 106. This also fits with the Frankfurter’s advice on detachment in Paragraph 5 of Eyn
deutsch Theologia.
Seven Evils

Image I.1 concerns the evil within. Luther writes, “If a man were to feel his evil, he would feel hell.” Affirming the total depravity of humankind, Luther builds on the ideas of Tauler and the Frankfurter, both of whom wrote about the depth of sin within the human heart. Tauler, for example, states in Sermon 35,

…If only we could remain within ourselves and look deeply into our nature, we would realize this abysmal tendency to sin and the enormous extent of our exposure to it. We should understand how feeble and flawed we are, how bent on evil without end, in quite an incomprehensible way…After some introspection we are bound to observe that our nature points towards humility, considering how great our deficiencies are.

Luther’s language seems even more reminiscent of the Frankfurter, who declares in *Eyn deutsch Theologia*:

Christ’s soul had to go to hell before it came to heaven, so the human soul must do the same. This, of course, comes about when a person knows and looks at himself and finds himself so wicked and unworthy of all the good and consolation that can befall him from God and created things, seeing it as nothing but an eternal damnation and perdition, and feeling himself unworthy of all the suffering that may befall him at this present time…Furthermore, he thinks it right that he should be damned eternally and even be a footstool for all the devils in hell, and is unworthy of all this…

Both the Frankfurter and Luther affirm that this awareness of one’s own sinfulness is not intended to lead to despair, but rather to an increased appreciation of God’s grace. God, in mercy, keeps one from seeing all at once his/her own full depravity. Instead, God reveals it slowly in stages. Only through faith does one grow in the ability to see more fully one’s own evil. According to Luther, those who despair in the face of their own sin

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30 LW 42,125. WA 6, 107.
31 Tauler, “Sermon 35 [Third Sunday after Trinity I],” 118.
have not recognized the graciousness of God. He also reminds the duke once again of the role of perception in this process of self-revelation.

...we measure, feel, or do not feel our evils not on the basis of the facts, but on the basis of our own thoughts and feelings.  

Although one can and will act upon the basis of one’s feelings, they provide neither a full nor accurate picture of one’s situation. Thus, the Christian should not look for certainty within his/her emotions, but instead in God’s revelations of the self to the self, which God will reveal in God’s own time.

Image I.2 considers future evil, i.e. evil which has not yet happened. Luther notes that anxiety about future evil manifests itself as fear. One grows afraid because s/he is unsure of what form future evils will take and what impact they will have. Additionally, future ills are potentially infinite in number. This thought alone can be terrifying. Indeed, Luther states that one cannot even be certain of the stability of one’s character or the virtue of one’s actions. As he puts it, “Such is our life that not for a moment are we safe in our good intentions.” Yet Christians should be grateful that only a small portion of all possible evils ever reach them. In this also is the mercy of God revealed. Luther acknowledges that the greatest of future evils is death itself and that all human beings, including the saints and even Christ himself, have dreaded this particular evil. However, in spite of death’s terror, he urges the elector to revise his image of death. He asks if death is not to be preferred to a future filled with countless evils. After all, death will bring all future evils to an end. When they no longer exist, what will be left to fear?

33 LW 42, 127. WA 6, 108.
34 LW 42, 129. WA 6, 110.
35 LW 42, 129. WA 6, 110. One wonders if this is truly the universal experience of death, or merely Luther’s perception of it.
36 For Luther, death was a permanent border: whatever happens on the other side of the grave is subject to the sovereignty and justice and mercy of God alone. One can see this idea in Luther’s “Letter to Bartholomew Von Staremberg,” written in 1524. See Martin Luther, Letters of Spiritual Counsel, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 53-55. Von Staremberg was grieving the death of his wife, and had been dedicating Masses to her. Luther offers the following advice.
Consequently, he suggests one learn to see death as “a minister of life and righteousness,” precisely because it will bring an end to evil for everyone.\textsuperscript{37}

In Image I.3, Luther reminds the elector of the evils in his past. Many were the things that could have happened, but which didn’t.

…even if there were no books or sermons, our very own lives, led through so many evils and dangers, would, if considered properly, abundantly commend to us the ever present and most tender goodness of God…\textsuperscript{38}

According to Luther, contemplation of the past makes one aware of the divine presence even when one thought God was absent. In the midst of this reflection, Luther contests the efficacy of the human will. Pointing out that many things happen which are against one’s will, Luther declares that human notions of control are an illusion and to be rejected.

…a man may see how often he has done and suffered many things without effort or care of his own, yes, even without or against his own will. He gave little thought to them before they occurred or while they were happening, and only after all was over did he find himself compelled to exclaim in great surprise, “How did these things happen to me, when I gave no thought to them, or thought something very different?” This bears out the proverb, “Man proposes, but God disposes.” That is, God turns things around brings to pass something different from that which man had planned. Thus in this one respect alone it is not possible for us to deny that our lives and actions are under the guidance, not of our prudence, but of the wonderful power, wisdom, and goodness of God. Here we see how often God was with us when we neither saw nor sensed it…\textsuperscript{39}

…I ask you to discontinue those Masses and vigils and daily prayers for her soul. It is enough to pray God once or twice for her…If we keep on praying for the same thing, it is a sign that we do not believe and we only annoy him with our unbelieving prayers…It is true that we ought to pray at all times, but we should do so in faith, certain that we are heard, otherwise the prayer is in vain…inasmuch as [God] instituted the Mass to be a sacrament to the living and not an offering for the dead, it is a shameful and terrible thing…Do not be a participant in this horrible error which priests and monks have invented for the sakes of their bellies.

\textsuperscript{37} LW 42, 130. WA 6, 110. Luther quotes Cyprian’s \textit{De Mortalitate} to support this position.

\textsuperscript{38} LW 42, 131. WA 6, 111.

\textsuperscript{39} LW 42, 131. WA 6, 111. See Tauler, “Sermon 1 [Christmas],” 37-38. Tauler speaks of renouncing the will.

…we must renounce our own will, desire, and worldly activity, so that we can orient ourselves single-mindedly toward God, and meet Him only in complete abandonment of self…In regard to this Saint Augustine said: “Pour out that you may be filled, go out of yourself, so that you may enter.
For Luther, this conclusion is not something to bemoan, but to applaud. For if God is in control of one’s life, then the Christian can recognize s/he could not be in any better hands.

Image I.4 deals with the evils below. According to Luther, there are two infernal evils: death and hell. He does not mention either the devil or the demonic as infernal evils. Although he already had given preliminary consideration to death as a future evil in Image I.2, Luther here contemplates the various forms death may take. Whether recalling the horrible deaths others have died or imagining those who are suffering eternal torment in hell, Christians often grow anxious, wondering if such a fate might be theirs as well. Ultimately they are outside of Christ’s Kingdom, which is itself a very great evil. Knowing that one is a part of the Kingdom should give one reason to praise God. Luther encourages the duke, however, to meditate on the suffering of his enemies - to have pity.

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Image I.5, the evil on the left hand, is the evil suffered at the hands of the wicked and/or of one’s enemies. Reflecting upon what they are capable of doing, or the suffering they can impose, can make one anxious. Instead of fearing what enemies can do, however, Frederick should remember that his enemies suffer their own evils, too. Ultimately they are outside of Christ’s Kingdom, which is itself a very great evil. Knowing that one is a part of the Kingdom should give one reason to praise God. Luther encourages the duke, however, to meditate on the suffering of his enemies - to have pity.

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40 Oddly, Luther has changed the order from what was listed in the Introduction. He moves the evil/good below up the list two spots. What this intentional on his part or an oversight?

41 Nowhere in Tessaradecas Consolatoria does Luther mention purgatory. Purgatory doesn’t fit into the Pauline narrative. The existence of a weigh station would have taken away death’s finality. If death itself did not bring about the necessary new life, then why would it have been necessary for Christ to die?
on them and seek to rescue them, instead of glorifying in their suffering.Referencing
Paul’s visualization in Philippians 2:4-7 of Christ’s self-emptying, Luther admonishes
Frederick to pray for the wicked and for his enemies.

…when all the evils of the wicked are viewed in the right spirit…a man
will…not only forget his own evil, but it will seem to him as if he were
not suffering at all. With Moses and the Apostle Paul, he would desire to
die for them, to be separated from Christ and expunged from the book of
life…just so that they might be set free. Christ was enkindled with such
zeal and fervor when he died for us and descended into hell, leaving us an
example that we should be concerned with the evils of others and
completely forgetful of our own – no, covetous of our own.\textsuperscript{42}

Luther suggests, as well, that one of the reasons why one’s suffering can appear
so large is because one has stopped being concerned about the suffering of others.
In the absence of other’s suffering, one’s own is all that remains to be
contemplated. Thus, meditating on the plight of others changes one’s perspective
on one’s own condition.

Image I.6, the evil on the right hand, is the suffering that friends and those within
the church have experienced. When contemplating what they have endured, one finds
oneself thinking that one could never endure the same evils. In his discussion of this
image, Luther challenges a common misunderstanding of both the saints and suffering.
He reminds the Elector that the saints became who they were precisely because they
suffered; their character grew through suffering. Thus, Christians should not pray to the
saints in order to avoid suffering, but rather to become like them, i.e. learning to grow
despite hard times. Responding to the suggestion that the saints suffered for their
innocence, whereas others suffer for their sins, Luther makes the following assertion:

Whenever you suffer it is either because of your sins or your
righteousness. Both kinds of suffering sanctify and save if you will but
love them…Since confession of sins is truth, it justifies and sanctifies.
Thus in the very moment of your confession, you are no longer suffering
for your sins, but for your innocence…There is only one truth in the midst

\textsuperscript{42} LW 42, 137. WA 6, 115.
of everything, only one confession of all sins, one suffering of all evils, and one true communion of saints in all and through all.  

For Luther the confession of sin is a simultaneous acknowledgement of the deeper reality that what one had formally believed or lived was false, while another mode of life / faith is in fact true. He writes, “Since confession of sins is truth, it justifies and sanctifies.” Here again Luther invokes the Pauline metaphor of dying to self and rising to new life. Christian existence is not a matter of attempting to actively construct a new life in accordance with certain rules, but of becoming part of a larger reality which has always been there and which has been graciously revealed to the faithful. In either case, suffering will serve a higher purpose: revealing one’s sin or developing one’s character. Luther seeks here to give a positive purpose to suffering, one which can be not only endured, but embraced.

He also seeks to relativize his reader’s suffering in light of the saints’ sufferings. In particular, he mentions the injustices that St. John the Baptist endured. As if to ask his reader, “Do you think you have it bad?” Luther urges the elector to consider John the Baptist’s fate: he got no public trial; he had no formal accusation brought against him; he didn’t die for the sake of the people. Instead, he was beheaded at the request of a dancing girl, the daughter “of a vengeful adulteress”. Luther even asks where God and Christ were at this time – why were they silent? Why did they allow John to suffer such a vile death? Compared to John, Luther declares, no one has reason to complain about one’s own suffering.

Image I.7, the final image of section three, is the evil above. Here Luther’s visualization resembles a traditional passion meditation. After mentioning the various evils which Christ himself endured, Luther proclaims that Christ has by his suffering consecrated and hallowed all suffering. Through him, suffering and death have become

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\(^{43}\) LW 42, 140. WA 6, 117.
“the beginning of our freedom as our death is the beginning of life.”\textsuperscript{44} Thus, Christians should not be afraid to take up their crosses and follow Christ. In this image Luther also offers a critique of relics. He states that true relics are not physical objects, but the pain and evils of this world which Christ has hallowed. Here too Luther develops the idea of the happy exchange in which Christ takes on the Christian’s sin and death and gives him/her his own righteousness and life. He converts suffering into freedom and death into the door to life.

If you kiss, caress, and embrace as sweetest relics the robe of Christ, the vessels, the water jugs, and anything Christ touched or used or hallowed by his touch, why will you not much more rather love, embrace, and kiss the pain and evils of this world, the disgrace and shame which he not only hallowed by his touch, but sprinkled and blessed with his most holy blood, yes, even embraced with a willing heart and with supreme constraining love?...In them victory over death, hell, and all sins is offered to you, but in those relics nothing at all.\textsuperscript{45}

To make his conclusions clear, Luther ends this section by arguing that the Christian should not only tolerate evils, but “love them, desire them, and seek them out.” This is how to make proper use of the cross. For Luther this advice represents not just a passing notion, but the essence of Christian existence. One should meditate upon this image – this narrative, not only until one has comprehended it, but until one has incarnated it.

In keeping with this image we must therefore absorb and consume whatever evils we may have to bear, so that they will not only not grieve us, but will delight us. This will come true if this image find its way into our heart and abides in the innermost affections of our mind.\textsuperscript{46}

Luther describes this experience as being “lifted above and outside of ourselves, caught up into Christ, and placed beyond all evils.”\textsuperscript{47} Such language is reminiscent of Tauler and

\textsuperscript{44} LW 42, 142. WA 6, 118.  
\textsuperscript{45} LW 42, 143. WA 6, 118-119.  
\textsuperscript{46} LW 42, 144. WA 6, 119.  
\textsuperscript{47} LW 42, 143-144. WA 6, 119.
the Frankfurter, but for Luther, this mystical vision is not achieved by escaping from this life’s suffering, but by properly appropriating it.

Seven Goods

As Luther moves on to contemplate the second set of seven consolations, he moves from the evils that plague Christians to the gifts that bless them. He again utilizes the same spatial/temporal directions used in section three, referencing the blessings within, before, behind, below, to the left, to the right and above. He continues to encourage the elector to focus upon what God has done for him and given him. In many of the images in this section, Luther encourages the elector to re-imagine perceived evils as actual goods.

Image II.1 treats the good within. Luther begins by reminding the elector that the sufferings of this life pale in comparison to its many blessings. Mentioning a couple of proverbs popular among “scoundrels” that illustrate their willingness to accept a little bad in the midst of life’s larger good, Luther then asks rhetorically why Christians should not be willing to do the same. He then names some of the internal blessings, beginning with the gift of life itself which opens human beings up to the wonder of the world around them. He also mentions the goods of the mind: reason, judgment, knowledge, eloquence, and prudence. He states that these blessings are only as great as one allows them to be. Consequently, one needs to expand one’s mind in order to learn to see all of life as a gift. In contrast to his assertion in Image I.1 that to be aware of all one’s sins would be hell, here Luther declares that to be fully aware of all God’s blessings would itself be heaven. But just as God hides the full extent of one’s sins, likewise God hides the full extent of

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48 In a rather sexist statement, Luther speaks of the greater nobility of the male and of the “many splendid achievements to which woman is a stranger”. *LW* 42, 144. *WA* 6, 119.
one’s blessings, only revealing them slowly over time. Faith again is the mediator which makes the blessings and the very presence of God known.

