

The Radical Dialectic Between Faith and Works in Luther's Lectures on Galatians (1535)

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1. THEOLOGIA BREVISSIMA ET LONGISSIMA

Although sinners are justified solely by their faith, that, as Luther knew, does not yet exhaust the description of them as “Christians.” “He who wants to be a true Christian... must be truly a believer. But he does not truly believe if works of love do not follow his faith.”¹ Here Luther is commenting on that controversial phrase from Galatians 5:6 around which the Roman opponents had recently built their *Confutatio* at Augsburg, “faith working through love.” Against their interpretation - that Paul here identifies what is justifying about faith, namely, its love - Luther argues rather that “Paul is describing the whole of the Christian life in this passage: inwardly it is faith toward God, and outwardly it is love or works toward one’s neighbor; thus a man is a Christian in a total sense.”² “Not one of these things [whether ‘a cowl or fasting or vestments or ceremonies,’ by which the opponents ‘want to give the impression of being Christians], not one, makes a man a Christian; only faith and love do so.”³ But the same judgment applies a few verses later (5:13) to those non-Roman, nominal “evangelicals” who “are enjoying the advantages of the Gospel to their own destruction and are worse idolaters under the name ‘Christian’ than they used to be under the pope.”⁴ “The form of the Christian life,” says Luther, “is faith and works” - “the only true rule” (Gal. 6:16), displacing “the rule of Francis, of Dominic, and of all the others,” describing the Christian completely as “inwardly righteous in the spirit and outwardly pure and holy in flesh.”⁵

Yet what is equally clear is that this “perfect doctrine of both faith and love” is “also the shortest and longest kind of theology - the shortest so far as words and sentences are concerned, but in practice and in fact it is wider, longer, deeper, and higher than the

¹ LX XXVII, 30; WA XL/2, 37. This and all subsequent quotations from Luther are from the lectures on Galatians delivered in 1531 and which in the form of Georg Rohrer’s edition of his own and others’ class notes were first published in 1535, together with an authorizing preface by Luther himself. The WA carries at the top of each page Rohrer’s original class notes, designated Hs. (for *Handschrift*). And at the bottom of each page the version which finally appeared in print, designated Dr. (for *Druck*). All quotations will cite both LW and WA, the latter referring (unless specifically designated Hs.) to the Dr. version. It so happens that the comments Luther makes on this present verse, Gal. 5:6, do not come either from Rohrer’s class notes or from Luther’s class lectures but are rather from a special manuscript on this verse, done in Luther’s own hand and inserted by Rohrer into the published commentary. See WA XL/2, 34, n. 1.

² LW XXVII, 30; WA XL/2, 37, 26-28.

³ LW XXVII, 31; WA XL/2, 38, 30-31.

⁴ LW XXVII, 51; WA XL/2, 64, 15-22.

⁵ LW XXVII, 30, 141; WA XL/2, 37, 30-38, 5.

whole world.”⁶ That, alas, is the problem. And for all its being a problem “in practice and in fact,” it is not for that reason any less a problem in “theology.” Indeed, just because Christians succeed so poorly at believing and loving “in practice and in fact,” what kind of theology is there that could honestly call them “Christians” at all, or their works “good” – except perhaps a mere hypothetical theology? But a merely hypothetical theology would fail in both of theology’s functions, both as *doctrina* and as *consolatio*.⁷ Precisely for *theologia*, therefore, the relation of faith and work, both of which are essential to being Christian, does pose a massive problem.

At least part of the difficulty is what we might call a problem in predication. If justification is solely by faith, how good, really, are good works? If the human subject, being always a sinner, can be justified only by his faith and not by his works, how can his work ever be expected to achieve the theological predicate “good”? But if his work does qualify as good, as Luther insists that it does, is his justification still solely by his faith and in no sense by his work? Isn’t it so “that Christian teaching [namely, that we are justified by faith] undermines good morals and conflicts with political order” – in other words, disqualifies Christians’ work from the predicate “righteous?” If not, if “to avoid this impression...the apostle also admonishes about good morals,”⁸ then doesn’t the opposite conclusion follow? “When he says that the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, he seems to have forgotten the cause he has set forth in this entire epistle [that is, justification by faith] and to maintain the exact opposite, namely, that those who do works of love fulfill the Law and are righteous” – in other words, are not righteous solely by their faith.⁹

Nor is this problem in predication academic or an imaginary dilemma contrived by the opponents. As Luther admits: “if grace or faith is not preached, no one is saved; for faith alone justifies and saves. On the other hand, if faith is preached...the majority of men understand the teaching about faith in a fleshly way and transform the freedom of the spirit into the freedom of the flesh.”¹⁰ This is how men can ruin that “perfect doctrine of both faith and love in practice and in fact,” thought they ruin it by something so apparently trivial and academic as a misunderstanding of *doctrina*. “The majority of men understand the teaching about faith [*doctrina de fide*] in a fleshly way.” And that is why even this “shortest kind of theology” – shortest “so far as words and sentences are concerned” – now has to expand in Luther’s lectures to well-nigh “the longest kind of theology” – longest even “so far as words and sentences are concerned” – and why we still have to follow him through the entire length of the fifth and sixth chapters of Galatians. For here in the relation of faith and works, more seductively perhaps than at any other point, is the *doctrina de fide*, that heart of Luther’s theology, subject to misunderstanding. And here the problem of predication, which haunts his whole theology – the problem, namely, how theology is about man: man the sinner, the man

⁶ LW XXVII, 59; WA XL/2, 74, 25-27.

⁷ For examples of how the two terms or their equivalents are paired see LW XXVII, 25, 31-32, 33, 39, 46-47; WA XV/2, 30, 17; 39, 17 and 40, 7; 41, 18; 48, 28; 58, 14-22.

⁸ LW XXVII, 47; WA XL/2, 59, 24-27.

⁹ LW XXVII, 63; WA XL/2, 28-31.

¹⁰ LW XXVII, 48; WA XL/2, 60, 27-31.

Christ Jesus, man the believer – comes to its limit in man the “Christian.” What relationship between the human subject and the theological predicate, between the working sinner-believer and the ultimate goodness of his work, is involved in the covering name “Christian”?

