ABSTRACT. Luther wrote his *On the Freedom of a Christian* at the end of a very turbulent and polemical period of the reformation. In it he puts forward his early, yet sophisticated understanding of justification by faith and contrasts it with the Romanist penitential system. In the accompanying letter to Leo X, Luther states the nature and purpose of his writing and names several of the theological opponents he has in mind during the Freedom Tractate’s composition. This essay argues that Luther’s *Freedom Tractate* is a refined implicit attack on the works-righteousness of papal scholasticism and at the same time a positive exposition of his reforming views on the nature of genuine Christian freedom. This essay also contends that Luther’s views on baptism undergird the whole work as a presuppositional framework. The lack of explicit reference to his understanding of baptism in the *Freedom Tractate*, in our view, is a conscious decision on his part due to the polemical genius of this piece of work. The development of a historical-polemical and theological background to Luther’s *Freedom Tractate* provides the necessary material for a felicitous understanding of the many nuances that exist throughout the work and places reasonable emphasis on Luther’s use of theological dialectic.

KEY WORDS: freedom, faith, works, baptism, justification

Introduction
Throughout Luther’s clearest exposition of biblical freedom, his (1520) *On the Freedom of a Christian*, there runs an anti-text that
serves to underline the polemical nature of the freedom tractate. This anti-text is developed to teach the recipients of the tractate how to discern who the “false teachers” are, what they teach and how to “boldly resist” them. The tractate directly confronts the false teachers and their teaching of its time. They are alluded to more than ninety times in the tractate and accompanying letter to Leo X. For example,

I have, to be sure sharply attacked ungodly doctrines in general, and I have snapped at my opponents.

Many people have considered Christian faith an easy thing, and not a few have given it place among the virtues. They do this because they have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith.

This ignorance and suppression of liberty very many blind pastors take pains to encourage. They stir up and urge on their people in these practices by praising such works, puffing them up with their indulgences, and never teaching faith.

Hence the Christian must take a middle course and face those two classes of men. He will meet first the unyielding, stubborn cere-

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1 Rieger develops the text/anti-text paradigm of the tractate by saying “The anti-text/text will be equally referred to in the first line of the Latin prologue, for it indicates a wrong opinion about the faith. The text carries out a hermeneutical reversal of supposedly understanding the faith through theory and understanding it through living experience” (my translation). See Reinhold Rieger, “Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen, De libertate Christiana”, Kommentare zu Schriften Luthers, 349, Band 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). Rieger goes on to say that experience is a crucial element for the correct understanding of faith over against mere historical acceptance of Christ.

2 LW 31:372; WA 7:70.

3 LW 31:373, 374; WA 70, 71.

4 Letter to Leo X, LW 31:335.

5 The Freedom of a Christian LW 31:343; WA 7:49.

6 LW 31:370; WA 7:68.
monialists who like deaf adders are not willing to hear the truth of liberty.\textsuperscript{7}

Based on the positive text—Luther’s forensic view of justification as an ontology of perfect lordship and servanthood (\textit{Herrnsein und Knechtsein})—the Christian is freed to resist the false teaching of works-righteous legalism with a pure and clear conscience and to participate in God’s good works for this world.

To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them do I serve—I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.\textsuperscript{8}

The tractate contains an explicit response to the legalist’s accusation that Luther’s understanding of freedom is antinomian and seditious toward the state. In response he clearly defines the proper place for “good works”. He is not opposed to works, just the false estimation of works by the legalists.

Our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works. Faith redeems, corrects, and preserves our consciences so that we know that righteousness does not consist in works, although works neither can nor ought to be wanting; just as we cannot be without food and drink and all the works of this mortal body, yet our righteousness is not in them, but in faith; and yet those works of the body are not to be despised or neglected on that account.\textsuperscript{9}

By being firmly grounded on his doctrine of freedom—his view of the new ontological relationship between God and justified sinners in its indicative and imperative nature—Luther urges

\textsuperscript{7} LW 31:373; WA 7:70.
\textsuperscript{8} LW 31:344; WA 7:49.
\textsuperscript{9} LW 31:372; WA 7:70, 14.
his readers to “boldly resist” false papal heteronomy using his text/anti-text paradigm in the freedom tractate. This chapter will, therefore, outline the major challenges to Luther’s understanding of freedom that lie at the polemical background of the tractate and also develop one of the main theological presuppositions Luther assumes in the tractate, although it is one that he consciously plays down in favor of focusing on the faith-works issue. That presupposition is the declarative and efficacious nature of Christian baptism.