To have faith is to have the Word and truth of God, and to have the Word of God is to have God himself, the maker of all.\textsuperscript{49}

At the end of this image, Luther affirms that there have been contemplatives like St. Augustine and his mother whose experience of these infinite blessings was so great that they were caught up into mystical rapture.\textsuperscript{50}

Image II.2 considers the good that lies ahead – those blessings that will occur in the future. After contrasting hope to fear, Luther argues that hope often disappoints. However, because humans cannot live without hope, possessing it should be seen as a divine blessing. He reminds Frederick that Christians do not need to be frightened of the future. Because they can trust that God has good in store for them, they can choose to be hopeful about future unknowns. In this image Luther turns again to a consideration of death, suggesting that death is actually a future blessing because it will bring the suffering and sins of this life to an end. Here Luther explicitly references the Pauline narrative of the death of the old man/Adam and the new birth in Christ. Recalling as well the Genesis account of Eden, Luther interprets the imposition of death and the expulsion from Eden as two of God’s greatest gifts to humanity. Death is not only necessary, it is good and profitable.

Thus (by the mercy of God) death, which for man was the punishment for his sin, has for the Christian been made the end of sin and the beginning of life and righteousness. Therefore, he who loves life and righteousness must not hate, but rather love, death, his servant and workshop, if he desires to attain to either life or righteousness...And that God appointed death to be the destroyer of death can be gathered from the fact that he imposed death on Adam immediately after his sin as a cure for sin [Gen. 3:19]. God did this before he drove him out of paradise to show us that

\textsuperscript{49} LW 42, 147. WA 6, 121.

\textsuperscript{50} Of course, the spirituality of Tauler and the Frankfurter again comes to mind here.
death works us no evil but rather every blessing, since it was imposed in paradise as a penance and satisfaction.  

As an alternative visualization of death’s impotence, Luther proposes Frederick imagine a slain serpent. Although it still might appear terrifying, it no longer has the ability to do harm. So, too, it is with death – and this a great blessing.

Image II.3 is a meditation on past blessings. Luther encourages the elector to think of all the blessings he has already received – blessings that he could not have foreseen or brought about on his own. Referring to Augustine’s *Confessions*, Luther argues that we delude ourselves if we think we can stand on our own. Attempts to secure our own future will only bring with them worries about the inadequacy of our efforts. Instead, Christians should acknowledge the divine providence which has sustained them, and in this acknowledgment find the peace to continue living. As support for such an understanding of Christian existence, Luther gives a summary explanation of Ecclesiastes.

…if we…presume to care for ourselves, what else are we then doing but seeking to obstruct God’s care for us, and at the same time creating for ourselves a life of sorrow and labor, troubled with unrest and many fears and cares? And it is so futile! We accomplish nothing good thereby, as the Preacher says, “It is vanity of vanities, and vexation of the spirit” [Eccles. 1:2, 14]. Indeed, this entire book treats this experience, for it is written by one who himself tried out many things but found them all to be nothing but toil, vanity, and affliction of the spirit. He finally came to the conclusion that it is a gift of God when a man may eat and drink and live joyfully with his wife, that is, when he passes his days without anxiety and commits his care to God.

In the last paragraph of Image II.3, Luther suggests that past blessings will only be understood if they are considered along with past evils within one’s own life. This is a realistic confession. Only after experiencing God’s blessings firsthand can one honestly

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51 *LW* 42, 150-151. *WA* 6, 124.
52 *LW* 42, 154. *WA* 6, 126.
53 *LW* 42, 154. *WA* 6, 126.
confess God’s universal grace. One alters one’s perception of suffering as one learns to alter one’s life narrative.

Image II.4 is a reflection on the infernal good. When one contemplates the fate of those who have already died and who have already been damned to hell, one should first remember and give thanks that it has happened to someone else. Although Luther might appear here to be encouraging an attitude of *Schadenfreude*, this is not the case, for he reminds the duke to consider simultaneously “the corresponding images of evil”.\(^5^4\) Remembering that all deserve the same divine judgment and punishment, the Christian should give thanks for still being alive and for having been given the grace of faith. This is, for Luther, a true blessing. Yet, he doesn’t stop there. He urges the elector to rejoice in the justice of God as revealed in God’s damnation of the wicked – to find a blessing in God’s judgment of sin. He even goes so far as to say that hell is no less filled with good than heaven, precisely because God’s justice reigns there also. Thus, the existence of hell should encourage the Christian, for if God were not to judge and destroy sin, then Christians could never hope to be rid of it. However, because God is just and does remove sin in death, Christians can look forward to a new life free of sin.\(^5^5\)

Image II.5 contemplates the blessings of those on the left-hand, i.e. the wicked. While acknowledging that the wicked prosper and that the biblical record accounts for this fact (Psalm 73:2-3,12; Jeremiah 12:1), Luther suggests that the best possible explanation for God’s lavishly wasting blessings on sinners is that by doing so, God reassures Christians that divine favor is theirs as well. Yet this is a test of their faith. Can they believe in God’s justice and grace in the face of their apparent absence? Luther also declares that the wickedness of one’s enemies serves as an opportunity for strengthening

\(^5^4\) *LW* 42, 155. *WA* 6, 127. Luther goes so far as to advocate putting one’s self in the shoes of the damned, to feel empathy for them, in order to grow in one’s appreciation of not having been damned.

\(^5^5\) In this image, Luther seems to wander from the Frankfurter’s perspective. Whereas the Frankfurter asserts that one should love all, just as God and Christ loved all, Luther declares it wrong to wish the wicked well. See The Frankfurter, *The Book of the Perfect Life*, 64.
one’s own character. Hence, the duke should learn to see his adversaries as conduits of blessing. By enduring their wickedness, he will himself become stronger. Luther suggests that the world attempts to ensnare Christians in one of two ways: either by the allure of its temptations or by the fury and torment of pain. As a visualization aid, Luther inserts here the story of the Chimera from Greek mythology. Although he mischaracterizes the creature as having the head of a seductive woman, the body of a dangerous lion and the tail of a poisonous serpent, it is a fitting image for the world’s two chief snares: its pleasures and its tyranny. By suffering these snares, Christians bear witness to God’s higher purposes, making the snares serve ultimately as blessings rather than curses.

But why waste words here when we see that all of Scripture, the writings and statements of all the fathers, and the lives and deeds of all the saints agree on this matter, namely, that those who inflict the greatest harm on the believers are their greatest benefactors, as long as they bear their sufferings in the right spirit.

Image II.6 is a reflection on the blessings on the right-hand, i.e. of the saints, both past and present. Yet Luther begins by considering their sufferings rather than their blessings. Not only did God come to the saints’ aid, God has made the saints available to the whole Church as a comfort in trying times. God has provided a community for the mutual bearing of burdens. No one needs to walk alone. Accordingly, Luther declares that the true blessings of the saints are their “faith, hope, love, and other gifts and graces,

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56 Here Luther might be encouraging the duke to continue to resist those who sought to silence Luther. By defending Luther’s cause, Frederick would not only be protecting his professor, he would also be growing in character.

57 Luther doesn’t get the image quite right. Chimera did not have a woman’s head, but rather that of a lion. It had the body of a goat and the tail of a dragon. The Sirens had multiple heads of a woman. Is this simply a mistake on Luther’s part, or is he also consciously rewriting the narrative imagery of Greek mythology in ways that will serve his purposes?

58 LW 42, 160. WA 6, 130.

59 This is a further reflection of the ideas he developed in Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften.
which are shared with all through love".\textsuperscript{60} All that they have belongs to all and apprehending this truth is a great blessing. Here Luther uses the language of “the eyes of the flesh” and “eyes of the spirit”. The “eyes of the flesh” are focused exclusively upon the suffering of this world. They can see only the evils mentioned in Image I.6. In contrast, the “eyes of the spirit” enable Christians to see all of the blessings which are a part of this life. They are the eyes of faith. Here again is another reference to the Pauline metaphor of dying and rising with Christ. Christians must die to one way of seeing and be reborn to another. This new eyesight enables them to view the exact same set of circumstances in a new and different manner: evils become blessings; death becomes life. Luther concludes this image with this prayer: “[that] the eyes of our faith, may be opened that we may see the church around us. Then there will be nothing for us to fear…”\textsuperscript{61}

Image II.7, the blessing above us, is mainly a meditation on the merits of Christ.\textsuperscript{62} Everything that Christ has he gives to the Christian: his resurrection and his glory, his overcoming of suffering through his endurance of it. When the Christian truly contemplates what Christ has done for him/her, s/he will not mind facing suffering because s/he will understand that this will not detract from his/her future share in Christ’s glory. On the contrary, according to Luther, it will enhance it. To assist with the contemplation of this image, Luther recalls the story of Jacob, who upon hearing that his son was a ruler in Egypt, would not believe until he had seen the wagons of goods Joseph

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{60} \textit{LW} 42, 160-161. \textit{WA} 6, 130-131.
  \item \textsuperscript{61} \textit{LW} 42, 163. \textit{WA} 6, 132.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} The opening paragraph of Image II.7 is somewhat reminiscent of \textit{Eyn deutsch Theologia}. \textit{LW} 42, 163. \textit{WA} 6, 132.
\end{itemize}

I do not now speak of the eternal and heavenly blessings which the blessed enjoy in the perfect wisdom of God. If I speak of them at all I do so only in faith and insofar as they come within the realm of my understanding.

Here Luther writes of divine perfection. However, he admits he lacks the full understanding to describe it. So instead of speaking about that which he doesn’t know, he states that he will focus instead upon what he does know: Christ – crucified and resurrected. In this manner, he perhaps distances himself from the ambiguous aims of much mystical spirituality.
sent. Likewise, as Luther puts it, Christ is the wagon that brings divine provisions that brings to the Christian from afar. Through Christ, God sends righteousness, sanctification, redemption, and wisdom, etc.

I am a sinner, but I am borne by his righteousness which is given to me. I am unclean, but his holiness is my sanctification, in which I ride gently. I am an ignorant fool, but his wisdom carries me forward. I deserve condemnation, but I am set free by his redemption, which is a safe wagon for me.\(^{63}\)

Luther calls this image of the exalted Christ “the most sublime,” for it illustrates both the goal and the end of the Christian journey. It represents the climax of the Pauline narrative.

This, then, is the most sublime image, for in it we are lifted up not only above our evils, but even above our blessings, and we are set down in the midst of strange blessings gathered by the labors of another, whereas formerly we lay among evils that were also brought about by the sin of another and enlarged by our own. [Rom. 5:17]. We are set down, I say, in Christ’s righteousness, with which he himself is righteous because we cling to that righteousness whereby he himself is acceptable to God, intercedes for us as our mediator, and gives himself wholly to us as our high priest and protector. Therefore, just as it is impossible for Christ with his righteousness not to please God, so it is impossible for us, with our faith clinging to his righteousness, not to please him. It is in this way that a Christian becomes almighty lord of all, having all things and doing all things, wholly without sin. Even if he is in sins, these cannot do him harm; they are forgiven for the sake of the inexhaustible righteousness of Christ that removes all sins. It is on this that our faith relies, firmly trusting that he is such a Christ as we have described…\(^{64}\)

This is young Luther’s vision of union with the divine. He chooses to describe it not in traditional mystical terminology, but instead references the Christ-narrative. One becomes a part of the divine life, “almighty lord of all”, only as s/he embraces the death and resurrection of Christ.\(^{65}\) Becoming one with Christ is, for Luther, synonymous with divine union. This redefinition simplifies the spiritual path, making it accessible to all

\(^{63}\) LW 42, 164. WA 6, 133.

\(^{64}\) LW 42, 165. WA 6, 133-134.

\(^{65}\) Luther develops this idea of the Christian as “almighty lord of all” further the next year in his *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*. 
Christians. Everyone can die to one’s current existence – whatever form it takes – and rise again to new life in Christ. All Christians face this universal task, yet can pursue it only through the particularities of their own lives. In this manner, Luther personalizes the process of conversion.

Final Paragraph

Luther concludes his treatise by again commending himself to the duke. After affirming that he has completed the task he had set himself, Luther admits that he remains in debt to the Elector. Finally seeking perhaps to flatter the duke, Luther prays that Christ will grant to Frederick a long life as well as a blessed death and a heavenly home.

An Analysis of Tessaradecas Consolatoria

Luther’s *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* is an original exercise in narrative revision. On the one hand, Luther urges Frederick to revise his own life narrative – to interpret the story of his suffering in a new way. Instead of focusing on the sufferings he has experienced, he should transform these sufferings into opportunities for personal growth and use them as motivations to assist others. For Luther, such narrative revision is the essence of personal conversion. New life arises as a new story and new possibilities appear in the life of the Christian. Luther declares that it is actually God who revises one’s story by continually revealing the true condition of one’s heart in its nakedness. This revelation is simultaneously death and hell as well as resurrection and heaven. It is not so much a future event, but a present and persistent existential experience. One dies – of necessity – to a previous mode of existence that no longer functions and is no longer viable. In the midst of and because of this revelation one is reborn to a new life – to new relationships with God, one’s neighbors, even one’s self. Yet, this revelation comes little
by little, not all at once. Therefore, one needs to die again and again. Conversion is thus a continual dying to self – to established ways of seeing, perceiving, valuing things. Hell is the continual discovery of sin’s persistence and heaven the continual gift of a new mode of existence. *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* not only presents conversion’s perpetual nature, it also offers Christians both a narrative for understanding conversion and a procedure for experiencing it personally. Narrative revision leads to character re-formation. Susan Karant-Nunn suggests that Luther was more concerned with the art of living (*ars vivendi*) than with the *ars moriendi*.\(^{66}\) *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* seems to affirm this. When Luther suggests that God chastens those whom God loves, he is asserting that chastisement promotes self-confrontation. It is no accident that Luther in *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* mentions Job and Ecclesiastes as often as he does. Through difficult confrontations with one’s self, God reveals truth. Truth, a.k.a. new life, comes only through suffering. As one gives up the old life – dies to it – and rises to new life – to a new trust in God’s providence, one realizes that the only thing – the only one – worth trusting is God. So, one holds onto God’s word.

On the other hand, personal narratives are not the only narratives that Luther seeks to revise in *Tessaradecas Consolatoria*. He addresses the cosmic narrative, too.\(^{67}\) No longer are Christians supposed to please and/or placate divine and demonic beings to secure their own salvation. No longer do they ask others to take an active role in moderating or mediating their own spiritual struggles. Instead of spending time focused on what they cannot change, Christians should turn their eyes inward towards what they can change – their own attitudes, their understanding, and their frame of mind. By

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\(^{66}\) In *The Reformation of Ritual*, Susan Karant-Nunn never mentions *Tessaradecas Consolatoria*. However, in her chapter, “Banning the dead,” she interprets three other Luther texts that deal with his perspective on death, including *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben* and his funeral sermons for Elector Frederick and Elector John.

\(^{67}\) For a conventional Lutheran interpretation of the *Fourteen Consolations*, see Jane Strohl, “Luther’s ‘Fourteen Consolations,’” *Lutheran Quarterly* III.2 (Summer 1989): 169-182.
renewing their thinking about the world and their place in it, Christians will find their sufferings lessened and their faith renewed.