Luther’s resolution of this problem of predication, if with one word we may anticipate what follows, lies in his “doctrine of *faith*.” “Even reason understands and imparts this part of [the apostle’s] teaching to some extent [namely. His teaching “about morals”], but it knows nothing at all about the teaching of faith.” (Conversely, we shall find in the end that in “the teaching about morals,” what “reason” ought to perceive but no longer can is retrieved by “faith.”) Accordingly, Luther concludes, Christians “teach morals and all the virtues better than any philosophers or teachers, because they add faith.”¹¹ The expression “because they *add* faith” recalls a similar use of this same word by Melancthon in the fourth article of his Apology to the Augsburg Confession. Melancthon, saving his constructive treatment of faith and works until the climactic end of his argument (in this respect resembling Luther’s progression in the Galatians lectures and Paul’s before that), invokes against the Roman *Confutatio* his exegetical “rule” that truly good works emerge only when the Biblical *lex* has the *promissio* “added” to it. Luther’s position is, in this respect at least, similar. Here also he finds the secret to Paul’s “faith working through love”: why, in other words, love is not love, good work is not good, unless it is the function of *faith* – that very faith which justifies.

The best way, consequently, for us to frame a large enough question to elicit the fullness of Luther’s anticipated answer is to ask: Why is it that a Christian’s works are “good,” not in spite of his being justified by faith, not in addition to his being justified by faith, but solely *because* he is justified by faith? (A further question, as an “afterthought,” will be: If this authentically good work does not justify, what is it good for?) If Luther’s claiming so much for faith elicits also the Barthian scolding, Barth’s warning against Luther’s “extravagant view” of faith¹² (a stricture understandable of course from Barth’s position), we shall here have to try all the harder to understand Luther from his own position.

2. RIXA ET PUGNA [Fight and Struggle]

To say, however, that what is good about a Christian’s good work depends on his faith may easily overlook the very feature of his faith which makes his good work good, namely, his life-and-death struggle, his *rixa et pugna*, against his flesh. At the least, theology dare not by-pass this hard fact of life, this struggle, by defining Christian good works in some ideal fashion and then consigning the obstacles they face in actuality to some extratheological realm of “fact and practice.” No, for Luther the empirical fact of the Christian’s struggle with his flesh is itself, right along with the Biblical data, one of

¹¹ LW XXVII, 47; WA XL/2, 59, 23-24, 29-30. The words *quia fidem addunt* do not appear in Rohrer’s Hs. (59, 4-12), but the same sense is there. *Doctrina nostra (fidei)* (of which Luther says *nihil scit mundum melius docet bonas mores quam ulli gentium philosophi*).

¹² Karl Barth, “An Introductory Essay” in Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christology*, trans. George Eliot, Harper Torchbook (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. xxiii.

the essential data of theology. But more than that, the Christian's "conflict and fight" is of the essence of – it defines – what is "good" about his good work. Without this conflict, his life being what it is, his work would simply not be good at all and he would be no Christian.

It is not yet an adequate definition of Christian good work, therefore, to say merely (though Luther does indeed say all these things) that it means "true faith toward God, which loves and helps one's neighbor,"¹³ or "a love that is unfeigned,"¹⁴ or to "love one another...on account of the indwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit,"¹⁵ or "following the example of Christ,"¹⁶ or doing "spontaneously, without any legal constraint...more than the Law requires."¹⁷ It is true of course that "a faith that is neither imaginary nor hypocritical but true and living...is what arouses and motivates good works through love."¹⁸ But none of this yet allows for the grim fact that "you cannot produce anyone on earth who loves God and his neighbor as the Law requires,"¹⁹ and that "every saint feels and confesses that his flesh resists the Spirit and that these two are opposed to each other."²⁰ Much less, however, does any of this explain why for Luther the opposition itself between Spirit and flesh, despite the disappointingly partial character of its victories, should be that very thing that characterizes the Christian's work as "righteous," "holy," "good."

What exactly is the Christian's conflict? Between what and what? If we take into view the entire fifth and sixth chapters of Galatians, two of the verses which for Luther seem to summarize well the two poles of the Christian conflict are 5:1 and 5:13. On the one hand, says Paul, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." On the other hand, "you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another." This bipolarity, as we shall see in a moment, is deceptive and might easily be so misconstrued as to locate the conflict between the wrong antitheses, namely, between "a yoke of slavery" on the one hand and "freedom as an opportunity for the flesh" on the other, that is, between legalism and antinomianism. That would be an error, though an understandable one.

Before we identify the precise poles of the conflict, or rather *in order* to identify them, we might note those other verses in Galatians in which Luther seems to find the conflict most clearly resolved. High on his list is 5:16: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." A close second is 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love," or its parallel, 6:15: "For [in Christ Jesus] neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." "Walking by the Spirit," "faith working through

¹³ LW XXVII, 31; WA XL/2, 38, 28-29.

¹⁴ LW XXVII, 54; WA XL/2, 38, 28-29.

¹⁵ LW XXVII, 93; WA XL/2, 117, 19-21.

¹⁶ LW XXVII, 114; WA XL/2, 146, 16.

¹⁷ LW XXVII, 96; WA XL/2, 121, 15.

¹⁸ LW XXVII, 30; WA XL/2, 37, 13-15.

¹⁹ LW XXVII, 64; WA XL/2, 79, 25-26.

²⁰ LW XXVII, 75; WA XL/2, 94, 31-33.

love,” “a new creation” all are, in Luther’s treatment, approximate synonyms. They all represent, moreover, one pole, the affirmative pole, of the Christian’s struggle. Knowing that should now help us see where Luther does and does not locate the other pole.

If the one side, the upper hand, of the Christian’s conflict is his existence in the Spirit, then his other side, the under hand, may be summed up as his fleshly existence under the Law. It is *both* “flesh” *and* “under the Law.” These two ingredients are together the unitary lot of the sinner, and together they pose one antithesis of the Christian’s existence by the Spirit. There is no flesh which is not under the Law, and only that is under the Law which is flesh. This point cannot be emphasized enough lest we misunderstand Luther. For reasons which we shall explore later, the fleshiness that admittedly permeates all of a believer’s doing is still by itself not sufficient to render him a non-Christian or to despoil his work of its goodness. This happens only when, as flesh, he so despairs of his goodness that he loses faith and then altogether falls back “under the Law.” This means then that BOTH the threatening *sub lege* AND the *caro* would only too willingly drag him under the *lex* which, together as a formidable alliance with the former, the Spirit opposes.