In the Letter to Leo X and the Latin version of the freedom tractate, Luther explicitly confront the opponents of his theology of freedom with a pointed and practical attack against the legalists and libertines within the church, on behalf of and for the weak and unlearned.\textsuperscript{10} The appendix continues to expose the challenge by legalism to freedom and pre-empts the abuse of Luther’s theology by antinomians. In this concluding section Luther identifies three groups of people. The first are the despisers (Verachter) who embody antinomianism and see in freedom an occasion for licentiousness. The second are the legalists, who invent a compounded system of lawmaking that makes the gospel into another and harsher law than Moses, and the third group, the weak (Schwach) of whom Luther is compelled to protect against the legalists, antinomians, and moralists by championing his doctrine of freedom through the via media paradigm. Luther knows that some laws and ceremonies are helpful for the weak. He also knows that some boundaries are also necessary for the weak until they reach the stage of maturity where both are no longer necessary. In the freedom tractate Luther upholds a correct use of the law and rebuts the charge of antinomianism.

In fact, Luther anticipates and challenges the antinomianism that comes from an over simplification of the forensic view of

\textsuperscript{10} LW 31:372; WA 7:70.
justification and the outright dismissal of good works.\textsuperscript{11} The false teaching that Luther anticipates here in 1520 came to dramatic historical realization with the 1525 “Peasant’s Revolt” and in the controversy with Agricola.\textsuperscript{12} The charge of antinomianism was an early accusation that Luther himself had to face from the Papacy.\textsuperscript{13} Luther counters the accusation throughout the second major part of the tractate.

Finally, something must be added for the sake of those for whom nothing can be said so well that they will not spoil it by misunderstanding it. It is questionable whether they will understand even what will be said here.\textsuperscript{14}

The permissive giving up of Christian imperative for formless and antinomian types of pseudo freedom, are for Luther, not Christian at all.

\textsuperscript{11} Luther’s threefold distinction of the law serves as a corrective to collapsing all law into the \textit{duplexus usus} and then claiming that since Christ has abolished the law; all law is irrelevant for the Christian. Luther’s realistic apocalyptic-eschatology, insightfully advocates a nuanced approach to the place of command and promise. See \textit{LW} 31:371-377; \textit{LW} 31:372; \textit{WA} 7:70. Also Rieger’s \textit{Anhang}. See Rieger, “Von der Freiheit eines Christenmensch, \textit{De libertate Christiana}”, 328-348.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Against the Antinomians}, 1539, \textit{LW} 47:99-119.

\textsuperscript{13} See correspondence dated March 13 1520, Gabriel Della Volta to John Von Staupitz, “We thought it necessary to write you this letter, to inform you of the enormous evils threatening your congregation and our whole order unless Martin ceases” in P. Smith, \textit{Luther’s Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters} (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), 297. Also Charles V to Frederick, November 28, 1520, “We should like to put down this movement, from which we fear much disorder and error may arise …” See P. Smith, \textit{Luther’s Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters} (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), 398.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{LW} 31:371; \textit{WA} 7:69.
There are very many who, when they hear of this freedom of faith, immediately turn it into an occasion for the flesh and think that now all things are allowed them.\textsuperscript{15}

Here Luther is addressing those that despise ceremonies, traditions and human laws, and he may be thinking of the moral depravity of the Romanists.\textsuperscript{16} Rieger says that Luther obviously wanted to make a clarification in the appendix because of a lack of understanding and misunderstandings in regard to the nature of freedom.\textsuperscript{17} Those that throw off “reasonable discipline” deny genuine Christian freedom and in so doing drag many into the depths of hell.\textsuperscript{18} Hütter calls the denial of reasonable discipline, given in the form of commandment, “negative freedom”.\textsuperscript{19} Rieger contends that the view that “all things” are permitted (\textit{omni licere}) is not the result of Christian freedom and does not correspond to—Luther’s understanding of Christian lordship as—the dominion over everything.\textsuperscript{20} In this regard Pope Leo X could easily have been challenged by Luther and grouped with the antinomian libertines due to his lavish pur-

\textsuperscript{15} LW 31:371; WA 7:69, 26.