In discussing both narratives, Luther’s pastoral concern is evident. Aware that many Christians struggled with stricken consciences, Luther offered images of comfort. For those whose consciences were terrorized by images of sin, death, and hell (images from the wider cosmos), Luther wrote *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*. For those who feel alone and abandoned in the world, Luther wrote *Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften*. For those who were troubled by a picture of a wrathful God, Luther composed *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*. For those who, like the elector, were struggling with suffering and illness, Luther penned *Tessaradecas Consolatoria*. In all these works, he asserts that faith, i.e. trust in God’s goodness, becomes real and effective only as one visualizes one’s relationship with God in personal terms. Only as Christ becomes real for and to the individual will an existential shift, i.e. a personal narrative revision, take place. Conversion happens as one comprehends more and more deeply what Christ has done for him/her.

This narrative language is more relational than theological. Luther asserts that there is a difference between simply visualizing biblical events and visualizing oneself interacting with God through Christ. It is not enough to know that Christ had died for one’s sin – that one can picture Christ on the cross. Rather, it is in visualizing one’s own present relationship with Christ that one will find comfort. As Luther puts it in Image II.7,

Thus the Christian (if he but believes it) may glory in the merits of Christ and in all his blessings as though he himself had won them. So truly are they his own that he can boldly dare to look forward to the judgment of God, however unbearable that is.

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68 *LW* 42, 164. *WA* 6, 133.
Above all, Luther strives to teach the Christian soul to appreciate and allocate Christ’s benefits. There is nothing s/he can do to affect what has already been done in and through Christ. The Christian should trust that Christ has done what the Scriptures say he had done and find hope in that faith. In the works under consideration, Luther presents Christ not so much as a forensic solution to a theological problem, but as a visible display of God’s love for humanity. Picturing Christ on the cross should ultimately generate gratitude and joy.

Again and again throughout Tessaradecas Consolatoria, Luther references the Apostle Paul and his writings. While some of these references serve merely as proof texts for Luther’s arguments (For example, his reference in the Introduction to Paul’s assertion in Romans 15:4 that consolation should be drawn from Scripture.), a majority of them call to mind the Pauline narrative of death and rebirth. When he mentions Paul’s description of suffering as a divine scourge, i.e. a lesser evil that drives away greater evils, Luther interprets this positively as death’s ability to drive out sin. Death removes sin and the absence of sin brings about new life. In quoting from Philippians 2 about Christ’s self-emptying and living for the sake of others, Luther insists that Christians are called to do the same. As he concludes the third section, Luther writes,

Neither seek what is too difficult for you, nor investigate what is beyond your power. Reflect upon what you have been commanded, for what is hidden is not your concern. Do not meddle in matters that are beyond you, for more than you can understand has been shown you. For their conceit has led many astray, and wrong opinion has impaired their judgment.

See Romans 7.
…surely this last image, in which we are lifted above and outside ourselves, caught up into Christ and placed beyond all evils, should teach us that we ought not only to tolerate these evils, but love them, desire them, and seek them out. If such thinking is still foreign to a person, it means the passion of Christ still has little meaning for him. This is evident in those who make the signs and arms of Christ to ward off evils and death, but are not ready to suffer or to die. This is altogether contrary to the cross and death of Christ.

In keeping with this image we must therefore absorb and consume whatever evils we may have to bear, so that they will not only not grieve us, but will delight us. This will come true if this image finds its way into our hearts and abides in the innermost affections of our mind.71

This passage clearly shows that for Luther the notion of dying and rising with Christ is necessarily central to the Christian’s self-understanding. Any other narrative is contrary to the core of Christian existence. In Image II.2, after quoting Philippians 1:21 and Romans 14:8, Luther states that dying is a gain for the Christian, because s/he receives Christ’s life.

Thus (by the mercy of God) death, which for man was the punishment for his sin, has for the Christian been made the end of sin and the beginning of life and righteousness.72

In the final image (II.7), Luther imagines Christ rising from the dead. Quoting Romans 6:9, he declares that all that has been accomplished by Christ’s resurrection has become the Christian’s as well. Asking then what Christians gain through the resurrection, Luther proclaims,

Thus the Christian (if he but believes it) may glory in the merits of Christ and in all his blessings as though he himself had won them. So truly are they his own that he can boldly dare to look forward to the judgment of God, however unbearable that is...

This, then, is the most sublime image, for in it we are lifted up not only above our evils, but even above our blessings, and we are set down in the midst of strange blessings gathered by the labors of another, whereas formerly we lay among evils that were also brought about by the sins of another and enlarged by our own.73

71 LW 42, 143-144. WA 6, 119.
72 LW 42, 150. WA 6, 124.
73 LW 42, 164-165. WA 6, 133.
This is for Luther the ultimate image – the one towards which all others were moving. This closing thought comes from Romans 5:2-3. So Luther brings the treatise to an end by recalling the Pauline narrative once again.

Not only does Luther refer to Paul repeatedly in *Tessaradecas Consolatoria*, he also mentions St. Augustine a number of times. He refers to *Confessions*, *Commentary on Psalm 39* [40] and *Harmony of the Gospels*. He also incorporated elements of Tauler and the Frankfurter’s spirituality into *Tessaradecas Consolatoria*, treating the two of them as valid interpreters of the Pauline narrative and Pauline spirituality.74

Given the popularity of *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* as well as the works considered in chapter 3, one can surmise that Luther’s audience found comfort in these particular writings. But is there any concrete way to determine this? How can we appraise the reception of these works? The next chapter will address these questions.

74 Luther’s positive assessment of Augustine and Monica’s mystical experiences bear witness as well to his appreciation for contemplative spirituality. Consider what he has to say in his *Auslegung deutsch des Vaterunsers für die einfältigen Laien 1519* [*An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen* of 1519] about contemplative prayer. [LW 42, 25-26. WA 2, 85.]

Indeed, no one should depend on his heart and presume to pray without uttering words unless he is well trained in the Spirit and has experience in warding off stray thoughts. Otherwise the devil will thoroughly trick him and soon smother the prayer in his heart. Therefore we should cling to the words and with their help soar upward, until our feathers grow and we can fly without the help of words. I do not condemn words or the spoken prayer, nor should anyone spurn them. On the contrary, they are to be accepted as an especially great gift of God. However, it is wrong when the words are not employed for their fruitful purpose, namely, to move the heart, but are only mumbled and muttered with the mouth, on the false assumption that this is all that is necessary. Not only is there no fruitful improvement, there is a corrupting of the heart.
CHAPTER V
THE CONTEMPORARY RECEPTION OF LUTHER’S
1519 CONTEMPLATIVE DEVOTIONS

Only a cursory glance at the *VD 16* publication records of Luther’s early spiritual writings is necessary to confirm their enormous popularity. Yet what made them so popular? Why did printers choose to publish them and why did people buy them? How were they put to use? I address these questions in this chapter. First, I consider briefly some of Luther’s own comments which illuminate the intended function of these treatises. Next I analyze references to these devotional works in the correspondence of others. Finally I take a closer look at a select group of sixteenth-century editions of these works to see if their publishers or translators left behind any interpretive clues in the titles, text, formatting or illustrations they chose to employ. By these means I develop a composite picture of sixteenth-century interpretation and reception of Luther’s early devotional literature, a picture that answers the above questions and lends further support to the arguments I have advanced in this dissertation concerning the contemplative focus of these writings.

**Luther’s Comments on His Devotional Writings**

Although one can glean insight into an author’s motivation for writing a particular work by reading it, this is not the only, nor necessarily the best, way of determining intention. Sometimes evidence from other sources can prove illuminating. For example, in a letter Luther wrote to George Spalatin on September 22, 1519, he provided this background about his *Tessaradeus Consolatorius*.

…At length, Spalatin, my *Tessaradeus* is coming to you, late, indeed, but even thus hardly having weathered the storms of all my other occupations. If you care to, you may translate it and offer it to our most illustrious elector with a prefatory letter…But dear me, I almost forgot to say that I would like to see my copy of the *Tessaradeus* again after it has served its
time. For I am wont to console myself with these trifles, nor do I always have before me the considerations which I there set down, if only for the reason that by thinking of them they become even richer…

After acknowledging that the many controversies brewing in his life had delayed the production of the treatise, Luther requested that his copy of *Tessaradecas* be returned to him; he wanted to reflect further upon the images he had developed within it. This request testifies to Luther’s understanding of the piece’s purpose: it was a contemplative exercise to which readers could return time and time again. He even admitted that this is what he intended to do with it. In another letter to Spalatin, dated December 7 that same year, Luther offers another enlightening comment on this same treatise:

“I know not yet whether to publish my *Tessaradecas*, especially in Latin, as that sort of work, which savors of Christ is very hateful to the sophists…”

This comment reveals Luther’s awareness of two differing audiences: the academic / ecclesiastical community and the German laity. He worried that by publishing *Tessaradecas* in Latin he might provide more fuel for the on-going controversy surrounding himself and his ideas in the entire scholarly community across Europe. On the other hand, he seemed to think that the German reading public would be receptive to the work and appreciative of its Christological focus.

In his dedicatory letter to Margaret, the Duchess of Brunswick, which he attached to his sacramental trilogy, Luther provides additional information about the treatises and his intentions for them. He stated that certain friends had encouraged him to “dedicate some spiritual and Christian writings” to the duchess. He asserted that he had long had this same desire (most likely an attempt at flattery), but had not had much material ready until recently. After mentioning the subject of the three treatises, Luther explained why he chose to write on the sacraments.

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2 Luther, *Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, 257.
… For I considered that many consciences are troubled and pained, and I have found people here who do not know the holy and full grace of the sacraments nor how to use them; but alas! presume to seek peace rather in their own works than in the holy sacrament of God’s grace. For doctrines of men have hidden and taken from us the holy sacraments…

According to Luther he had written these three treatises in response to a number of perceived needs: some had troubled consciences; others had misunderstood the sacraments’ intended purposes; and still others had shown disdain for the sacraments by claiming they had no need of sacramental grace. Luther’s chief complaint was that human doctrines had overshadowed the biblical narratives of these sacraments, robbing them of their meaning. Luther sought to correct these problems by restoring proper sacramental narratives.

Luther repeatedly mentioned this emphasis upon wrong narratives throughout much of his 1519 correspondence. For example in a letter to George Spalatin that he wrote in mid-October, Luther addressed the request that he write postilla, model sermons for the prescribed lectionary readings of the church year:

….Of all that I do there is nothing I would do more willingly than that, because by this means alone I believe I could succor the priests and monks, so that they might cut off and reject those dirty fables of sermon-writers, which rather proscribe than describe Christ, and that they might have something by which they might publish the pure theology of Christ among the people, and expel those errors which flood the land like a deluge…

In language reminiscent of his 1516 recommendation of *Eyn geystlich edles Buchlynn*, Luther spoke of the “the pure theology of Christ” and described what he believed was wrong with contemporary preaching: it “proscribed” rather than “described” Christ. Priests were making use of published sermons that focused on fables and morality tales to the exclusion of Christ. Luther hoped that by writing postilla he could provide priests

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3 Luther, *Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, 227.
4 Luther, *Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, 228.
with sermons that would restore the central Christological narrative to the pulpit. He believed that such a change would bring renewal to the laity.

Another letter to Spalatin, dated February 14, 1520, underlines the general direction of Luther’s thought in this early period. After having read the works of Jan Hus for the first time, Luther clearly states his hermeneutical commitments:

I have taught and held all the teachings of John Huss, but thus far did not know it. John Staupitz has taught it in the same unintentional way. In short we all are Hussites and did not know it. Even Paul and Augustine are in reality Hussites. See the monstrous things into which we fall, I ask you, even without the Bohemian leader and teacher. I am so shocked that I do not know what to think when I see such terrible judgments of God over mankind, namely, that the most evident evangelical truth was burned in public and was already considered condemned more than one hundred years ago. Yet one is not allowed to avow this. Woe to this earth.5

While a certain amount of exaggeration is evident in this quotation, two statements are significant. On the one hand, Luther’s declaration that both Paul and Augustine were actually Hussites indicated the esteem he held for these two early Christian figures and his belief that the two were key interpreters of the biblical tradition. On the other hand, his comment about Hus’s “most evident evangelical truth” demonstrated Luther’s belief that Hus’s writings were in keeping with the Pauline and Augustinian interpretations of the biblical narrative. Yet sadly, he declared that this Pauline / Augustinian narrative had been replaced by another in the contemporary church.

These examples from Luther’s correspondence of 1519/20 demonstrate that one of Luther’s motivations for writing devotional works concerned correcting false or corrupted narratives. He was concerned not so much with promulgating a new theological system, as with revising the biblical narrative. He sought a narrative form that could be incorporated into everyday lay piety. Turning to a variety of familiar devotional forms, Luther strove to give them all a consistent focus. His vision for these contemplative devotions involved a Christian piety that was both simple and biblical, i.e. in accordance

5 LW 48,153. WA Br 2, 41-42.
with the Pauline / Augustinian narrative. But did his readers interpret these works as Luther intended? To answer this question, we turn to other sources.

The Reception of Luther’s Contemplative Writings

One of the easiest ways to assess the reception of Luther’s early devotional writings is to turn to the publishers who printed them. Individually they decided which of Luther’s writings they would print, for they did not print everything he wrote. What was it about these five devotional tracts that captured the attention of their sixteenth-century publishers? How did they interpret them? How did they pass their interpretive agenda on to their customers? What do their own contributions (introductory materials, formatting, illustrations and their correspondence) reveal about how they understood and marketed these works?

Publishers’ Correspondence

Although I did not come across any extant correspondence from those German publishers who printed the five spiritual writings under consideration in this dissertation, I did find one letter to Luther from the Basel publisher, John Froben. In October 1518 Froben had published a collection of texts, primarily Luther’s, entitled Resolutiones disputationum de virtute indulgentiarum. On February 14, 1519, Froben wrote to Luther about the origin and popularity of his volume.

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6 Froben, a Franconian, had previously worked together with Erasmus and published in 1516 Erasums’ Greek New Testament, as well as the works of Jerome.

7 Benzing, “Grössere Sammlungen 3,” in Lutherbibliographie, 3. A mixture of academic and devotional writings, this Latin collection included the 95 Theses, the Resolutions, the Answer to Prierias, the Sermon on Penitence and the Sermon on the Proper Preparation of the Heart to Receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as Andreas Karlstadt’s 1518 Theses.
Blasius Salmonius, a printer of Leipsic, gave me some of your books, which he had bought at the last Frankfurt Fair, which, as they were approved by all the learned, I immediately reprinted. We have sent six hundred copies to France and Spain; they are sold at Paris, and are even read and approved by the doctors of the Sorbonne, as certain of our friends have assured us; for some of the most learned say that they have hitherto missed among those who treat Scripture the same freedom that you show.