It might be all too tempting to mistake Luther as saying that the Christian’s “walk” is a kind of tightrope between two apparent extremes, between the pitfall of carnal license on the one side and the pitfall of judaizing enslavement on the other, between antinomianism and legalism. It is not as though the antinomians alone are designated as “flesh” and the legalists alone as “under the Law.” Both designations describe both types of sinner. In fact, for this present inquiry into Luther it is unwise to make much of the distinction between the two groups.²¹ In his exegesis Luther interprets those judaizing Galatians who would impose again “a yoke of *slavery*” to be the same Galatians who would use their “*freedom* as an opportunity for the flesh.” The same flesh which under the yoke of the Law justifies itself with “silly and fanatical ceremonial works” also wants enough “freedom” to prefer such works to a truly lawful and loving service of the neighbor.²²

This same perverse combination of legalistic enslavement and fleshly freedom is still in force, Luther finds, “under the papacy...in the sectarians of our day and in their disciples, especially in the Anabaptists. [Even] in our churches, where the true doctrine of good works is set forth with great diligence,” there is also, first of all, an “amazing... sluggishness and lack of concern.”²³ But in addition to this “amazing” (*dictu mirum*) fleshly freedom from the law of love, there is also, presumably among the same Christians, an equally amazing enslavement to legalistic “superstitions.” “It is amazing [*mirum*] that godly people have this trial; their conscience is immediately wounded if they omit some trifling thing that they should have done, but not if, as happens every day,

²¹ True, Luther does seem to describe these two groups (for example, “the papacy” and “the unspiritual men”) as a kind of Scylla and Charybdis, but only because they are the obverse results of a single heresy, namely, the urging of faith or works to the exclusion of each other – which after all is really no genuine theological option. “If works alone are taught, as happened under the papacy, faith is lost. If faith alone is taught, unspiritual men will immediately suppose that works are not necessary.” LW XXVII, 63; WA XL/2, 78, 22-23.

²² LW XXVII, 52; WA XL/2, 66, 18-32.

²³ LW XXVII, 53; WA XL/2, 67, 19-24.

they neglect Christian love and do not act toward their neighbor with a sincere and brotherly heart.”²⁴ Antinomianism and legalism, not at all the opponents they might seem to be in the Christian’s struggle, are rather but two faces of that one and same opponent against whom he struggles, his *caro*, which is always also *sub lege*. In fact, it is decisive for Luther’s whole argument that “flesh” should mean not just the crass behavior of the evildoer but also that exalted religiosity that (whether in presumption or despair) yearns for justification under the Law. Otherwise the flesh would hardly need to be opposed by something like faith, the faith which justifies. It could just as well be opposed by the divine law or perhaps by some assist from the Spirit without justifying faith. But these do not suffice when the “flesh,” as legalism, entails an entire contrary soteriology.²⁵

We are now in a position to look once more at those passages from Galatians which seem, as we said, to identify the poles of the Christian’s conflict. Contrary to initial appearances, the decisive Christian antithesis is *not*: “submitting again to a yoke of slavery” (5:1) on the one hand versus “using your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh” (5:13) on the other hand. Basically the same antithesis appears in both passages: the Christian’s “freedom” on the one hand versus *both* the Law’s “yoke of slavery” *and* “the freedom of the flesh” on the other hand. Already in his comments on 5:1, which warn against the “yoke of slavery,” Luther shows how this slavery goes hand in hand with “the freedom of the flesh.” The same “papists” who are “slaves” “use the freedom of the Gospel” as “Epicureans.”²⁶ Likewise in his comments on 5:13 Luther refers to those who abuse their “freedom as an opportunity for the flesh” as “captive” and “slaves.”²⁷ The Christian’s conflict, his “good” fight, is between his free life in the Spirit and the fleshly existence under the Law. And this fight is the very thing about his faith that defines his work (“faith working through love”) as good, though we have not yet explained why.

And isn’t this the same conflict – between Spirit and flesh under law – that Luther finds described in the other passages: 5:16, 5:6, 6:15? “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” At first Luther’s notion that the Christian’s struggle is between Spirit on the one hand and not merely flesh but flesh under Law on the other hand is not convincing. For Paul seems to pit the Spirit against the flesh exclusively. “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other.” But then Paul continues: “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.” Luther is aware that this opposing of the Spirit not only to the flesh but also to the *sub lege* is not quite the way one would expect the Christian struggle to be defined.

Here someone may raise the objection: “How can it be that we are not under the Law? After all, Paul, you yourself teach that we have a flesh whose desires are against the Spirit, a flesh that...enslaves us...This is surely what it means to be under the Law. Then why do you say, Paul, that we are not under the Law?”

²⁴ LW XXVII, 54; WA XL/2, 68, 25-28.

²⁵ LW XXVII, 87-90; WA XL/2, 110, 13-113, 26.

²⁶ LW XXVII, 4,8; WA XL/2, 2, 28ff. And 9, 19-20.

²⁷ LW XXVII, 49, 50; WA XL/2, 61, 30 and 62, 34.

What “Paul” answers is, “Do not let this bother you.”²⁸ Why not, remains to be seen.

Consider also 5:6: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love” – or as 6:15 puts it, “a new creation.” Once again the diametric opposite of being “in Christ Jesus,” of “faith working through love,” of the “new creation” is not only the obvious opposite, the antinomian flesh of “uncircumcision,” but always also that *sub lege* existence, “circumcision.”

The Jews...were perfectly ready to concede that uncircumcision did not count for anything...but to say the same about the Law and about circumcision was unbearable...Today the papists...excommunicate us for teaching that in Christ Jesus these traditions do not count for anything. In the same way some of our followers, who are no less stupid than the papists, regard freedom from the traditions of the pope as something so necessary that they are afraid of committing sin if they do not violate or abolish all of them immediately.²⁹

Luther does not deny that circumcision and uncircumcision – legalism and antinomianism, shall we say? – are mutually opposed. It is simply that both together stand at the farthest remove from the new creation. “They are, of course, contrary to each other, but that has nothing to do with Christian righteousness,”³⁰ or with “a new creation...which is inwardly righteous in the spirit and outwardly holy and pure in the flesh.”³¹

We have tried to show that according to Luther, in order to predicate “good” or “Christian” of the believer’s existence, it is not enough to say idealistically that his existence, his works, must be the product of his faith. They must, of course. But what this easily overlooks is that the Christian’s work is always also the product of his flesh, which the law of God condemns. Then how can the Christian’s work be honestly “good” work? By faith, Luther answers, as it struggles against that flesh, which is so susceptible of the Law’s tyranny and which shows itself not only as antinomianism but also as the most pious sort of legalism. But how, let us ask again, does such a prestigious predicate as “good” or “Christian” apply to this struggle against flesh under law, as admirable as that struggle admittedly is, though its ambiguous, sin-conditioned character becomes all the more glaring when we recall that it is still only a struggle? It pursuing the answer to that question it should become clear why it was so essential for Luther to place the *sub lege*, along with the flesh, at the opposite pole from faith’s walking by the Spirit.