\textsuperscript{16} It is made clear that Luther is not primarily or explicitly concerned with the moral acts of the pope, although we believe he was aware of the immorality propagated by him, which can be discerned implicitly in the Latin letter and tractate (Examples of Luther’s sarcasm LW 31:334, 335, 337, 338, the reference to Leo’s “innate goodness” and Leo’s status as a “demigod” and “lord of the world”, 341). His main concern appears to be the theological practice of the church and its negative consequences on the congregations.

\textsuperscript{17} Rieger, “Von der Freiheit eines Christenmensch, De libertate Christiana”, 335.

\textsuperscript{18} LW 31:375; WA 7:71.

\textsuperscript{19} “In modern Protestant ethics this is seen in the fact that freedom has come to be understood primarily as negative freedom”. “It is seen as freedom ‘from’ and not freedom ‘for’”. See Reinhard Hütter, “The Twofold Centre of Lutheran Ethics”, The Promise of Lutheran Ethics, 32-33, Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

\textsuperscript{20} Rieger, “Von der Freiheit eines Christenmensch, De libertate Christiana”, 336.
suit of all things pleasurable and his self-justified disregard for pastoral and administrative responsibility.\textsuperscript{21}

Luther, in the appendix, as in the body of the tractate, opposes the dichotomization of the lord-servant dialectic with his cruciform view of freedom.

Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christ’s to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.\textsuperscript{22}

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love, as Christ says in John 1(51), “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man”.\textsuperscript{23}

The modeling of cruciform freedom consists of the ontological (forensic) freedom of imputed lordship that is bound and compelled to bear the fruit of love, which will, in turn, resist the flesh nature with good works and work for the neighbor.\textsuperscript{24} According to Luther, the Christian cannot choose to live as a lord

\textsuperscript{21} According to J. L. Allen Jr., “Power, secrecy feed conspiracy theories in Vatican City”, \textit{National Catholic Reporter} 34.35 (1998): 1. Giovanni was an “adventurous” homosexual. The lack of bastard children at his coronation ironically seems to support this substantial rumor. Leo is recorded as saying “Let us enjoy the papacy since God has given it to us”. This is exactly what he did and according to Löffler he had fully depleted the substantial treasury left to him by Julius II in less than two years. See K. Löffler, “Pope Leo X” \textit{The Catholic Encyclopaedia} (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 2009), 3.

\textsuperscript{22} LW 31:367; WA 7:66.

\textsuperscript{23} LW 31:371; WA 7:69.

\textsuperscript{24} LW 31:371. To be as another Christ (\textit{alter Christus}) for the neighbor. According to Luther this is a Christian’s only work.
or a servant in whatever form they deem fit. For Luther, freedom has a defined boundary.\textsuperscript{25} Luther’s biblical exegesis states that the dichotomization of the lord-servant dialectic is unfaithful, simply because it is a denial of the fullness of Christian ontology. The Christian is called to understand and live its two fold nature (lord and servant).\textsuperscript{26} The Christian, according to Luther, is called to “the” way. That way is the twofold image of Christ—divine and human—and him crucified; the \textit{Lord} and \textit{Servant} par excellence,

So a Christian, like Christ his head, is filled and made rich by faith and should be content with this form of God which he has obtained by faith; only, as I have said, he should increase this faith until it is made perfect. For this faith is his life, his righteousness, and his salvation: it saves him and makes him acceptable, and bestows upon him all things that are Christ’s, as has been said above, and as Paul asserts in Galatians 2(:20) when he says, “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God”. Although the Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him. This he should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval.\textsuperscript{27}

Luther’s doctrine of freedom can and should therefore, be seen in close connection with his dynamic Christology (\textit{communicatio

\textsuperscript{25} Luther’s realistic view of the now/not-yet eschatological tension recognizes the need for the twofold obligation to work and love. See \textit{LW} 31:344, 358. Luther’s concept of Christian freedom follows a Lord, Love, Servant progression in the tractate.

\textsuperscript{26} Luther says “Because of this diversity of nature the Scriptures assert contradictory things concerning the same man, since these two men in the same man contradict each other, ‘for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh’, according to Galatians 5(:17)”. See \textit{LW} 31:344.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{LW} 31:366; \textit{WA} 7:65.
idiomatatum)\textsuperscript{28} which serves to embolden his personal, yet rhetorically sarcastic rebuke of the pope because his loyalty lies with Christ first and foremost.\textsuperscript{29}