Francis Calvus, also a bookseller of Pavia, a most learned man, one devoted to the Muses, has taken a good part of your books to Italy to distribute them among all the cities. Nor does he do it so much for gain as to aid piety. He has promised to send epigrams written in your honor by all the learned in Italy, so much does he like your constancy and skill…

We have exported your books to Brabant and England. We only printed three hundred copies of your reply to Prierias...We have sold out all your books except ten copies, and never remember to have sold any more quickly. We expect to bring out the second edition of Erasmus’ New Testament much enlarged, within ten days. Farewell, reverend Father.8

Froben acknowledged first receiving Luther’s writings from a colleague who had bought them at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Aware of their significance, Froben quickly decided to create a small anthology of Luther’s works, which he then marketed internationally, shipping the volume to recognized centers of learning in France, Spain, Italy, and England. However, Froben’s volume wasn’t entirely academic: it included two of Luther’s sermons as well. Why did Froben choose to print these sermons? Simply to appeal to a broader customer base? Perhaps, yet Froben also passed along praise for Luther’s treatments of Scripture, in particular “the freedom” of his interpretations. Likewise, he mentioned, too, an Italian bookseller, Francis Calvus, who had taken a number of Luther’s writings to Italy. According to Froben, Calvus’ motivation for distributing Luther’s books had had as much to do with aiding piety as with turning a profit. Thus, it would seem that Froben’s motivation for creating his anthology reflected an interest not only in the controversy surrounding Luther’s ideas about indulgences, but Froben’s belief that Luther offered to his readers a new interpretation of the biblical narrative.

8 John Froben, “125. John Froben to Martin Luther,” in Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters, 161-162.
Wolfgang Fabricius Capito, cathedral preacher and professor of theology in Basle, was evidently involved with Froben’s printing of this collection as well. He wrote to Luther four days after Froben did, offering additional comments about the collection and Luther’s general reception throughout Europe.⁹

Switzerland and the Rhine country as far as the ocean, is solid for Luther, and his friends in these regions are both powerful and learned…We have printed your collected works, as you will learn from Froben’s gift, and within six weeks after the Frankfurt Fair sent them to Italy, France, Spain and England, in this consulting the public welfare, which we think is advanced by having the truth spread abroad as widely as possible. Nature by means of truth allures even an enemy to love her.¹⁰

Capito not only mentioned the speed with which they had prepared this edition, but also asserted that their reason for doing so was to advance “the public welfare” and “spread the truth abroad as widely as possible”. This statement suggests that Capito, too, believed that contemporary Christian piety was based on misleading and inaccurate representations of the central Christian narrative. He helped disseminate this collection of Luther’s works precisely to address this issue. Froben and Capito’s comments taken together illustrate the personal convictions that went into the publication of Resolutiones disputationum de virtute indulgentiarum. While obviously pleased with the sales of the volume, both men contributed to spreading Luther’s writings because they believed that these writings would be effective means of renewing Christian piety throughout Europe.

⁹ Smith, footnote on 71-72. Smith states that Capito worked for the Archbishop Albert of Mainz from 1520-1523. He then went to Strassburg where he worked together with Bucer and remained a leader for the remainder of his career.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Fabricius Capito, “127. Wolfgang Fabricius Capito to Martin Luther,” in Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters, 163-164. Another reference to the popularity of Luther’s writings at the point in time is a letter from Claudius Cantiuncula to Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettisheim. Cantiuncula was a lawyer and Agrippa a professor. Agrippa had evidently asked Cantiuncula to send him some of Luther’s works. Cantiuncula replied, …Believe me, dear Agrippa, I have scoured the whole of Basle without finding Luther’s works, as they were all sold long ago. They say they will soon be printed again at Strassburg…

See Claudius Cantiuncula, “153. Claudius Cantiuncula to Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettisheim,” in Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters, 190-191.
Translators’ Comments

Foreign translations provide a possible source of information concerning the sixteenth-century reception of Luther’s early devotional works. While Luther’s Latin writings were easily accessible to scholars across Europe, Christians outside German-speaking lands were dependent upon vernacular translations of Luther’s works. Francis Higman in his informative short article, “Ideas for Export: Translations in the Early Reformation,” claims that Luther’s works were translated more often than those of any other figure of the early Reformation. He also points out that as the sixteenth-century progressed there was an evolution in the types of works typically translated.

…early translations tend to concentrate on short and simple works, varying between the catchistic, the devotional (collections of prayers), and the polemical (all potentially more appropriate to reading aloud); later in the century, “study works” like commentaries on books of the Bible, collections of sermons, and works like the *Institutio*, become more frequent: a new generation of readers has perhaps learned to read for private study.

Higman concludes his article by acknowledging the relative paucity of scholarship on Reformation-era translation and the need for further study of the role of translation played in disseminating Reformation ideas. This became obvious to me, as well, as I analyzed some of Luther’s sixteenth-century English translations.

Translations are significant not simply because they render a work into another language, but because they present a distinct interpretation of the work – an interpretation

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11 Francis M. Higman, “Ideas for Export: Translations in the Early Reformation,” in *Lire et découvrir : la circulation des idées au temps de la Réforme*, Travaux d'humanisme et Renaissance (Genève: Droz, 1998), 534. In contrast, Luther’s academic and polemical texts of an occasional nature were printed and translated much less frequently. In analyzing the origins of early reformation translations, Higman considers three possible locations: the author’s source country, the target country or an intermediate one. Translations made in either the target country or in an intermediate place were the most common. Few German printers, for example, published for the export market in languages other than their own. Most translations were never particularly up to date (German to Dutch translations being the exception).


that can often addresses a social context other than that of the work’s original setting.
Sixteenth-century translators often wrote introductions or letters of dedication to explain
why they had labored to render Luther’s writings into their native tongues. Some of them
clearly admired the Reformer and felt he was a gifted teacher or preacher. Others,
however, decided to translate Luther’s works because a particular piece addressed their
contemporary context especially well. These translators’ remarks are useful for studying
both the interpretation and reception of Luther’s works in foreign lands.

In terms of the five devotional texts analyzed in chapters three and four of this
dissertation, I have studied two sixteenth-century English translations of *Ein Sermon von
der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi* and three English translations of Luther’s
*Tesseradecas Consolatoria*. Three of these included lengthy introductory materials. A
careful study of these introductory writings, as well as of any corresponding marginal
notes or illustrations contained within them, has revealed much about the context for and
in which these translations were made, and help illuminate the complicated reception of
Luther’s works in England.

H. Peetersen van Middelburch’s *Certeine prayers and
godly meditacyons very nedefull for euery Christen*

The English volume, *Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons very nedefull for every Christen*, appeared in 1538. The original imprint indicates that the book was
published in Malborow by Joannem Philoponon. However, EEBO disputes this assertion,
suggesting instead that H. Peetersen van Middelburch, whose press was located in
Antwerp, was the actual printer.14 As the title suggests, the book was similar to other
English primers of its day.15 Its contents included an almanac, a calendar of saints’ days

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14 According to the EEBO record, Philoponon had long been incorrectly identified as J. Hoochstraten.
15 For more on English primers, see Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
and festivals, a letter to the reader, the Athanasian Creed, the “office of all estates”
(scriptural passages on the duties of bishops, rulers, commoners, husbands, wives, fathers
and mothers, children, masters, servants, widows and a final summary for everyone),
prayers for diverse occasions (for wisdom, for boldness in preaching, etc.), the 10
Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ave Maria, all with
accompanying explanations. The volume also included translations of Luther’s
_Tessaradecas Consolatoria_, entitled _Consolacyon for troubled consciences_, and of _Ein
Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi_, whose English title was _A
devoute frutefull and godlye remembraunce of the passion of oure Savioure Christ Jesu_.
The book’s final section was an exposition of Psalm 51, a translation, according to
EEBO, of an original text by Girolamo Savonarola. Nowhere in the volume are either
Luther or Savonarola acknowledged as the original authors of these pieces. The very end
of the volume included a table of contents as well.

Also unacknowledged in the volume (as well as in contemporary scholarship), is
the fact that the entire volume was more or less a translation of Luther’s _Betbüchlein_.
Luther first published the _Betbüchlein_ in 1522, and continued to revise it regularly for
years to come. Apparently Middelburch used as his source text the 1523 or later edition,
since _Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi_ and a number of the
prayers had not been a part of the 1522 edition. Although Middelburch nowhere openly
acknowledged Luther as the original author of any part of his volume, he made a covert
reference to him at the end of _A devoute frutefull and godlye remembraunce of the
passion of oure Savioure Christ Jesu_.

16 Benzing incorrectly states that _Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons_ included Luther’s _Eine kurze
Form der 10 Gebote, des Glaubens, und des Vaterunsers_ of 1520. This identification cannot be correct
because _Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons_ includes Luther’s treatment of the Ave Maria which he
first wrote for the 1522 _Betbüchlein_. Likewise _Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons_ contains a
translation of Luther’s preface from the _Betbüchlein_. According to the “Personal Prayer Book,
Introduction” on page 5 in _LW_ 43, Luther first incorporated his _Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des
heiligen Leidens Christi_ in the 1523 edition.
We purposed [Christen brother] to have annexed the Christian Libertye how be it all thinges considered we thought it most profitable for this present world to ioyne rather unto the ende of this boke a devote exposicyon upon the Psalme Miserere mei Deus.\cite{17}

This mention of “the Christian Libertye” was surely a reference to Luther’s well-known 1520 treatise, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*.\cite{18} Those familiar with Luther’s works would have recognized this reference. In all likelihood, the omission of Luther’s name from the volume was intentional. In the late 1530s, Lutheran ideas had become suspect in many English ecclesiastical circles. In 1539, Henry VIII published the Six Articles against Lutheran teaching. So, it is possible that Middelburch was afraid of being directly associated with the publication of one of Luther’s works. If *Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons* was indeed published in Antwerp, Middelburch would more likely have had earlier and easier access to Luther’s works there.\cite{19}

Since the letter to the reader in *Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons* is printed anonymously, one might erroneously conclude that it had been written by the translator or printer of the volume instead of by Luther. The letter actually provides an interpretive context for the entire volume. It began by lamenting the number of existing books that fostered false devotion such as *The Garden of the Soule* or *The Paradise of the Soule*. The prayers advocated by such books need to be either reformed or discarded. Likewise the majority of volumes on the passion or on the lives of the saints, most of which are based on extra-biblical legends, should be eliminated. The Pater Noster is the best and

\cite{17} *Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons very nedefull for euery Christen*, ed. Joannem Philoponon. (Malborow: Joannem Philoponon [H. Peetersen van Middelburch], 1538). See EEBO: STC (2nd ed.) / 20193, image 102.

\cite{18} According to Benzing, the earliest English translation of *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* dates to 1578. Given the early date of this volume, one might suspect that it was printed on the continent rather than in Great Britain. A more detailed study of the various editions of the Betbüchlein is necessary to determine whether or not *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* was ever incorporated into the Betbüchlein itself.

\cite{19} The volume available on EEBO entitled *A prymer in Englyshe with certeyn prayers [et] godly meditations, very necessary for all people that understonde not the Latyne tongue. Cum priuilegio regali*. (London: Johan Byddell, 1534). See EEBO: STC (2nd ed.) / 15986. *A prymer in Englyshe* is also a variant of Luther’s Betbüchlein, though this is nowhere acknowledged. The preface is the same as the letter to the editor in *Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons*. 
only truly necessary model prayer. The author (Luther) then stated the purpose of the book.

Therefore here…first I will declare after a syngle & playn maner…thou shalt knowe whate the knowelege of synne is & howe we ought truly to praye folowing the rehersall of the commandementes and of the Pater noster.  

The translation of Tessaradecas Consolatoria included in the volume omits Luther’s letter of dedication and his concluding paragraph, both of which would have identified him as the author. By placing Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi and Tessaradecas Consolatoria within Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons very nedefull for every Christen Middelburch effectively converted both of them from occasional pieces into contemplative devotions intended for repeated usage.

Middelburch contributed very little original material to the volume. There is, however, this short, yet interesting comment following A devoute frutefull and godlye remembraunce of the passion of oure Savioure Christ Jesu.

Thus endeth the meditacyon and frutefull remembraunce of Chrystes passyon which passeth the contemplycon of Monkes / fryers and Nonnes yee and all other religious.

Although the anti-monastic tone of this statement is readily apparent, it is difficult to assess whether or not it was directed at the religious situation in England in the 1530s or was intended to serve as a broader polemical attack on the Catholic Church. Whatever else, Middelburch continued to promote contemplative devotion among the laity. Indeed, he proclaimed that this particular lay meditation on Christ’s Passion was itself superior to monastic meditations.

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20 Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons very nedefull for every Christen. See EEBO: STC (2nd ed.) / 20193, image 11.

21 Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons very nedefull for every Christen. See EEBO: STC (2nd ed.) / 20193, image 102.
Robert Filles’s *A treatice conteining certain meditations of trew & perfect consolation*...

Robert Filles (c.1521–1578), a priest of the Church of England, studied at Oxford, receiving his BA in November 1542 and his ordination in 1546. A convinced Protestant, he and his wife fled to Geneva after the accession of Mary I, becoming members of John Knox’s congregation in 1557. Upon his return to England in 1561, Filles was appointed to a parish position and began translating a number of Protestant texts from French into English, including works by Calvin and Beza. In 1564 he translated Luther’s *Tesseradecas Consolatoria* into English from an earlier French translation. Filles dedicated the translation to Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester. In his dedicatory letter, Filles provided the following reasons for having made his translation.

In reading over dyverse bookes in the time of the late persecution, ther came one little treatise too my handes wrytten in the French tunge wherein (above the rest) I toke moste plesure and found cheefest comfort in that miserable time, and being not fully satisfied with the often readyng thereof: I took in hand for to translate it into the English tunge, for mine own use only, thinking therby to imprint it the more lively in my minde, being not determined to have published it abrode untill a certaine freend by chaunce found it among other of my bookes, wylled mee, and as it were urged mee not to keep backe so excellent a treasure from the people of God. At last (being overcome) I condescended to set it forth in print, devising with my selfe to choose a patrone whose honorable name & renoume might be an occasion somewhat to stop the mouthe of the sicophant & privy biter, I could not devise one more meeter, and to whome this work more aptlier dooth agree nor whose estate is more livelier painted for the: then is in this little volume, wherfore taking courage of your accustomable benevolent kindenes towards me, I have

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22 Benzing identifies a single French translation of the work, *Consolation chrestienne, contre les afflictions de ce monde, & scrupules de conscience*, printed by Simon DuBois around 1534. I am unaware if Luther’s authorship is acknowledged in DuBois’ edition or not. On the other hand, Francis Higman, in his article “Luther, Calvin et les docteurs” in *Lire et découvrir : la circulation des idées au temps de la Réforme* writes about Claude d’Espence, a doctor on the faculty at the University of Paris who got in trouble for publishing a French translation of *Tesseradecas Consolatoria* in 1547. The French translation of Luther’s treatise mentioned above had been condemned by the Paris faculty in 1541 and added to the *Catalogue des livres interdits* in 1544. See Higman,“Ideas for Export: Translations in the Early Reformation,” 305-320.