3. NUNC INTERPRETATUR LEGEM

Despite all we have said in proof of the Christian’s opposition in the Spirit to the *sub lege*, an honest misgiving that might still lurk about our present reading of Luther is that he surely does (because Paul does) find in that same *lex* a genuine resource for the Christian’s fight against the flesh. Remember how Paul, in order to combat the Galatians’ abuse of “freedom as an opportunity for the flesh,” appeals to the

²⁸ LW XXVII, 77; WA XL/2, 97, 19-24.

²⁹ LW XXVII, 138; WA XL/2, 176, 23-30.

³⁰ LW XXVII, 137; WA XL/2, 176, 18-19.

³¹ LW XXVII, 141; WA XL/2, 179, 34-35.

commandment of mutual love, the Law. “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.” (5:13) Luther too is frank to call this admonition by its lawlike names. “The apostle imposes an obligation [*servitutum*] on Christians through this law [*legem*] about mutual love in order to keep them from abusing their freedom. Therefore the godly should remember that for the sake of Christ they are free in their conscience before God from the curse of the Law, from sin, and from death, but that according to the body they are bound [*servos*].”³² That this is the Law and that the Law is a weapon against the flesh is unquestioned.

When Paul goes on in the next verse to explain: “For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’” Luther marvels at Paul’s exegesis of Biblical law: “This is the real way to interpret Scripture and the commandments of God.”³³ Not only does Paul compress “all of Moses into a brief summary,” thus bypassing all “unnatural and superstitious works” and coming directly to the heart of the Law, neighborly love.³⁴ What is more, he identifies in turn what is the very heart of love: not, as the sophists coldly imagine, “to wish someone well” but rather to “be a servant” of one’s neighbor. “It is as though Paul were saying: ‘When I say that through love you should be servants of one another, I mean what the Law says elsewhere (Lev. 19:18): ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”³⁵ True, it is impossible for a man to understand the Law as perceptively as that (even though it be what “we call the law of nature”) unless he has first exchanged his legalism for faith.³⁶ Still, what his faith understands is just that, the law. Yes, the Law – not the existence *sub lege*, of course, but the *lex* – is definitely here aligned with the Christian against his flesh.

However, not only must a man’s healthy opposition to the flesh be distinguished from a man’s enslavement under the Law, but we must also distinguish between the Law’s genuine capacity to oppose the flesh and its incapacity. The Law has its limitations, for one thing, because it is incapable of being lived up to except by recourse to something beyond the Law, the Spirit, who is had by faith in Christ. (At this level there is no conflict between the Law and the Spirit, and Paul can say of “the fruits of the Spirit”: “Against such there is no Law.”) For another thing, we bear in mind that the deadliest form of the flesh is that very legalism, that yearning for self-justification, which capitulates *sub lege*. This legalistic brand of fleshliness brings with it, of course, every other ethical fleshliness of “vainglory” and lovelessness; but, still worse, it makes Christ and faith and the Spirit “of no advantage.” Against this ploy of the flesh the Law itself is not effective, but only the Spirit.

It is of interest to Luther, therefore, that Paul’s interpretation of the Law does not stop where we last left it. Having explained that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” means really “through love be servants of one another,” he goes a step farther. Now in

³² LW XXVII, 49; WA XL/2, 62, 13-16.

³³ LW XXVII, 51; WA XL/2, 64, 31-32. See Hs., 62, 7-8: “Quid sit servire...man kans aber aller besten declarim per decalogum.”

³⁴ LW XXVII, 56,57; WA XL/2, 70, 24-25 and 71, 29.

³⁵ LW XXVII, 51-52; WA XL/2, 64, 29-65, 22.

³⁶ LW XXVII, 53; WA XL/2, 66, 30-32, 36-37.

turn “he interprets what it means to be a servant of one’s neighbor through love.”³⁷ And he does this in 5:16 ff.” “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify,” etc. Yet in this farther step of his exegesis Paul steps quite outside the Law itself into the doctrine of the Spirit, justification by faith, “the doctrine of faith.” It is this stage, I take it, in the apostle’s admonition “about good morals and about honest outward conduct, the observance of love and harmony,” that Luther had in mind when he said earlier that Christians “teach morals and all the virtues better than any philosophers or teachers, because they add faith.”³⁸

The way Paul now “adds” faith in his further exegesis of the law of love, namely, in his “walk by the Spirit,” not only deepens our understanding of that law (if it does that at all) but actually transcends that law. It supersedes the Law with an altogether new solution precisely at the point where the Law fails. Here we recall again how determined Luther is that theology, though it must insist finally on calling the Christians’ work genuinely good, dare not blink the realities of these same Christians’ failures and sins. For it is a simple fact that the Law fails to be fulfilled even among the saints. “Because sin clings to you as long as you live, it is impossible for you to fulfill the Law.” Therefore, “with the words ‘walk by the Spirit’ Paul shows how he wants his earlier statements to be understood: ‘Through love be servants of one another’ (5:13) and ‘love is the fulfilling of the Law’” (Rom. 13:10). Namely, “it is as though he were saying: ‘When I command you to love one another, I am requiring of you that you walk by the Spirit. For I know that you will not fulfill the Law.’”³⁹ The statement by which Paul reveals that “I know you will not fulfill the Law” is really not so much his verse 16, “Walk by the Spirit,” etc., as it is the next verse (which Luther is anticipating), “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit...to prevent you from doing what you would.” All the same, as Luther sees it, it is because “you will not fulfill the Law” (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” etc.) that Paul must now reinterpret that law by recourse to something quite different from the Law, namely, “Walk by the Spirit.”