Luther opens his argument in the freedom tractate by identifying the deplorable situation whereby faith and all it implies had become a merely historical virtue.\textsuperscript{30} He goes as far as saying that even if Christ is preached, in a merely historical fashion, then it betrays a significant part of the formative (experiential) process.\textsuperscript{31} A purely historical assent is not compatible to the existential power of Luther’s understanding of freedom in faith.\textsuperscript{32} He lays the responsibility for propagating this false faith directly at the feet of the theologians of the Roman curia and indirectly at the pitiful negligence of Leo X himself.\textsuperscript{33}

Luther says the experience of faith goes well beyond the acknowledgment of it as a historical virtue.\textsuperscript{34} For him, the tension

\textsuperscript{28} See especially Luther’s use of Philippians 2 in the tractate in \textit{LW} 31:366.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{LW} 31:343; \textit{WA} 7:49.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{LW} 31:357; \textit{WA} 7:58.
\textsuperscript{32} In particular the \textit{Ex opera operato}, which denies the existential value of justification by faith. By existential we mean—as per Luther—faith derived in the soul (heart) by the external power of the word. See \textit{LW} 31:343, 345, 356.
\textsuperscript{33} Did Luther know the lifestyle of Leo X? We believe he did, See \textit{Babylonian Captivity} in \textit{LW} 36:58 and \textit{To the German Nobility} in \textit{LW} 44:142. Luther lets Leo know in the \textit{Open Letter} that he knows what has been going on in Rome (\textit{LW} 31:336). On this basis, we contend that Luther did not specifically target Leo’s morality in the \textit{Freedom Tractate} for political (diplomatic) reasons, but uses discrete, rhetorical genius, to amplify Leo’s real nature through sarcastic references to Leo’s morality, see in the \textit{Open Letter to Pope Leo X} (\textit{LW} 31:336). The discussions on the nature of being and act that focus on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:15-20, highlight the antichristian heart behind the debaucherous lifestyles of the Romanists. “Consequently it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person, as Christ also says, ‘A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit’” (Matthew 7:18) (\textit{LW} 31:361).
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{LW} 31:343; \textit{WA} 7:49.
that exists within a natural and spiritual ontology must be maintained, for if one denies the real and present dynamic of “Spirit in conflict with flesh” (*Freiheit im Widerspruch*), then one will not “experience the courage which faith gives a person when trials oppress them”.

It is, therefore, imperative that the evangelical pastor, teacher and theologian be “far seeing” in this regard and intentionally strive to provide members of the church with as free and strong a communicative-experiential process as possible. Luther’s freedom tractate is intended to aid this purpose.

What follows in this opening chapter, will be an outline of the polemical context, the main opponents that Luther faced in 1520, and Luther’s Christological response.

**The Freedom Tractate’s Polemical Context**

Luther, according to some, appears inconsistent and theologically underdeveloped when he lays stress on certain factors while leaving others no real place at all in his argument. The lack of explicit use of baptismal theology in the tractate despite the fact that it had played such a fundamental role in his 1520 the Babylonian Captivity of the Church. However, it

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35 As per the Roman stance on concupiscence which denies the sinful quality of “fleshly desire”. It removes the focus away from the heart and onto specific, concrete acts of sin. Luther re-invokes the moral and theological responsibility of the Romanists by challenging their understanding of concupiscence (*LW* 31:343; *WA* 7:49).

36 *LW* 31:374; *WA* 7:71.

37 See G. W. Hoyer, “Christianhood, Priesthood and the Pope”, *Accents in Luther’s Theology*, 173, H. O. Kadai ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967). He states that Luther’s semantic and exegetical support for his freedom thesis “reveals a lack of development”. In our opinion Hoyer incorrectly sees this for his struggling to fit his own thesis of “brotherhood” into the tractate and thereby using his own paradigm to judge Luther’s without regard to the polemical and theological context of the tractate.

38 There are several reasons for this according to Trigg. It is our understanding that Luther did not introduce baptismal theology into the freedom tractate because he did not want to give the controversialists a ground on which to justify themselves without faith. He needed to demolish the “second
will be our purpose to show that rather than seeing the tractate as inconsistent and underdeveloped, one should realize that Luther consciously stresses some factors at the expense of others because of his polemical struggle at the time. Some of Luther’s presuppositions prior to the tractate and developed in his previous battles with the controversialists, play a key role in discerning his approach in the freedom tractate and its implications. These presuppositions will be defined after we enumerate the actual opponents Luther lists in the Letter to Leo X that accompanied the Latin version of the *Freedom Tractate*.