23 According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Biography*, Dudley was long rumored to be a consort of Queen Elizabeth and was a protector of Puritan causes. During the reign of Mary he and a number of his family members had been arrested and tried for treason. It is probably this hardship to which Filles refers in his dedicatory letter.
performed my device, desiring your honor to accept my meaning and to beare with my rudenes.24

After stating that this work had brought him the “cheefest comfort” while he was in exile in Switzerland, Filles asserted that he decided to translate it into his mother tongue because he wanted to “imprint it the more lively in [his] mind.” These comments reveal what sort of use Filles made of the treatise. Clearly, he found it to be a vivid and engaging contemplation to which he could and did return again and again. Not only did he read it often, he meditated upon the images contained therein.

As was the case with the translation of *Tessaradecas* printed in *Certeine prayers and godly meditacyons very nedefull for euery Christen*, Filles omitted both Luther’s letter of dedication and the concluding paragraph and nowhere acknowledged Luther as the author of the treatise.25 Whether or not he was aware that Luther was the author is unclear. This would have depended, in large part, on whether or not the French translation had itself identified Luther. Given that he published the volume during the reign of Elizabeth, one wonders if there still would have been any political or ecclesiastical impediments to identifying Luther as the author of the treatise like there likely had been when Middelburch published his earlier translation. In any case, Filles evidently believed the work’s significance was found in its contents rather than its authorship.

Instead of printing Luther’s introduction as a separate section, Filles incorporated it into his own dedicatory letter, printing it immediately after the passage quoted above. He omitted the last paragraph of the original introduction as well, substituting his own

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24 *A treatice containing certain meditatio[n]s of trew & perfect consolatio[n], declared in two tables. fist, is the consideratio[n] of 7 eveles, whiche happen to us. Second of the good which we receive, set forth for the consolation[n] & comfort of all those who are lade[n] & do labour to be eased. Written in the Frenche tung, and translated in to Englishe by Robert Filles (London: J. Alde, 1564). See EBBO: STC (2nd ed.) / 16988.5, image 2. It is somewhat ironic that Filles dedicates his translation to a member of the nobility as did Luther originally.*

25 Luther’s preface from the 1535/36 edition was also missing. If Filles, however, was using the French translation of 1534 mentioned above in footnote 25, then he would not have been aware of the preface.
lengthy ruminations on the topic. Having referenced Solomon’s reflections on the co-mingled nature of joy and sorrow, he moved on to tell a tale from ancient Greek mythology of how Sorrow came to wear Pleasure’s clothes. When Pandora opened her vessel, releasing Sorrow upon humanity, Pleasure also went out into the world and began recruiting disciples. Pleasure’s success was so great that Jupiter resolved to lure Pleasure back to heaven. So he sent nine Muses to seduce Pleasure with their music. Before ascending into heaven, Pleasure left his corruptible earthly clothing behind. Stumbling upon this clothing, Sorrow put it on and “so ever after he hath gone about the world clothed in pleasure’s apparel, deceiving men continually.” Filles used this myth to explain the union of opposites more fully. While the joining of pleasure and sorrow might appear impossible to humans, for God all things are possible. Had not God coupled death and life, hell and heaven, the human and the divine? After offering examples of two ancient Jewish kings, Filles then offered a reflection on the two-fold nature of humanity.

Heere we may se these two passions, directly contrary in one soule. Now considering these two contrary operations within a man and the tormoiling between hope and dispaire, whiche be so outrageous, sudaine and unmesarable so that there is no man, but it maketh him amased when he cometh to consider it as it is…It appereth that S. Paul felt wonderful things in himself. For suddenly from the depth of Hel, and the knowledge of sin, he erecteth himself up above the heavens, and wandzeth, in his spirit contemplating the high and marvelous divinitye of God after an unspeakable maner. Now here may we learn not too be careful for ourselves or to have respect to our owne misery or infermitye, but aske of God our good father and he wil not faile us but wuth speede wil exalt us into a moste blessed and happye fruition of his divinity. But we cannot rightly desire the mercy and goodness of God, except we hat oure own sinful wicked lie: and we cannot hate our sinne and wickedness: except we have a/the true knowledge and feeling thereof. And wee cannot know it nor feel it without his contrary, which is the great mercy and infinite goodness of God. But so long as our soule doth dwel and abide captive and deteined in this miserable body of sinne as a wanderer in the desert or as a pilgrim or wayfaring man: there shal be alwaise relikes of sin remayning within us.

While Filles attributes this tale to a Greek poet, he refers to Jupiter instead of Zeus. In all likelihood, this is a later version of the story.

27 A treatise containing certain meditations of true and perfect consolation. See EBBO: STC (2nd ed.) / 16988.5, image 4-5.

28 A treatise containing certain meditations of true and perfect consolation, declared in two tables, first, is the consideratio[n] of 7 eveles, whiche happen to us. Second of the good which we receive, set forth
In this paragraph, Filles presented to his readers his own interpretation of the Pauline–Augustinian narrative discussed in chapter two. Filles reminded them of Paul’s ecstatic vision of the third heaven and suggested that Christians can experience glimpses of heavenly pleasures even while in the midst of earthly sorrows. However, such a vision is possible only after having fully comprehended one’s own sinfulness. Divine grace is visible and understandable only in the face of human sin. Each interprets the other. And so, all who would know God, must also dare to know themselves. Obviously, Filles had spent time reflecting on the imagery and theology contained within *Tessaradecas Consolatoria*, for he here revealed his intimate knowledge of its contents, particularly of Image I.1.

After this reflection on the union of opposites, Filles then commented on the current political situation in England. Declaring that the mixing of opposites is nowhere more present than in England itself, he mentioned the peace and tranquility that had come to the realm since the ascent of Queen Elizabeth I. Good books and sound teaching abounded throughout England. Nonetheless London continued to be plagued by hunger, disease, and warfare. Why was so much joy and sorrow mingled together in England? Filles interpreted these manifold sorrows as the judgment of God. According to Filles, these evils had come upon the people because of their contempt for the ministers of the Word of God. They had disrespected pastors and defrauded them of their income.

According to Filles, many had been reduced to poverty. Aware that not all of his readers would be convinced by these arguments, Filles admitted that there were greedy pastors in the Church. However, their greed should be addressed on an individual basis. Filles anticipated the arguments of his Catholic readers, who might suggest that Protestant ministers were suffering on account of the illegitimacy of the English reform itself. Filles

pointed out in response that plagues had also existed during times of Catholic rule. In the end, he called his readers back to true fasting and prayer in the hope that God would have mercy and bring the plagues to an end.

Filles included a number of additional items in the volume to increase its usefulness. For example, he created a two-sided table of contents after the dedicatory letter which lists the fourteen images and the pages on which they were found. At the end of his edition Filles provided a nearly ten page listing (“a breefe Table of the principall matters cotained in this book…”) of the consolations the reader could find within the text, as well as specific page and line number references. The last page also lists a few typographical corrections and gives the following publication information: “Imprinted at London at the Long School [?] Adjoining unto Saint Mildreds Churche in the Pultrie by John Alde”. Filles volume seems to have been carefully organized and printed. The cover included a non-thematic decorative frame around the title. The first letter of the first word of many major sections were printed with larger decorative woodcuts. With its additional apparatus, *A treatice conteining certain meditations of trew & perfect consolation…* was intended to be used again and again as a contemplative devotion.

William Gace’s *A right comfortable treatise conteyning sundrye pointes of consolation…*

William Gace (1568–1580) received his B.A. from Clare College, Cambridge in 1572. An ardent evangelical who was particularly inspired by Luther, Gace translated a number of continental Reformation writings into English. In 1578 Thomas Vautrollier “dwelling at the Black Friars” printed Gace’s translation of *Tesseradecas Consolatoria*

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29 Filles doesn’t number each page separately, but rather numbers each folio (double page).

30 The microfilm copy was dark and I was unable to read the entire word.
under the title *A right comfortable treatise conteyning sundrye pointes of consolation for them that labour & are laden* Gace’s translation must have been based upon Luther’s corrected edition of 1536/37, because he included the new preface that Luther wrote for that edition. Gace also included Luther’s dedicatory letter and final paragraph which both Middelburch and Robert Filles had omitted. Gace dedicated the work to Henry Dale, a London merchant.

Gace began his dedicatory letter by affirming the manifold miseries of earthly life.

For if heaven be our countrye, what is the earth else but a place of banishment? Wherein being exiled from true delightes and pleasures, we live in a state unquiet, troublesom, and many wayes miserable…

In light of earth’s continual hardships, consolations are a necessary relief. Because this treatise contained so many good consolations, Gace thought it would be appropriate and prove beneficial to translate it into English. Being familiar with its content, Gace affirmed that the treatise had the ability to deliver the consolations promised in its title. Not only that, it would also assist Christians to love and obey God’s will patiently rather than to resist it. After all, “the cross is usually incident to the godly”. Gace then goes on not only to commend the treatise to his patron, but to repeatedly shower it with high praise.


32 *LW* incorrectly suggests that Gace’s 1578 translation was the first in English. Benzing, on the other hand, has no reference to Gace’s translation, but mentions instead the 1538 version.

33 Gace does not attempt to tie the *Tessaradecas* to any particular circumstances, but uses it to speak of human experience generally.

34 Martin Luther, *A right comfortable treatise containing fourteene pointes of consolation for them that labor and are laden: Written by D. Martin Luther to Prince Friderik Duke of Saxonie, he being sore sicke, thereby to comfort him in the time of his great distresse*. Englished by W. Gace, (London: Thomas Vautrollier, 1578). See EEBO: STC (2nd ed.) / 16989, iii.

...I am bolde to commend this treatise to all the godly in generall, to be reade of them to their singular commoditie and comfort, but especially to your worship, whose godly conversation both of a long time has bene, and dayly is an evident testimony of your sincere and unfayned profession of Christ his religion; desiring you to esteeme thereof, not according to the quantitie or outward appearance (for then shall you make but small accompt of it, being both litle in quantitie, & adorned with no eloquent tearmes or glorious words) but according to the frute that the godly shall reape by diligent reading thereof. For pearles and precious stones for the most part are in quantitie but small, and in outward appearance simple, which in value notwithstanding are great and in vertue excellent…

Throughout his edition, Gace added a number of marginal notes to assist readers with the interpretation of the treatise. In one place he offered a definition for a word left untranslated in the text. In another he provided a missing reference for a scriptural quotation. On most pages, the marginal notes served as summaries of a paragraph’s main points. Gace consecutively numbered the pages of the volume and corrected the ordered listing of the images in the Preface so they would agree with the actual ordering of the images within the main body of the text. Gace’s edition was visually appealing as well. He used a variety of fonts and font sizes to highlight different aspects of the text. For example, most marginal notes are printed in a smaller italicized script. The dedicatory letter is printed in a font different than the rest of the text. In general, it would appear that Gace sought to produce a text as faithful to the original as possible. Perhaps he was aware of the previous anonymous translations of the text and sought to give appropriate credit to Luther. Since the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 had effectively created a Protestant Church in England, evangelicals such as William Gace likely no longer had to fear mentioning Luther by name.

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37 See footnote 40 in chapter four.
William Gace’s *Special and Chosen Sermons of D. Martin Luther*

*Special and Chosen Sermons of D. Martin Luther,* collected out of his writings and preachings for the necessary instruction and edification of such as hunger and seeke after the perfect knowledge and inestimable glorie which is in Christ Jesu, to the comfort and salvation of their soules was a collection of thirty-four sermons translated by William Gace and printed by Thomas Vautrollier in 1578. Most of them are focused on the life of Christ or are based on Gospel texts, though a number of them address Reformation themes such as law and gospel, the proper understanding of confession, or good work as the fruits of faith. Included within the collection is “A Sermon of the Meditation of Christes passion”. As was the case with *A right comfortable treatise*, Gace’s *Special and Chosen Sermons of D. Martin Luther* was a visually appealing volume. Much thought went into its layout. Once again, different fonts were used for differing purposes. Intricate capital letter woodcuts began each major section. There was a table of contents to assist the reader in finding the various sermons. Titles are printed at the top of the pages. There are marginal notes throughout. In places where Luther quotes Scripture, the references are listed in the margins. Whether William Gace or Thomas Vautrollier was responsible for these many additional features is unclear. The book was certainly more than a quickly printed, quickly discarded cheap pamphlet; it was a keepsake volume, intended to be read and approved of by not only the English laity, but by the ecclesiastical elite as well.

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38 See Gace, “A CATALOGVE OR REHEARsall of the Sermons conteined in this booke” ii-iii. I have been unable to determine the original source of these sermons. I am unaware of either a German or Latin collection which numbered thirty-four sermons. This would be an intriguing study, but one which goes beyond the domain of this dissertation.

39 By 1578, it would have seemed obvious to an English observer that the Lutherans in Germany had succeeded in establishing a distinct Protestant Church, especially since the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. Consequently, Luther’s teachings would likely have gained in ascendancy in English circles during the Elizabethan Settlement. See also the following note.
After the table of contents, the book contains two preliminary pieces which shed light upon the intended purpose of the volume. The first is Gace’s letter of dedication to Sir Thomas Henneage, a member of Elizabeth I’s privy chamber.40 Gace begins by denying the ability of the human intellect to comprehend God and of the human will to serve, honor, and/or obey God freely. Aware of these human deficiencies, God has graciously revealed in God’s Word the essence of both divine nature and human duty. Yet, God’s Word must be both taught and learned. Unfortunately, there have been few who have taught it well. According to Gace, Martin Luther had been an exemplary teacher who had faithfully explicated the basic narratives concerning Christ: that Christ was created under the law to redeem those in bondage to the law; that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to those who believe; that through Christ Christians have been adopted into the family of God; that joy, comfort, and quietness of conscious are found only in Christ; that the Holy Spirit imparts to Christians strength which they have not on their own. Gace explicitly states that he translated Luther’s sermons precisely because they communicate these teachings so clearly. Thus, the grieving Christian, the doubting Christian, the suffering Christian, etc. will find in these sermons remedies for their ills. In the dedicatory letter, he commented, too, on the assumptions he brought to translation.

Whereas in translating them I have used a plaine kynde of stile (yet such as sufficiently expresseth the meaning of the author) and not studied for curious words & eloquent phrases, the cause thereof is, for that I preferre plainnesse with profit, before much curiositie with smaller commoditie, so that I nothinge at all feare that in this respect they shal be misliked of the godly, whose misliking onely I endevour to avoide.41

40 Henneage was not only a member of Elizabeth’s privy chamber, but also a trusted friend and mediator between the throne and those who wished access to the queen. Though of originally modest estate, he rose regularly in rank and office throughout his career. In 1570 he became the treasurer of the queen’s chamber and was knighted in 1577. Interestingly, as he grew in stature, he aroused the jealously of Robert Dudley, the earl of Leicester, to whom Robert Filles had dedicated his translation. See footnote 26. See Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, online ed, Jan 2008, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): accessed June 3, 2011, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12921.