“Thus,” Luther adds (though at first glance his “thus” is anything but obvious), “he [Paul] has not forgotten the matter of justification. For when he commands them to walk by the Spirit, he clearly [?] denies that works justify.”⁴⁰ Does this follow so “clearly” as all that? What is the connection? How did the issue of justification get in here? Why should Paul’s simple and direct admonition to “walk by the Spirit” be interrupted now by this detour into justification by faith? And why should it be this obtrusive doctrine of justification rather than the direct guidance of the Spirit, which resolves the Christian’s failure to keep the law of love? These questions can hardly be answered in one sentence, but in anticipation of the longer answer which lies ahead, let us try.

“The more aware they [Christians] are of their weakness and sin, the more they take refuge in Christ...plead for His assistance, that He may adorn them with His righteousness and make their faith increase by providing the Spirit, by whose guidance

³⁷ LW XXVII, 62; WA XL/2, 78, 15-16.

³⁸ LW XXVII, 47; WA XL/2, 59, 26-30. See n. 11.

³⁹ LW XXVII, 65; WA XL/2, 81, 26-31.

⁴⁰ LW XXVII, 65; WA XL/2, 81, 33-82, 13.

they will overcome the desires of the flesh and make them servants rather than masters.”⁴¹ This much at least should be clear from this quotation: The Spirit’s “guidance,” which helps Christians “overcome the desires of the flesh and make them servants rather than masters,” is not *immediate* guidance. Nor is it in the first instance for the Spirit’s guidance but instead “for Christ’s assistance” that “they plead.” Indeed, it is through Christ’s assistance that the guidance of the Spirit is mediated, that is, through that justifying “righteousness” with which Christ “adorns them,” and through that “faith” which, though it is provided by the Spirit, means to “take refuge in Christ.”⁴²

But this taking refuge in Christ, which is but another way of saying justification by faith, still presupposes that in the whole struggle to walk by the Spirit – to love one’s neighbor as oneself, to be his loving servant – even the question of one’s justification is an issue. That is a presupposition, true, the very one which Luther mentions first of all in the above quotation, when he says: “The more aware Christians are of their weakness and sin, the more they take refuge,” etc. Still, being aware of their weakness and sin, what – rather than taking refuge in the righteousness of Christ – would be their alternative? Not simply capitulating to the flesh but doing so because in their awareness of weakness and sin they would have no prospect of being anything else but flesh. Luther’s name for this is “despair,” and for him this is strictly a problem of justification, of a man’s worth before God.

Isn’t that, after all, the condition which also Paul presupposes in his original admonition, “Walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh”? “For,” as he goes on to explain, “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other to prevent you from doing what you would” (5:15-17). For those sanguine “sophists” who “took the statement of Paul, ‘Love is the fulfilling of the Law,’” to imply a *justification* by love, this fact of an inescapable, Spirit-frustrating opposition by the flesh should be rebuttal enough.⁴³ (“If we were pure of all sin,” Luther concedes, “...then we would certainly be righteous and holy through love...But [that] must be postponed until the life to come.”)⁴⁴ However, for those who are only too well aware of this conflict – “in fact, the godlier one is, the more aware he is of this conflict”⁴⁵ – and who know clearly enough that they do not have enough love to justify them, there is the converse danger, *desperatio*: losing heart in their battle against the flesh, feeling undone by their relentless, inextinguishable impatience, lovelessness, grumbling, sexual desire, competitiveness, becoming downcast over their way of life, their social position, their work and routines, all so seemingly unimportant and displeasing to God. What else is that but the problem of a sinner’s justification before God? When he despairs of that, he concedes the battle to his flesh, and that is the end

⁴¹ LW XXVII, 86-87; WA XL/2, 108, 28-109, 11.

⁴² “And when we say ‘Spirit,’ we do not mean a fanatic or an autodidact, as the sectarians boast of the Spirit; but our Spirit is ‘by faith,’” LW XXVII, 20; WA XL/2, 23, 22-24.

⁴³ LW XXVII, 66 ff.; WA XL/2, 79, 15 ff.

⁴⁴ LW XXVII, 64-65; WA XL/2, 80, 31-34.

⁴⁵ LW XXVII, 74; WA XL/2, 94, 14-15. “The wicked do not complain about their rebellion, conflict, and captivity to sin; for sin has powerful dominion over them,” LW XXVII, 71; WA XL/2, 89, 19-20.

both of his faith and of his love.⁴⁶ “Paul cannot forget about his doctrine of faith, but he keeps on repeating and emphasizing it, even when he is dealing with good works.”⁴⁷ Isn’t that what Luther means by “adding faith” to the “teaching about morals”?

Presumably, then, Paul reinterprets the Law (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”) not only by being more faithful to the intention of the Law (“through love be servants of one another”) but also by recourse beyond the Law to the Gospel, to the doctrine of justification by faith (“Walk by the Spirit”), for the simple reason that the Christian’s very struggle to do good works and to love is what raises recurrently the question of his justification before God. It is exactly the Law’s obligating the flesh to loving, neighborly servanthood that then suggests, alas, his reverting again, *sub lege*, whether for self-justification or in despair, and therefore demands some other resource than the Law – namely, the Gospel – both for his justification and for his good work.

4. QUATENUS LUCTAMUR, EATENUS IUSTI

But how, we now ask, is this purpose accomplished by Paul’s exhorting, “Walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh?” For after all even those who do walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh continue always to have the flesh very much with them, opposing the Spirit in them and preventing them from doing what they would. If so, if every action of theirs is still muddied more or less by the incursions of their flesh, then it is difficult to see how their work may honestly be called good, even though they simultaneously “walk by the Spirit,” more or less.

Still, Luther insists on calling Christian work just that – good. This is all the more perplexing in view of his unyielding determination to call sin – also Christian sin – by its name. “Sin is really sin, regardless of whether you commit it before or after you have come to know Christ. And God hates the sin...A believer’s sin is...just as great as that of the unbeliever.”⁴⁸ Moreover, as we have noted, Luther does not call Christian work good simply because it is possible to conceive of such good work ideally, even though actual Christian existence may afford no instances of it. “The Law prescribes and commands that we love God with all our heart, etc., and our neighbor as ourselves; but from this it does not follow: ‘This is written, and therefore it is done...’”⁴⁹ Of course, as Luther never tires of saying, a Christian sinner is gratuitously righteous before God, by faith in Christ, and in that relationship, at least – *coram Deo*, “inwardly” – he “remains godly.”⁵⁰ But how about “outwardly”? That is, if his only righteousness is by faith, then why invoke at all the predicate “righteous” for his work, his love? If it is true of the unbeliever that “even his good works are sins,”⁵¹ why should that be any less true of the believer? Why even distinguish between “good” works and some other kind, between “the works of the flesh” and “the fruits of the Spirit”? Why not leave the matter in the conflict it is, a *rixa*

⁴⁶ LW XXVII, 72-74, 70; WA XL/2, 90, 33-94, 17; 88, 25-26.