41 William Gace, “The Epistle Dedicatory,” in Special and chosen sermons of D. Martin Luther collected out of his writings and preachings for the necessary instruction and edification of such, as hunger and seeke after the perfect knowledge and inestimable glorie which is in Christ Jesu, to the comfort and
Recognizing that translators can get lost in the study of an original text, Gace states his goal was to maximize the book’s reception among the “godly”. If they should like it and use it (and buy it), then he claimed he would be pleased.

The second preliminary piece is “An Admonition to the Christian Reader” by the martyrologist John Fox.42 Fox begins his admonition with the assertion that Luther needs no real introduction on account of his many good books already in circulation. Fox also asserts that Luther’s sermons will commend themselves to the reader through the consolations they convey. The sermons were worthy of both publication and careful reading because they “set forth Christ in his right glorie”.43 Clarifying what he meant by this, Fox outlines Luther’s strengths as he understood them.

...of all expositors of the same Scriptures, I know none or fewe, in these our dayes, more lively to open the comforts unto us out of Gods worde, then this Doctor and Preacher of these Sermons here following: which as he hath done most effectually first in his owne tongue to his contrypeople, then in Latin to the learned: so this translator hath no lesse plainly and faithfully englisht the same for the commoditie and use of the contryfolke of England. By whose meanes and industrie this vantage we have now gained, that we have gotten unto us one good preacher in England more than we had before, to the comfort and edification of all such as be disposed to read and learne. So that in such townes and villages, wherein before were mute ministers...this Preacher now may supplie the lacke, and there be received as their person, if they please, preaching now in their own speech unto them, and putting them to no charges of any tythes. And in other places where more plenty of learned teachers is, yet notwithstanding no hurt shall come to admit this stranger as a coadjutor, or felowhelper unto them. Whereby I nothing doute, but it so doing, all such as shal be willing to give eare to this Preacher, as we they that be learned, shall fynde wherein to grove in more perfection, as also


43 John Fox, “An Admonition to the Christian Reader,” in _Special and chosen sermons of D. Martin Luther_ collected out of his writings and preachings for the necessary instruction and edification of such, as hunger and seeke after the perfect knowledge and inestimable glorie which is in Christ Iesu, to the comfort and _saluation of their soules_. Englished by VV.G. (London: Thomas Vautroullier, 1578). See EEBO: STC (2nd ed.) / 16993, ix. This language bears witness again to the concern for true and false narratives.
According to Fox, Luther was a masterful preacher who was able to address both the laity and the learned clearly in either German or Latin, and whose special gift was speaking comfort to troubled hearts. It was self-evident to Fox that Luther’s translated sermons would serve to renew piety throughout England.

In the translation of *Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi* printed in this volume there are no preliminary or concluding observations. However, there are a number of interpretive notes and biblical references in the margins. The inclusion of biblical references reinforces Higman’s claim that later sixteenth-century translations were intended for personal study. Scriptural citations in the margins imply that Gace assumed his readers had access to a Bible and had the knowledge and skill to look up these passages on their own. The biblical citations included in the text were printed in a different font, making them stand out on the page. The marginal notes, too, are printed in a different and smaller font. In most cases, these notes summarize the main points of the sermon and provide the reader with explicit points upon which to continue reflecting after their reading is complete. For example, on page 72, there are two marginal notes: “What it is to cast our sinns upon Christ.” and “What we must doe when we can not attaine unto this faith, to beleve that Christ died for our sinns and rose again for our justification.” By providing readers with these notes for their contemplation, Gace exercised a certain amount of control over the interpretations his readers could bring to the text.

As these translations attest, Luther’s early spiritual writings were appreciated and utilized because of their clarity and simplicity. Many of these English translators commented as well on the vividness of Luther’s language. He knew how to explain the

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45 See quotation associated with footnote 14 above.
Christian narrative in a manner that caught people’s attention and drew them into the story.\textsuperscript{46} But these works were not translated solely for the purpose of introducing Martin Luther to English readers. On the contrary, they were translated for the sake of their own merits. People found comfort and hope in these writings, whether or not Luther was acknowledged as their author.\textsuperscript{47}

Publishers’ Illustrations

Although the covers of some sixteenth-century books were adorned only with the title of the work(s), most sixteenth-century printers chose to decorate their covers with some sort of artwork.\textsuperscript{48} The preferred and simplest means of producing cover illustrations were woodcuts. Carved in a block of wood, woodcut images could be inked and used over and over again. They offered printers a relatively inexpensive way to make their publications more appealing. Not simply providing ornamentation, woodcuts served a various functions. Some identified the publisher. Others offered a portrait of the author or provided clues to the subject matter of a given publication. Because the woodcuts included with a given publication were chosen, in most cases, by the printers themselves,

\textsuperscript{46} However, just what the Christian narrative was understood to be seems to have varied somewhat among these different publishers.

\textsuperscript{47} For example, although \textit{Tesseradecas Consolatoria} is almost completely unknown today in English-speaking countries, it was obviously a popular devotional piece in the England in the mid-to-late sixteenth-century. After all, three different English translations of the work appeared in the span of forty years. Why did the English translators choose to print this work? Because it represented something original: an approach to Christian spirituality both old and new. On the one hand, it returned the Christ narrative to central place. After all, the contemplation of the crucified and risen Christ makes up the last and highest of each of the two sets of seven images. It also enabled the reader to put themselves into the story. \textit{Tesseradecas Consolatoria} became more than just a reflection on how to approach a grave illness. Instead it served as a guiding narrative for Christian existence, adaptable to any variety of circumstances.

\textsuperscript{48} German editions regularly had more illustrations than Latin editions. This could indicate that the publishers believed scholarly readers of Latin were less interested in (or in need of) accompanying illustrations than were German readers. It is possible, too, that not all publishers could read Latin and were thus unaware of the actual contents of a particular work. It would likely have represented a larger financial risk for a publisher to print a work with unknown content. In such cases, the author’s reputation might have provided a sufficient rationale.
they serve as evidence of the publisher’s own interpretation of a text, some of which are more helpful than others.49

Generic & Standardized Cover Illustrations

While some sixteenth-century printers adorned the covers of their publications with nothing other than the title of the work and possibly the author’s name, many began to make use of woodcuts in order to draw a reader’s attention. The simplest covers consisted of decorative frames or borders which surrounded the book titles. Some of these borders were plain, others rather intricate. Consider, for example, the frame on the 1520 Leipzig edition of *Eyn Sermon von der bereytung zum Sterben Doctoris Martini* Luther Augustini (Figure 3). A careful examination of the border shows that it consists of four separate strips which are positioned around the edges. There are a variety of imaginary figures within the border, the most obvious being winged, naked children known as putti. The artwork itself has no relationship to the content of the treatise. Only the title provides information on the pamphlet’s contents, designating not only the name of the work and its author, but identifying Luther as both an academic and as an Augustinian friar.

The cover of Johann Rhau-Grunenberg’s 1519 Wittenberg edition of this same work has a relatively simple border as well (Figure 4). However there is a singular theme in this frame: a hunting scene. In the bottom left hand corner is a hunter. In the upper half of the left border is a hunting dog. The rest of the frame contains a variety of game animals and plants. Although this frame might have been visually appealing, it had nothing to do with book’s contents. For some reason, Rhau-Grunenberg chose only to print Luther’s initials on the cover. This wasn’t his standard practice.

One final example of a non-thematic border is illustrative. Silvan Otmar’s 1520 Augsburg edition of Spalatin’s German translation of *Tesseradecas Consolatorias* (Figure 5) has a more intricate frame containing columns, vines, putti and mythological figures. Otmar used this particular frame for a number of publications by Luther and other authors. The small blank square at the top center provided a place to print the date of publication. While standardized frames such as this enabled printers to develop a distinctive look for their publications, they would have offered sixteenth-century readers no clues to a book’s contents. In this case, Otman’s lengthy title, *Ain trostlichs büchlein Doc. Martini Luthers Augustiner / in aller widerwertigkait ains yeden Christglaubigen menschen neülich geteücscht durch Magistrum Georgium Spalatinum*, does identify both Luther and Spalatin. However this title is quiet a bit different than the Latin original.

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50 Some sixteenth-century publishers used a personalized logo to identify their own presses instead of a distinctive border. The English publisher, Thomas Vautrollier, for example used an anchor logo. In the middle of the image is an anchor which is surrounded by the inscription: “anchora spei”. Although Vautrollier published Gace’s two translations the same year, he used slightly different anchor logos. They have the same basic layout, though the one is more ornate than the other.
Cover Illustrations as Interpretive Clues to the Text

Other publishers went a step further. Instead of selecting a title page woodcut for aesthetic appeal or press identification, some chose woodcuts to complement the work’s subject matter or to provide an interpretive clue to the work’s content. In a few cases, the cover illustration itself was intended to function as a devotional aid, assisting the reader’s contemplation. However, not all publishers chose equally appropriate or helpful woodcuts.

Unrelated Illustrations

Although publishers often chose cover illustrations to represent a specific theme, their choices did not always match the work’s contents. Perhaps they lacked a suitable image and substituted another image that they deemed a close approximation. Or it could
have been that they had never actually read the work or had only skimmed it, and gained a false impression of the work’s theme only from a cursory glance at the title or opening paragraph.

The cover of Jörg Nadler’s 1520 Augsburg printing of Luther’s baptismal sermon, entitled *Ain Sermon von de[m] haylige[n] hochwirdigen sacrament der Tauff / Doctor Martini Luthers Augustiner tzuo Wittenberg*, is an example of a poorly chosen or mismatched cover woodcut (Figure 7). Surrounded by a border of grapes on the vine, the central cavity includes a separate woodcut of a saint holding a chalice.\(^{51}\) A small snake is visible above the rim of the chalice. These elements convey Eucharistic themes. Yet, this is a work on baptism. There are no elements on the cover: no baptismal font, no water, no dove – that would assist the reader in recognizing this as a baptismal treatise. Perhaps Nadler (or an assistant) saw the word “sacrament” and jumped to conclusions. In any case, he correctly identifies Luther as an Augustinian friar, resident in Wittenberg.

The 1520 Leipzig edition of *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwirdigen Sacrament der Tauffe* (Figure 8) provides another example of a mismatched cover illustration. Published by Wolfgang Stöckel, the cover woodcut is a composite image of the seven sacraments displayed in three columns. The first and third columns each contain three small images; the second column has two slightly larger ones. The larger image on top is a representation of Christ with the inscription “Septem Sacramenta”.

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\(^{51}\) According to DIA, the saint is most likely the Apostle John.
Holding a cloth draped around his groin, he is otherwise naked. Although no wounds are visible in his hands, feet or side, there is a line extending from his side to each of the other images. The larger image at the bottom of the central column shows an ornate monstrance. The viewing window is open and the Eucharistic host is visible inside. These are the only two images of the eight which might invite contemplative devotion. All of the remaining images show not objects of devotion, but rather picture the administration of the sacraments: a baby being dipped into the font, a confirmand kneeling before a bishop, a penitent confessing his sins, a man being ordained, a couple exchanging their marital vows, and the last rites being administered to the dying. Although it is a detailed illustration, this particular woodcut would likely have not been particularly helpful in identifying the actual subject matter of the piece. While it suggests that the volume concerns the sacraments, it would likely have misled buyers into thinking the work was about all seven sacraments, or perhaps the Eucharist since the monstrance looms large in
the middle column. Stöckel identifies Luther by name and order in the same size font as the rest of the title.

Silvan Otmar’s 1519 Augsburg edition of *Ain Sermon von der Beraytung zum Sterben Doctor Martini Luthers Augustiner etc.* has a cover illustration of two men stumbling over a third who had died (Figure 9). While this illustration appropriately identifies death as the topic of this sermon, it doesn’t clearly focus the reader’s attention. Is one supposed to look primarily at the dead man and think about one’s own death? Or does the image direct one’s vision to the two who are reacting to his death? Perhaps this woodcut is simply intended to signal the potential suddenness of death. Otmar’s title mentions Luther by name and identifies him as an Augustinian.

Jörg Nadler’s 1520 Augsburg edition of *Ain Sermon von der Beraitung zum sterbenn, Doctor Martini Luthers Augustiner etc.* has three individual woodcuts under the title (Figure 10). Two of the three are smaller than the third and placed below it. The large image on top portrays a man at the moment of death. A woman kneels at his feet holding up a burning candle. An angel, hovering above the bed, draws the man’s soul (or last breath) out of his mouth. These various actions are in keeping with the *ars moriendi* tradition. However, Luther states in this sermon that he wanted people to think about death while living and not while upon their deathbeds. It will be too late then. This image actually contradicts Luther’s advice in the sermon.

The second image, in the lower left hand corner, shows the figure of death carrying a casket in his right hand and a large arrow in his left. In the background a small cross, perhaps a tombstone, is barely visible. This image, like the one just discussed, is not in keeping with Luther’s treatment of the subject. In the sermon, Luther strives to ease his readers’ fear of death. However, this image was intended to invoke one’s fear of death.

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52 According to the DIA, the illustration was the work of Hans Leonhard Schaeufelein. Otmar’s ran three printings of this text in 1519. Otmar changed the spelling of Beraytung to Beraitung in the third edition.
The third image depicts a saint, most likely Jerome, contemplating Christ’s passion in an outdoor setting. Before him on the ground is an open book and directly before him jutting out from a hillside is a small crucifix. In the background a building is visible on another hill. Behind Jerome rests a large lion.\textsuperscript{53} At first glance, this third image would seem not to fit with the subject of the sermon at all. What does the contemplation of the Passion have to do with preparing for death? However, given that Luther in the sermon counsels his readers to remember that their hopes of resurrection arise from the Passion of Christ, this image might actually be the most appropriate illustration of the three. However, this association would have been lost on all except those who had already read the sermon. In all likelihood, Nadler realized that this sermon was similar to

\footnote{\textsuperscript{53} During a workshop session of the 2011 North American Luther Forum, Christopher Brown indicated that the lion in this image helps identify the character as St. Jerome.}
ars moriendi manuals and decided to use these illustrations to aid readers in making this identification. Nadler does mention Luther by name and identifies him as an Augustinian.

The last example of a mismatched illustration I want to consider is the one that was printed at the end of the Silvan Otmar’s 1520 Augsburg edition of Spalatin’s German translation of the Tessaradecas Consolatoria. (Figures 5 & 6.) The title of the work is *Ain tröstlichs büchlein Doc. Martini Luthers Augustiner in aller widerwertigkeit ains yeden Christglaubigen menschen neülich geteüscht durch Magistrum Georgium Spalatinum.*

The inclusion of this particular illustration was made, I believe, to assist the reader in contemplating the treatise’s themes. At the top of the woodcut, the risen Christ is seated on an orb in glory surrounded by two angels who are blowing trumpets. Behind Christ’s head are a sword and a lily. Below him are two saints, recognizable by their halos, kneeling in prayer. The saint on Christ’s left is male and the one on his right is female. It would appear that both of them are appealing to Christ for five souls who are shown in purgatory at the bottom of the illustration.

Otmar might have chosen to print this illustration in his edition of the Tessaradecas because it hints at four of the seven directions mentioned in Tessaradecas: the evils/goods above, below, to the left and to the right. However, only three of the figures in this woodcut actually fit Luther’s schema: the resurrected Christ reigning above, the souls in damnation below, and the saint at Christ’s right hand. The person to the left of Christ is a saint, whereas in Tessaradecas one’s enemies are to be pictured on one’s left. The sword and lily behind Christ’s head might represent past evils and blessings, though this is a bit of a stretch. While one might have attempted to make use of this woodcut to contemplate the fourteen consolations contained in the work, its

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54 Most of the Latin editions of *Tessaradecas Consolatoria* have no cover illustrations at all.

55 Along with the same cover frame, Otmar also included this illustration in the back of his 1520 *Der zehen gebot gotes ain Schöne nutzliche Erklärung durch Doctor Martinum Luther Augustiner zuo Wittenberg, beschrieben vnd gepredigt, gaistlichen vnd weltlichen dienende.* How it would have fit this work’s theme is unclear.
usefulness would likely have been limited on account of the mixed metaphors. In actuality, it is hard to imagine the scene suggesting anything other than two saints pleading to Christ at the Last Judgment for souls in purgatory. Consequently, although the insertion of this particular image represents a potentially creative interpretation of the Tesseradecas, it would seem likely that it reinforced traditional piety instead.

Related Illustrations

In contrast to the mismatched illustrations just considered, other woodcuts were effective and useful additions to particular publications. The cover illustration on Jobst Gutknect’s 1520 Nuremberg edition of Ein Sermon von dem hochwirdigen Sacrament des heyligen waren leichnamb Christi und von den Bruderschaften is a good case in point (Figure 11). This woodcut of an elaborate monstrance would have been a familiar image of Eucharistic devotion and likely served two distinct purposes. On the one hand, it would have instantly identified the volume’s subject matter. On the other hand, it would also have highlighted the sermon’s contemplative focus. A monstrance not only served as a visual display for the reserved Sacrament, it also functioned as a contemplative focal point for the adoration of the host. An image of a monstrance could have effectively fulfilled the same devotional purpose as an actual monstrance. In the sermon, Luther asserts that one can receive a blessing just by desiring the sacrament. Thus, the repeated viewing of this image could in and of itself enliven this desire. Gutknecht also added an additional subtitle to the pamphlet: “fur die Leyen”. This might have been a shrewd addition on his part, intended to indicate the pamphlet’s intended audience. However,

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56 Gutknecht published a second image of another, even more elaborate, monstrance inside as well.

57 LW 35, 49. WA 2, 742.
Gutknecht did not spell out Luther’s name on the cover; he printed only the initials D.M.L.A.

The 1521 Wittenberg edition of Johann Rhau-Grunenberg’s printing of *Eyn Sermon von der Betrachtung des heyligen leydens Christi* shows Christ hanging on the cross with Mary to his right and the Apostle John to his left (Figure 12). As was usual for medieval crucifixion scenes, a skull rests at the base of the cross.\(^{58}\) This particular portrayal of the crucifixion was common. Readers could contemplate the suffering of Christ, of Mary, or even of John, the beloved apostle. Because of its long-time association with Passion devotion, this scene would have instantly been recognized by the sermon’s readers and likely put to personal devotional use.

\(^{58}\) One tradition stated that Christ was buried atop Adam’s grave. So, Adam’s skull is often shown resting near the foot of the cross.
The cover illustration of Valetin Schumann’s 1519 Leipzig edition of *Eyn Sermon von der Betrachtung des heyligen leydens Christi d. Mar. Luther zu Wittenberg*, shows the risen Christ sitting alone with his head in hand on top of a rock (Figure 13). His foot wounds and the nail mark of his left hand are visible. He is wearing the crown of thorns. Little else is included in the scene. Obviously, this image is not meant to be an historical representation, for it corresponds to no particular Gospel text. Instead it was an image whose sole purpose was to serve as a focal point for meditation. Known in art history as the “Pensive Christ”, this common portrayal of the suffering Christ was intended to invoke sympathy and/or shame in viewers as they reflected upon Christ’s Passion and death. Consequently, Schumann’s readers would have instantly understood, appreciated, and made use of this image as they progressed through the contemplations outlined by Luther in the text.

The woodcut chosen by Jobst Gutknecht for his 1519 Nuremberg printing of this same sermon is a more complex example of the Pensive Christ (Figure 14). Once again Christ sits with his head in his hand, wearing the crown of thorns. However, this time he sits in front of the cross surrounded by the differing instruments of his torture and death: whip, scourges, hammer and nails, cross, spear, and a sponge soaked with hyssop. Presentations of Christ with the instruments of torture were known as the “Arma Christi”.59 The entire scene is once again not meant to be a historical composition, but rather a devotional one. The archway frame focuses the viewer’s attention upon the pensive Christ. In the background is the Latin inscription “Ecce Homo”, a reference, of course, to the words of Pilate in John 19:5. This phrase was itself often used to describe artistic treatments of Christ which present him to the viewer for their contemplation. Thus, in this single woodcut, three different genres of Passion illustrations are combined.

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59 Another good example of the “Man of Sorrows” / Arma Christi is Johann Knobloch’s 1519 cover. The woodcut frame shows cherubs engaged in a variety of activities. In the center under the title is another woodcut of Jesus is surrounded by the instruments of his Passion: a scourge and a whip, the crown of thorns. There is blood flowing from his wounded side in to a chalice. This is an obvious Andachtsbild. See TRRC Tr. Luth. 2.1-22, 3.23-45, 6b.
into one. Again, Gutknecht’s readers would have recognized this woodcut for what it was: an image of contemplative devotion, and they would likely have used it to assist their meditation on Luther’s sermon.

The cover illustration on Silvan Otmar’s 1519 Augsburg edition of *Ain Sermon von der betrachtung des hailigen leidens Christi. Doctor Martini Luther zü Wittenberg* is another obvious example of a contemplative image. A contemplative Christian kneels beside the crucified Christ, adoring his suffering Lord.60 Once again, the scene is not intended to be an historical representation of the crucifixion, but rather a devotional one. It portrays simultaneously both a scene for and an act of contemplative devotion. The entire scenario visualizes the contemplative ideal of bringing Christ into the present through meditation. This idea is fully in keeping with Luther’s instructions in the sermon itself. By

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60 The devout Christian might have been a patron of the artist, who commissioned a work to illustrate his devotion.
conceiving of what Christ has personally done for them, Christians will find joy and forgiveness and hope for living their lives.  

Figure 15: Contemplation

Source: DIA 1519LuthB

Extensive Illustrative Apparatus

A few publishers went beyond offering their readers a single cover illustration. Some included multiple illustrations within the pages of their publications in order to illustrate numerous points addressed within the text. Some even went a step further, supplying captions for their illustrations. The 1523 Straßburg edition of Luther’s Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben prepared by the heirs of Matthias Schürer’s print shop bears witness to a careful editor. Not only did someone in the shop read the treatise before printing it, s/he attempted to provide supplemental materials to make the treatise

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61 See LW 42, 10-11. WA 2, 138-139.
62 Even more obvious example is the Basel edition of 1523. This one contains fourteen illustrations. A couple of these are identical to those in the previous edition.
even more comprehensible and useful to readers. To begin, the printer changed and expanded the title: *Ein nützlich vnd fast tröstlich predig oder vnderrichtung wie sich ein Christen mensch mit freüdenn bereyten sol zu sterbenn*. Luther is credited by name on the cover and named as an Augustinian. Schürer’s heirs included a single woodcut on the cover. Christ is bent over and appears to be healing a seated man. Behind him stand two saints, one of whom looks somewhat like Luther. A large brick building is visible in the background (Figure 16). On the first page of the booklet, there is an additional description of the sermon’s contents.

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Dise predig durch D. Martinu Luther von Bereytung zu dem todt beschriben / begrifft in ir.xx stuck oder artickel der ein sterbender mensch mit hohem fleyß vor seinem end sol warnemmen.
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Here the printer not only explains the structure of the sermon, he also suggests that a dying person should take quick advantage of Luther’s advice. This actually contradicts what Luther himself suggested in the tract, since Luther stated the best time to reflect on death is while alive, rather than on one’s deathbed. At the top of all facing pages within the booklet is the heading, “Bereytung zum einem Seligen todt”. The tract contains eight additional images scattered through the text, each of which addresses in some fashion the work’s content.

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63 According to Reske, Matthias Schürer died in 1519. Matthias had been a prominent printer of humanist literature. However, after his death, the shop’s output switched primarily to Reformation literature. See Reske, 876-877. Also, Miriam Usher Chrisman, *Lay Culture, Learned Culture: Books and Social Change in Strasbourg, 1480-1599* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).

64 Martin Luther, *Ein nützlich und fast tröstlich predig, oder underrichtung, wie sich ein Christen mensch mit freüdenn bereyten sol zu sterbenn / Bescriben durch Doctor Mar. Luther Augustiner* (Straßburg: Matthias Schürer Erben, 1523), 1.

The first of these additional illustrations is on the opening page. It shows two people reconciling with one another (Figure 17). There is also a marginal comment which reads, “Ein sterbender mensch sol verziehen”. This fits with Luther’s advice in the second article of the sermon to seek forgiveness from those one has offended.

The second illustration shows a child kneeling in confession (Figure 18). This is in keeping with Luther’s advice in the fourth article to make a sincere confession. The third illustration is printed on the same page as the second and shows a person, kneeling before a priest, about to receive the sacrament (Figure 19). The accompanying caption reads, “Die Sacrament sol man groß achten.” This is entirely in keeping with Luther’s counsel in article five to give the sacraments their “due honor”.

Figure 16: Healing
Source: DIA 1523LuthII

Figure 17: Reconciliation
Source: DIA 1523LuthII
Printed next to the sixth article is a woodcut of a coffin, draped with a pall, being born away by two pallbearers (Figure 20). The marginal note says, “Des tods bild sol nit zu vil in… zune…”\textsuperscript{66} Again this fits with Luther’s advice in article six not to be scared by the image of death.

In the eighth article, Luther writes of how images of hell frighten many Christians. Schürer’s heirs place an image of souls in hell next to this discussion (Figure 21). Although this image most likely was originally created in order to invoke feelings of fear or dread, here the printer places it in a context where its power can be negated. This was a psychologically astute move. Should a reader first fear this image, s/he should then take Luther at his word and learn no longer to be bothered by such an image. When s/he succeeds in doing this, then the image will have lost its power. This is precisely Luther’s prescription in article eight.

\textsuperscript{66} The copy is too dark to make out the entire caption.
The next image is a particularly appropriate one. In article ten, Luther discussed Christians’ need to overcome their fear of death. After all, death will bring an end to sin and sickness. Consequently, Christians should learn to see in Christ’s cross a sign of life and healing, just as the ancient Israelites found life and healing in looking to the uplifted bronze serpent erected by Moses. The accompanying image shows the erect but empty cross with a bronze serpent hanging from it (Figure 22). This woodcut thus blends both of Luther’s images together. In the eleventh article, Luther declares,

…look at sin only within the picture of grace. Engrave that picture in yourself with all your power and keep it before your eyes. The picture of grace is nothing else but that of Christ on the cross and of all his dear saints. How is that to be understood? Grace and mercy are there where Christ on the cross takes your sin from you, bears it for you, and destroys it. To believe this firmly, to keep it before your eyes and not to doubt it, means to view the picture of Christ and to engrave it in yourself. Likewise, all the saints who suffer and die in Christ also bear your sins and suffer and labor for you…

Figure 23 offers the reader this picture of grace to which Luther referred. In this image Christ hangs on the cross. Mary and the Apostle John are present with him. Luther

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67 LW 42, 104-105. WA 2, 689.
68 Compare with Figure 13.
repeatedly declared that one should engrave this picture of grace within one’s self and keep it ever before one’s eyes. What better way of doing this, then by turning to an image such as this one? By repeated meditation, one would remember both image and its significance.

The image of hell (Figure 21) is repeated again next to article twelve. In this article, Luther encouraged his readers not to wonder about whether or not they were predestined to hell. Such an idea would only frighten them. Instead they should picture the heavenly Christ descending to hell and there suffering their punishment. In this woodcut, a divine or angelic figure is flying into the scene from the upper right. The last woodcut in the pamphlet is as large as the cover illustration. It shows a priest elevating the sacramental host while a number of kneeling Christians venerate it. The accompanying caption reads: “An den Sacramenten soll mann nit zweyffeln.” These are printed beside article sixteen of Luther’s treatise which begins, “…it is of utmost
importance that we highly esteem, honor, and rely upon the holy sacraments…” Once again, Schürer’s heirs chose well the accompanying illustration.69

All in all, it is obvious that someone in Schürer’s shop had read this sermon before publishing it and was attempting to present it in a format that would prove beneficial to readers.70 As with Gace’s edition of Special and Chosen Sermons of D. Martin Luther, the 1523 Straßburg edition of Ein nützlich vnd fast tröstlich predig oder vnderrichtung wie sich ein Christen mensch mit freüdenn bereyten sol zu sterbenn was intended to be read again and again. However, instead of directing the readers’ attention to biblical passages or particular doctrines, the printer turned the readers’ inner vision towards specific contemplative images: images that Luther himself mentions in the text.

69 Adam Petri’s 1520/1523 Basel editions of this same work included thirteen woodcut illustrations, a couple of which were identical to the images used by Schürer’s heirs.

70 He even makes use of a small woodcut of a pointing hand to signal a major point within the text.
The close correspondence between these images and Luther’s bears witness to the contemplative focus Schürer’s heirs found in this sermon.

Analysis of Textual Illustrations

What has this study of illustrative woodcuts revealed about their publishers? Some of them understood Luther’s devotional intentions and some did not. Some successfully complimented his text with illustrations which they carefully and creatively chose; others were less attentive and creative. The appropriateness of the images seemed to hinge in part upon the subject matter of the text at hand. Those attached to either Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben or Ein Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi, for example, were not appropriate to the topic at hand. Those adorning Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe were much less so. This can likely be explained by the long traditions of contemplative devotion on the Passion and the ars moriendi. There was no corresponding tradition of baptismal contemplation, a fact which Luther himself attempted to address in his sermon.

This survey suggests some publishers understood these works to be contemplative devotions and marketed them as such. They realized that the Reformation was, in some fashion, a narrative to be sold, and they each did their part to get the word out…and make a little money in the process. To what degree they realized that Luther had proposed new narratives, however, varied from individual to individual.