⁴⁷ LW XXVII, 77; WA XL/2, 97, 18-19.

⁴⁸ LW XXVII, 76; WA XL/2, 95, 27-96, 8.

⁴⁹ LW XXVII, 63-64; WA XL/2, 79, 23-95.

⁵⁰ LW XXVII, 76; WA XL/2, 95, 29-96, 16.

⁵¹ LW XXVII, 76.

et pugna between flesh and Spirit, rather than claim some kind of victory, some brand of Christian work allegedly good “in practice and in fact”?

Still, Luther does say that a Christian “fulfills the Law,” not only “inwardly by faith (for Christ is the consummation of the Law for righteousness to everyone who has faith)” but also “outwardly by works and by” something else, to which we shall return quickly, but nonetheless “by works.” “Thus it [the Law] is completely abrogated for them [Christians], first in the Spirit, but then also in works.”⁵² This is so because they walk by the Spirit. “But those who perform the works of the flesh and gratify its desires are accused and condemned by the Law, both politically and theologically.”⁵³

Christians, however, do not “perform the works of the flesh and gratify its desires.” But didn’t Luther concede that Christians do have the desires of the flesh? “This does not mean that they do not feel its desires at all; it means that they do not gratify them.”⁵⁴ And there is a vast difference. “Christians strive to avoid the works of the flesh; they cannot avoid its desires.”⁵⁵ Luther sees here a decisive distinction between Paul’s terms “desires” of the flesh and “works” of the flesh, between the “opposition” from the flesh, on the one hand (which would “prevent you from doing what you would”), and “gratifying” the flesh or “submitting” to it or “doing such things” on the other hand.

Because the saints have not yet completely shed their corrupt flesh, They are inclined toward sinning. They do not fear and love God enough, etc. They are aroused to anger, envy, impatience, sexual desire, and similar feelings; nevertheless, they do not carry out these feelings, because, as Paul says here, they crucify their flesh with its passions and faults, ...not only...by fasting or other kinds of discipline, but when, as Paul said earlier (5:16), they walk by the Spirit.⁵⁶

Luther says: “Here it is sufficient if you resist the flesh and do not gratify its desires, that is, if you follow the Spirit rather than the flesh.” This does not mean that the Law has now conveniently been “reinterpreted” in the sense that it has been compromised – requiring, say, merely that “we try our best.” Not at all. Still, Luther does say: “To the extent that by the Spirit we struggle against the flesh, to that extent we are outwardly righteous, even though it is not this righteousness that makes us acceptable in the sight of God.”⁵⁷

Luther’s distinction between “feeling” the flesh’s desires and “gratifying” them, etc. pictures the Spirit and the flesh as being engaged in something more than an inconclusive, even-draw, up-and-down struggle. It is not enough to say, in other words, that the Christian is *partly* flesh and *partly* spirit, or that he is *both* sinful and righteous. No, the one pole is in control, the other is not. The faithful “know that they have partly flesh and partly Spirit, but in such a way that the Spirit rules and the flesh is subordinate,

⁵² LW XXVII, 96; WA XL/2, 121, 18-24.

⁵³ LW XXVII, 96.

⁵⁴ LW XXVII, 74; WA XL/2, 93, 13-14.

⁵⁵ LW XXVII, 85; WA XL/2, 107, 21.

⁵⁶ LW XXVII, 96; WA XL/2, 121, 29-122, 11.

⁵⁷ LW XXVII, 72; WA XL/2, 91, 22-23; 90, 30-32.

that righteousness is supreme and sin is a servant.”⁵⁸ Luther is not of course equating Christians with just any people whose “good side” (as we say) happens to prevail over their “bad side,” nor is he equating the Christians’ Spirit with their native reason, soul, conscience, or will. True, he does locate the Spirit in the Christian’s “good will,” but this “is, of course, the Spirit Himself resisting the flesh.”⁵⁹ And “the will which is opposed to the flesh”⁶⁰ is that “new mind, a new will, new senses, and even new action,”⁶¹ the “new creation.” Essentially, to “obey the Spirit rather than the flesh” means “by faith and hope...[to] take hold of Christ.”⁶²

Yet at the same time this is all a behavioral occurrence as well “in practice and in fact.” It is as factual behaviorally as its opposite, “despair,” which – in the case of the conscientious man who succumbs *sub lege* – is exactly what “gratifying the desires of the flesh” means. To “walk by the Spirit” is that behavioral fact of Christian life which is signaled by a struggle, but a struggle in which the one power has the upper hand, exercises the executive office of the ego, though perhaps not much more than that. In fact, Luther seems at times to say that the mere fact that there is any struggle at all, that the flesh is even so much as being frustrated and resisted (“in the wicked, of course, it has dominant control”⁶³), is itself “victory” by definition, seeing who it is (namely the Spirit) that is doing the resisting. In behavioral terms, the resister is faith – not the Law, which is helpless against despair and in fact abets it.

5. QUID FIDES EST

But that, finally, explains also why the Christian’s work, his love, qualifies as “good,” why he “is a Christian in a total sense,” not only “inwardly through faith in the sight of God” but also “outwardly”; namely, because his love (or at least as much of it as he can manage in his struggle against his loveless flesh) is *by faith* just as is his justification. His love is “*faith working through love.*” To be sure, this Pauline phrase “has not yet said what faith is.” But hasn’t it? Doesn’t it say, by Luther’s own admission, that faith “is the impulse and motivation of good works or love toward one’s neighbor”? Yes, but that is faith in “its external function,” not what faith *is*. It its “internal nature, power and function...it is righteousness or rather justification in the sight of God.”⁶⁴ Presumably, therefore, it is impossible for good works or love really to be good at all unless their “impulse and motivation” is that very faith (and nothing else) which is “justification in the sight of God.” At that rate, if good works or love could somehow take their impulse

⁵⁸ LW XXVII, 74; WA XL/2, 93, 19-21.

⁵⁹ LW XXVII, 75; WA XL/2, 95, 13-14.

⁶⁰ LW XXVII, 77; WA XL/2, 97, 25-27: “...be led by the Spirit, that is...obey the will which is opposed to the flesh and...refuse to gratify the desires of the flesh; for this is what it means to be led and drawn by the Spirit.”

⁶¹ LW XXVII, 140; WA XL/2, 179, 12-13. “...by ‘flesh’ Paul means whatever there is in a man, including all...powers of the soul.” LW XXVII, 89; WA XL/2, 111, 32-33.

⁶² LW XXVII, 73; WA XL/2, 91, 28. “Whatever there is in us beside Him [Christ] – whether it be intellect or will, activity or passivity, etc. – is flesh, not Spirit... ‘But we,’ Paul says, ‘go far beyond all this to live in the Spirit, because through faith we hold to Christ...’” LW XXVII, 25; WA XL/2, 30, 20-26.

⁶³ LW XXVII, 54; WA XL/2, 68, 13.

⁶⁴ LW XXVII, 30; WA XL/2, 37, 26-38, 10.

and motivation from some other kind of “faith” – or even from the Holy Spirit Himself, though without that faith which is “justification in the sight of God” – and even if those good works or love somehow met the demands of this lovely law, “through love be servants of one another” (though for Luther of course none of this could happen), still the good works in that case would not be good and the “love” would not be love.

Why not? Because these good works or love would always simultaneously be vitiated by that ruinous opposition from the flesh. Granted, but isn't that equally the case with those good works or love which issue from faith? Yes, “even the saints love in an imperfect and impure way in this present life, and nothing impure will enter the kingdom of God.”⁶⁵ Still, that is exactly where faith makes the difference despite the fact that, as an “impulse and motivation,” it is no doubt inextricably intertwined with the desires of the flesh. The difference is that faith possesses Jesus Christ, the Mediator who interposes Himself between the believer's otherwise incriminating flesh and the Law which does the incriminating. That is why, “if you are led by the Spirit [which means not despairing, not gratifying the flesh, but taking hold of Christ], you are not under the Law.”⁶⁶ The believer's flesh, never to be minimized in its sinfulness, is nevertheless also not to be predicated (“imputed”) as *his*. That is, *he* is not *sub lege*, and his faith in Christ – the opposite of despair *sub lege*, of gratifying the flesh – is his hanging onto that freedom. “This is not because of a difference between the sins, as though the believer's sins were smaller and the unbeliever's larger, but because of a difference between the persons. For the believer knows that his sin is forgiven him on account of Christ, who has expiated it by His death.”⁶⁷ That is Luther's confidence in saying of Christians that “when Christ has been grasped by faith, ...the Law is completely abrogated for them, first in the Spirit, but then also in works,”

This does not mean that there is no difference among works *qua* works. It is the mark of believers that they struggle to do those works which “God commands”, not “self-chosen” or “superstitious” works. But that is not what makes their works “holy.” “Spontaneously they do what the Law requires, if not by means of perfectly holy works, then at least by means of the forgiveness of sins through faith.”⁶⁸ But neither is this the same as their being righteous “inwardly,” as justified. Also “outwardly” they are righteous, but “by works *and* by the forgiveness of sins.”

With the realization that the flesh, though still merely resisted and not extinguished, is nevertheless suffered out of existence (“expiated”) by Christ, the Christian's struggle now comes full circle. He is renewed, “a new creation,” also behaviorally. In his hands “even evil will have to cooperate for good. For when his flesh impels him to sin, he is aroused...to seek forgiveness of sins through Christ...which he would otherwise not have regarded as important...” Then in turn he becomes “a wonderful creator, who can make joy out of sadness...righteousness out of sin...despair...anger or sexual desire...” – love

⁶⁵ LW XXVII, 64; WA XL/2, 80, 17-19.

⁶⁶ LW XXVII, 78; WA XL/2, 98, 20 ff.

⁶⁷ LW XXVII, 76; WA XL/2, 96, 10-12.

⁶⁸ LW XXVII, 96; WA XL/2, 121, 18-21.

out of resentment. “Find out by experience,” Luther encourages his students, “what a good and brave warrior you are.”⁶⁹

6. HOC OBIECTUM AMABILISSIMUM

Our original question – how the Christian’s work, precisely as work, qualifies as “good”- has been answered. But there might still be room for the afterthought: What in turn is this good work, this outward righteousness, *good for*, if it is not that “righteousness that makes us acceptable to God”? It is good, in one word, for the neighbor – the *proximus*, the near one. It might of course also have benefits for the loving worker himself. Being provided in this interim with faith, hope, and love, he has the assurance of being “whole and perfect in this life, both inwardly and outwardly, until the revelation of the righteousness...which will be consummated and eternal,”⁷⁰ when he shall no longer need faith and hope, since his love will then be enough.⁷¹ Moreover, “although no work is able to grant the conscience peace before God, yet...we have need of this testimony of our conscience that we have carried out our ministry well and...lived a good life...to the extent that we know [our works] to be commanded by God and pleasing in his sight.”⁷²

However, the fundamental truth remains: God “does not need our works,” our neighbors do. That, after all, is what righteousness “outwardly” means: *coram hominibus*. It is for our fellowmen, and they “do not derive any benefit from [our] faith but do derive benefit from [our] works or from our love.”⁷³ But then the question of what (or rather whom) our love is good for, is hardly an afterthought. For if “the Law cannot be fulfilled without the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit cannot be received without Christ,”⁷⁴ then what else is “this freedom of the Spirit [for], achieved by the death of Christ”? It is “for [people] to be servants of one another through love.”⁷⁵ And what else does “the whole Law” finally amount to except that – which is likewise “the law of Christ”?⁷⁶

Not an afterthought indeed. Actually, this could well be the beginning of any discussion of Luther on faith and love, of the goodness of Christian good works, so vast is the phenomenology of this servant-love which he finds in the fifth and sixth chapters of Galatians. True, he refers those students who desire detailed elaboration of Paul’s catalogue of vices and virtues to “the old commentary which we prepared in 1519,” seeing that “our chief purpose this time has been to set forth the doctrine of justification as clearly as possible.”⁷⁷ However, exactly because of this heightened interest in justification, “even when the apostle is teaching good works”⁷⁸ – this “adding faith” to

⁶⁹ LW XXVII, 74, 26; WA XL/2, 93, 23-94, 14; 31, 27-28.

⁷⁰ LW XXVII, 25; WA XL/2, 30, 14-16.