Summary of Findings

What sort of impression of Luther’s reception emerges from these various sources? People seemed to appreciate Luther’s proposed approaches to piety. There was a vibrancy and freshness to these early works. The spiritual exercises were both simple and
memorable. One didn’t need to be literate to make use of them. They were
instantaneously accessible and seemed to speak directly to people’s needs. Their
existential focus made it easy for people to put themselves into the images – to play
within them. Evidently, many sixteenth century Christians were looking for a more
gracious image of God; many were seeking consolation. These works provided them with
both. They offered a simplified narrative of Christian existence which could offer not
only comfort for living, but also a practical, dynamic and accessible Christian spirituality.
The editions that included contemplative illustrations were especially appealing and
typically were reprinted more often than those with no illustrations or with only generic
borders.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

As has been suggested throughout this dissertation, the young Luther was dissatisfied with the divergent spiritual narratives of his day. They overlapped one another; they contradicted each other; they tended to terrify consciences and trouble hearts; they encouraged beliefs and practices which fed superstition. Even more disconcerting was that these assorted narratives were not in keeping with the primary biblical narrative; they lacked a Christological focus. Accordingly, young Luther sought a single meta-narrative which could become the backbone of Christian theology and spiritual practice.1

He found it in St. Paul’s metaphor of dying and rising with Christ. This image became for young Luther the primary means of interpreting Christian existence. Taking his cue not only from the writings of Paul, but also those of Augustine, Tauler, and the Frankfurter, Luther developed a consistent and versatile narrative for interpreting Christian existence. This narrative served as the basis for both theology and piety. As Hoffman so aptly put it,

The consonance between Luther and his mystical soul-mates lies in the experience of justification, not primarily in cognition about an old biblical truth revisited.2

Young Luther realized that if the Pauline metaphor remained only a theological explanation for an imperceptible divine act, then it would have little meaning or

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1 Many Lutheran theologians and/or historians define Luther’s spirituality on the basis of what fits with either Luther’s mature theology or with the Lutheran Confessions. See Georg Heckel, “Lutherische Spiritualität,” in Zugänge zu Luther (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 1984), 55-95. Heckel asserts Luther’s spirituality can be characterized by the following five points: 1) A Spirituality of the Word of God, 2) A Spirituality of Faith, 3) A Spirituality of “Nächstenliebe”, 4) A Spirituality of Worship, i.e. Worship Services, 5) A Spirituality of Prayer. While these points fit with historical emphases of the Lutheran Church and might describe idealized Lutheran piety, they do not accord with young Luther’s piety.

2 Hoffman, Luther and the Mystics, 224.
motivating force within the daily lives of Christians. In order to experience changed lives, they needed a means of experiencing this death and resurrection as a present existential reality; they required corresponding spiritual practices to assist them with the living of this life. According to the Augustinian model, as Christians die to themselves, the resurrected Christ gives them the inspiration, example, and power to live a new life. The confession of human sin and corresponding revelation of divine grace becomes the repeated rhythm of everyday Christian piety – a piety that requires and fosters humility, honesty, and gratitude. As Christians become more and more aware of the enormity of their own sin, they will also grow simultaneously in their awareness of the enormity of God’s grace and forgiveness. This ever-expanding consciousness of the true nature of their relationship with God constitutes the substance of spiritual growth. It enables Christians to move beyond fear, doubt, guilt and shame, and frees them to love God and neighbor in new ways. Without such an expanded consciousness, young Luther was convinced that Christians grow conceited and self-assured, resting on their own merits instead of God’s grace.

This was Luther’s “new” biblical narrative, the “pure theology”, about which he often wrote. Yet, his interests were far from just academic. Drawing upon popular medieval contemplation, young Luther infused assorted genres of Christian devotional literature (Passionals, sacramental devotions, ars morendi manuals, books of consolation, primers, and so forth) with the Pauline metaphor, and in so doing revised almost every aspect of late medieval piety.

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3 Luther raised precisely this point in *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe*, acknowledging that sin will always remain in the life of the baptized Christian.

4 Such contemplation could be understood as an existential experience of Law & Gospel. One must first feel the condemnation of the law and the consequent alienation in order to know and appreciate the forgiveness and release of the Gospel. This release comes not on account of what one does, but as one gives upon doing all things and accepts who one is under God’s judgment.
For example, in *Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe* young Luther built his entire baptismal theology upon the Pauline metaphor. Baptism was for him not to be understood primarily as either a washing away of sins or an adoption into God’s family, but rather as an act of God’s judgment. In baptism God killed the sinner and brought sin to an end. Yet, God also raised one up in baptism – to new life and a renewed appreciation of divine grace. Christ’s resurrection was itself the sign and guarantee of this. Young Luther used the Pauline metaphor not only as an explanatory narrative of baptism’s significance, but also as eschatological narrative about the Christian hope of resurrection and eternal life with God.

This is apparent in *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*. Young Luther counseled Christians to expel the three dread images of sin, death, and the devil from their minds, and to take hope instead in images of Christ, whose obedience overcame sin, whose resurrection overcame death, and whose ascent to heaven has robbed hell of its power. Christ’s victory frees them from fear and enables them to live and die in peace.

*Tessaradecas Consolatoria* presented the Pauline metaphor to suffering Christians in a very creative manner. By asking his readers to contemplate the good in times of ill and the evil during good times, young Luther repeatedly urged his reader to die to old ways of seeing their lives and to learn to envision their sufferings and/or blessings in new ways. While the Pauline metaphor’s presence might seem less obvious, it is apparent throughout, building to a crescendo in Image II.7: the ascended Christ, who is the ultimate image of hope and consolation in the face of suffering.

This seventh image is Jesus Christ, the King of glory, rising from the dead, just as in his suffering, death, and burial he formed the seventh image of evils. Here the heart can find its supreme joy and lasting possessions… This, then, is the most sublime image, for in it we are lifted up not only above our evils, but even above our blessings, and we are set down in the

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5 See Robert Kolb, “God Kills to Make Alive: Romans 6 and Luther's Understanding of Justification (1535),” in *Lutheran Quarterly* 12:1 (1998): 33-56. Kolb states that baptismal theology is at the root of Luther’s thought (though he admits that explicit baptismal language is missing in many of his writings). I disagree. The Pauline metaphor of dying and rising with Christ is actually the foundation of Luther’s baptismal theology. Kolb here simply perpetuates a later Lutheran emphasis on baptism.
midst of strange blessings gathered by the labors of another, whereas formerly we lay among evils that were also brought about by the sin of another and enlarged by our own.⁶

Perhaps the most obvious exposition of the Pauline metaphor in Augustinian form is found in the Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi. Here young Luther detailed in almost step-by-step fashion how Christians die both to themselves (by seeing their true selves and being “terrified and crushed” by this vision)⁷ and arise with Christ (by “pouring” their sin back on Christ and “freeing [their] conscience[s] of it”)⁸. This meditation alone bears witness to the centrality of the Pauline metaphor in young Luther’s thought.

Yet, even in his treatment of the Eucharist, Ein Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften, young Luther’s continuing reliance on Paul remains clear. He expanded the metaphor, however, to include the communal aspects of participation in Christ’s body. As Christians die to themselves and rise to new life, they are joined by others who have travelled or are travelling the same path. Together, as the communion of saints, they share each other’s burdens and joys, as well as one another’s vices and virtues. Bearing and celebrating with one another, they experience mutually what it means to die and rise with Christ.

…Christ has given his holy body for this purpose, that the thing signified by the sacrament – the fellowship, the change wrought by love – may be put into practice.⁹

By focusing on the communal aspects of Christian existence in this sermon, Luther accentuated the ethical dimensions of the Pauline metaphor. Christians die and rise with

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⁶ LW 42, 163-164. WA 6, 132.
⁷ LW 42, 10. WA 2, 138.
⁸ LW 42, 12. WA 2, 139-140.
⁹ LW 35, 62. WA 2, 751.
Christ not primarily for their own sakes, but rather for the sake of the entire community. Dying to one’s self always involves living for others instead.

Within these assorted devotional works, young Luther offered to his readers a variety of contemplative images or exercises which were intended to reinforce the centrality of the Pauline metaphor. He told them to imagine God speaking directly to them. He encouraged them to visualize their sins weighing down the innocent Christ. He reminded them of assorted biblical passages, scenes, characters, and promises. He provided them with mnemonic devices to aid their retention of these images. He told them to imagine themselves as characters in the story of cosmic redemption, together with the God who both kills and resurrects them. And he proclaimed to them that they would find in the midst of this story comfort, hope, forgiveness and peace.  

Young Luther utilized and recommended these focused contemplative devotions because he believed them to be particularly effective means of effecting personal change.

Young Luther’s publishers and translators appeared to have shared these same beliefs. Many of them printed Andachtsbilder on the covers of his devotional works, as well as additional illustrations inside. English translators of his writings spoke of the consolations to be found in them and encouraged their readers not just to read these works, but to meditate on them repeatedly. A number of young Luther’s publishers, domestic and foreign, added interpretive apparatus to the margins of their editions. Some printed keepsake editions of these works. Young Luther’s mixture of traditional devotional forms with a revised biblical narrative not only appealed to early modern readers, it represented a revivification of basic Christian piety. The popularity of these particular works among Christians of differing confessional communities into the latter half of the sixteenth-century attests to their broad and continuing appeal.  

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10 For an interesting contemporary exploration of this idea, see Brian D. McLaren, The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

11 This might also explain the Pietist preference for Luther’s early writings in the seventeenth century.
popularity testifies, as well, to the significant role these writings played not only in the dissemination of Reformation ideas but in that of an accompanying contemplative piety as well.

This study of the nature, function and utility of Luther’s early devotional writings has not only answered questions, it has generated a host of new ones. While confirming the pervasiveness of the Pauline metaphor in Luther’s devotional writings of 1519, I found myself asking whether or not the metaphor remained a dominant feature of Luther’s devotional writing throughout the rest of his career. I wondered, too, if more detailed research into the publications of a particular print shop such as that of Matthias Schürer’s heirs would reveal more about how sixteenth-century printers added their own layers of interpretation to the Reformation editions they published. These are some of the specific questions that merit my future attention, or that of other historians. There are, however, still other questions which deserve wider discussion.

1) The inaccuracies I discovered concerning the proper attribution of Luther’s English translations revealed numerous inadequacies in the existing reference apparatus of Luther’s works. Would the scholarly community be better served by the creation of new resource formats? For example, would not an online database which could be continually updated and referenced at any time or location be more preferable than a revised printing of Benzing’s Lutherbibliographie? A properly formatted database would allow for not only detailed studies of particular works, but of particular publishers, translators, woodcuts, or even themes across these various categories. Imagine how much more useful an even larger sixteenth-century database would be!

12 Elements of the Pauline metaphor are still visible in Der kleine Katechismus. In particular, see Luther’s explanation of the meaning and significance of baptism.

13 Most of the woodcut studies to date have focused largely on the polemical or catechetical use of illustrations. Few have explored the interpretive elements added to a text by differing publishers.

14 While www.Gateway-Bayern.de provides online access to and searches within VD16, it remains focused upon sixteenth-century publications which appeared in German-speaking lands. In order to cross-reference translations of Luther’s works published in other countries, one must turn to other databases.
2) Young Luther’s repeated use of contemplative devotional forms and the corresponding visualization of specific images or *Andachtsbilder* in 1519 raises the question of whether or not Luther’s supposed preference for the spoken Word has been overstated. Did Luther’s sensory emphases change, and if so, when and why? Or did he continue to promote and publish contemplative devotions throughout his career? If so, then a much fuller treatment of Luther’s on-going devotional writings is in order. 

3) There has been a long-standing and controversial debate in Luther studies as to whether or not Luther should be understood as a mystic. While his positive comments about Tauler and the Frankfurter are incontrovertible, many historians and theologians have been hesitant to attribute mystical tendencies to Luther because they feared that such attribution would contradict or compromise his theology. Direct unmediated experiences of the Godhead (in a Plotinian-like vision) run counter to Luther’s insistence on the necessity of Christ as the mediator between the divine and human. However, if as I suggested in chapter two, Luther’s mystical features are best comprehended in terms of the Augustinian visualizations Kenney described, then new possibilities for assessing Luther’s relationship to and critique of the broader mystical tradition become possible. If contemplation leads not to union with the divine, but rather to the dual confession of human alienation from the divine and of the consequent human need for divine grace, then affirming Luther’s contemplative tendencies might actually help to explain better the Pauline and Augustinian origins of both his theology and piety and lead to an increased appreciation for the significance and interpretation of his contemplative writings.

4) If Luther’s original critique of the many medieval spiritual narratives involved the confusion generated by their differing foci, their incongruities, and their lack of a

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15 Luther’s continued republication of his *Betbüchlein* seems to bear witness to his on-going use of contemplative devotional forms. For his expanded 1529 version, he commissioned the inclusion of a series of 50 woodcuts which depicted key stories from the greater biblical narrative. The *Betbüchlein* was reprinted about every five years for the remainder of the sixteenth-century. Martin H. Bertram, “Personal Prayer Book 1522, Introduction,” in *LW* 43, 3-10.

16 See Bengt Hoffmann, “Luther and the Mystical” for one summary of this debate.
singular biblical narrative, one wonders if the later manifold narratives of the Wittenberg Reformation violated his own earlier critique. In the face of the historical contingencies of the unfolding German Reformation, did Luther and his disciples create and utilize additional narratives, which themselves came to overshadow his original Pauline narrative and distort its focus? For example, *Passional Christi und Antichristi* of 1521 was a polemical narrative intended not only to poke fun at the papacy, but to delegitimize it. Did this sort of narrative shape early Lutheran Christians’ self-understanding and piety rather than the Pauline metaphor of dying and rising with Christ?17

5) Should the practice of interpreting Luther’s earlier works in light of his later, more “mature” works continue to be seen as a legitimate and appropriate method for appraising the significance and development of his life and thought? Or should Luther scholars finally admit it produces biased historiography? It doesn’t allow Luther to speak in his own voice, but rather requires him to say what others are convinced he said (or should have said). It doesn’t allow him to show doubts or ambiguities; it doesn’t allow him to change his mind. In a word, it doesn’t allow him to be human. The significance of Luther’s early devotional works will never be properly understood if they are referenced solely as proof texts to support interpretations of his later work. Before comparing them to later works, they must be read first on their own terms, and then interpreted in light of what preceded them.

More and more contemporary scholars realize that a new approach is needed for an adequate study not only of Luther’s early writings, but of his entire corpus and its reception. They are convinced that the confessional methodologies of the past are an inappropriate foundation for twenty-first century scholarship and have begun to forge new paths in Luther studies. I would like to count myself among their number and offer this project as my small contribution to the community’s greater discussion.

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17 See Roberta J. Dykema, “Lucas Cranach the Elder, Martin Luther, and the "Passional christi und antichristi." Dykema looks at the use of image and text in this work to create, promote, and sustain differing confessional identities.
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