⁷¹ LW XXVII, 64; WA XL/2, 80, 25-26.

⁷² LW XXVII, 121; WA XL/2, 155, 17-21.

⁷³ LW XXVII, 30; WA XL/2, 37, 19-30.

⁷⁴ LW XXVII, 131; WA XL/2, 168, 15-16.

⁷⁵ LW XXVII, 49; WA XL/2, 61, 32-36.

⁷⁶ LW XXVII, 114; WA XL/2, 145, 15-16.

⁷⁷ LW XXVII, 87; WA XL/2, 109, 30-110, 12.

⁷⁸ LW XXVII, 78; WA XL/2, 98, 14-16.

the “teaching about morals” – it is all the more revealing how one sort of Christian love after the other reflects the same structure within it as does the believer’s own justification before God. One example will have to suffice, namely, the eye-opening advantages which such compassionate, burden-bearing love brings in the form of new appreciation of the commonplace in God’s creation.

The prototype of this compassionate *epiekeia* occurs already when Paul reinterprets “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” to mean “Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh”: “When I [Paul] say that, ...I am not requiring of you that you strip off the flesh completely or kill it, but that you restrain it.” For “God wants the world to endure until the Last Day. This cannot happen unless men are born and reared; and this, in turn, requires that the flesh continue.” But it also requires “that sin continue, since the flesh cannot be without sin.”⁷⁹ This kindness toward the flesh extends even to one’s own. “For just as we should not be cruel to other people’s bodies or trouble them with unjust requirements, so we should not do this [in this case enforced celibacy] to our own bodies either.”⁸⁰ “In the church faithful pastors see many errors and sins which they are obliged to bear. In the state the obedience of subjects never lives up to the laws...; therefore if he does not know how to conceal things, the magistrate will not be fit to rule.” Likewise “in the family.” “If we are able to bear and overlook our own faults and sins...let us bear those of others as well, in accordance with the statements: ‘Bear one another’s burdens’ and ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” – “and so fulfill the Law of Christ.” But “to carry the flesh, that is, the weakness of the brethren” “a Christian must have broad shoulders and husky bones.”⁸¹ And that is what the ‘outward’ righteousness – not just outer but outward, outer-directed – is for.

But then notice what eye-opening appreciation this good-neighborly love brings with it, what power of discernment, of recognizing goodness in the most unlikely places and people – for instance, within the church, that communion of so-called saints. “When I was a monk, I often had a heartfelt wish to see the life and conduct of at least one saintly man”⁸² – but in vain. Now, however, “I am happy to give thanks to God for His superabundant gift, which I sought when I used to be a monk; for I have seen, not one saint, but many, in fact, innumerable genuine saints.”⁸³ “Saints are all those who believe in Christ,” “not those who lead a celibate life, who are abstemious, or who perform other works that give the appearance of brilliance or grandeur...They are not all of equal firmness of character, and many weaknesses and offenses are discernible in every one of them; it is also true that many of them fall into sin. But...on no account...am I to jump to the conclusion that [they]...are unholy, when I see that they love and revere the Word, receive the Lord’s supper, etc.”⁸⁴

The same perceptiveness of love sees through the apparent inequalities in social status, refusing to evaluate one vocation as inferior to another. “In the eyes of the world, of

⁷⁹ LW XXVII, 68; WA XL/2, 85, 27-86, 13.

⁸⁰ LW XXVII, 69; WA XL/2, 87, 26-27.

⁸¹ LW XXVII, 113-14; WA XL/2, 144, 22-145, 16.

⁸² LW XXVII, 81; WA XL/2, 103, 12-13.

⁸³ LW XXVII, 83; WA XL/2, 104, 18-20.

⁸⁴ LW XXVII, 82; WA XL/2, 103, 18-104, 16.

course, these ways of life and their positions are unequal.” “A monk does not concede that the works which a layman performs in his calling are as good and acceptable to God as his own.” Neither does a nun in comparing her life with that of a married woman. Similarly “the Anabaptists imagine today” that the status of those who “suffer need, hunger, cold, and tattered clothing” is superior to that of those others who own property, etc.” But “no godly person believes that the position of a magistrate is better in the sight of God than that of a subject.” Nor will he “distinguish between the position or work of a father and that of a son, or between that of a teacher and that of a pupil, or between that of a master and that of a servant.” Instead, he will insist that “both are pleasing to God if they are done in faith and in obedience to God.”⁸⁵

Finally, this same appreciative faith working through love reappropriates that splendor to which, in God’s violated creation, “reason” has become blind: above all, that splendid creation, the neighbor – man. “Men are completely mistaken when they imagine that they really understand the commandment to love”⁸⁶ – that is, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” – “even though this principle and others like it, which we call the law of nature, are the foundation of human law and of all good works.”⁸⁷ To the corrupted reason, however, just as that “shortest” theology, “Believe in Christ,” seems to be a “stingy and paltry phrase,” so “serving another person through love seems...to mean performing unimportant works” like “teaching the erring...bearing with [the neighbor’s] rude manners and impoliteness, putting up with annoyances, labors, and the ingratitude and contempt of men in both church and state...being patient in the home with a cranky wife...” But in truth these loving works in the neighbor’s behalf are incomprehensibly “outstanding and brilliant.”⁸⁸ Thereupon Luther follows with an extolling of man that rivals Pico’s or even Feuerbach’s: “No creature toward which you should practice love is nobler than your neighbor...more pleasant, more lovable, more helpful, kinder, more comforting...more necessary...worthier of love in the whole universe...” “Even one who had done me some sort of injury or harm has not shed his humanity on that account or stopped being flesh and blood, a creature of God very much like me...my neighbor.”⁸⁹ But that is the sight which Christians behold when, in their “teaching about morals,” “they add faith.”⁹⁰

⁸⁵ LW XXVII, 61-62; WA XL/2, 76, 15-77, 18.

⁸⁶ LW XXVII, 56; WA XL/2, 71, 22-23.

⁸⁷ LW XXVII, 53; WA XL/2, 66, 36-37.

⁸⁸ LW XXVII, 56; WA XL/2, 70, 27-71, 21.

⁸⁹ LW XXVII, 58; WA XL/2, 72, 31-73, 28.

⁹⁰ “Without [faith] one cannot understand what a good work is and what is pleasing to God,” LW XXVII, 53; WA XL/2, 66, 31-32.