Luther’s letter to Leo X names a number of the “monsters” he had been waging war against over the previous three years. In it he also speaks directly to the pope in a sharp and condemnatory manner without actually directly implicating himself. Throughout the letter to Leo, Luther speaks, in our view, with a degree of sarcasm and appears to have already—in mind and method—separated from the Roman way. After all that is said in the letter to Leo, the tractate immediately gives dedication to the unlearned, and states that it is “only” them whom he serves. We will survey the controversialists and their relationship to Luther and his tractate because there are many points throughout the tractate where Luther is speaking directly against them and their doctrines.

In the Latin proem of the freedom tractate, Luther mentions those who give faith a false virtue, though they have really never experienced it. He calls them “literalists” and “subtle dispens plank” theology of penance to reinstate effectual faith, which for Luther, amounted to dynamic baptismal faith.

40 *LW* 31:344; *WA* 7:49.
41 *LW* 31:343; *WA* 7:49. The scholastic emphasis at the time had an overbalanced understanding of faith that didn’t involve embodied relationship with Jesus. The emphasis was on the theoretical affirmation of the historical position of the church. See Rieger, “Von der Freiheit eines Christenmensch, *De libertate Christiana*”, 349. If one accepted these things cognitively then it was seen as a virtuous faith, for the historical position of the church was seen to be authoritative and virtuous. Luther radically calls this into ques-
tants”. He speaks directly against their compounding of human laws and their blind and dangerous doctrines that teach works-based righteousness. The discussion on the Aaronic priesthood is a direct reference to the arguments of the controversialists that support the primacy, lordship and office of the pope and on the point of the physical power and dominion of the Roman church he says that it is “a madness with which some churchmen are afflicted”. Luther is fully informed of the broad ecclesial disease for which he attributes the pope with direct responsibility. He is incensed at the suppression of liberty forced upon the people by the practice of false teaching with a direct reference to “their” indulgences that never teach faith. The tyranny of false doctrine and the resultant oppression of Christian liberty are seen as sheer desire for glory and

42 LW 31:344; WA 7:49.
43 LW 31:345, 350; WA 7:50, 54.
44 LW 31:353, 362; WA 7:56, 63.
45 LW 31:354; WA 7:56.
46 LW 31:354; WA 7:57.
47 See LW 31:368; WA 7:66. For a long time it was assumed that Luther’s portrayal of the condition in Rome derived from the recollection of his own stay there in 1510-1511. The evidence uncovered by modern research, however, suggests that he drew less upon his own memory than upon the very recent information provided by Reuchlin’s lawyer, Johann von der Wiech (To the Christian Nobility, 1520, LW 44:121). Luther states in the Open Letter that he knew what was going on in Rome “As you well know, there has been flowing from Rome these many years—like a flood covering the world—nothing but a devastation of men’s bodies and souls and possessions, the worst examples of the worst of all things” (LW 31:336).
48 See LW 31:370; WA 7:68. The accusation by the controversialists’, that Luther attacked the authority of the pope as early as 1517, can be inferred from the Ninety-Five Theses. See especially theses 77-95 (LW 31:32-33).
the inculcation of greed.\textsuperscript{49} The controversialist teaching on works-righteousness had created a system that craved the domination of society from the cradle to the grave. It also made society pay for the privilege of being dominated. The machinery used by the papacy to enforce this false heteronomy, is found in the theological justification of meritorious works-righteousness. In regard to works-righteousness, Luther emphatically states:

\begin{quote}
Unless faith is at the same time constantly taught, this justification by work happens easily and defiles a great many, as has been done until now through the pestilent, impious, soul-destroying traditions of our popes and the opinions of our theologians. By these snares numberless souls have been dragged down to hell, so that you might see in this the work of the Antichrist.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

This statement is hardly conciliatory, and reveals how Luther avoids direct condemnation of the current pope by owning the popes and theologians of the past.\textsuperscript{51} The previous major tracts for the year reveal his exact intention—to speak against the Roman tyranny and it propagators and speak with unequivocal conviction about the genuine freedom of the Christian wrought by faith and faith alone. In my opinion the opponents Luther targets with the polemical interface of the freedom tractate “does” include Pope Leo X, due to his responsibility for the entire administrative system (curia), with which he inherited from a series of corrupt popes.

\textsuperscript{49} Maybe a subtle illusion to Leo’s lust for money. See Open Letter to Leo X “Would that you (Leo) might discard that which your most profligate enemies boastfully claim to be your glory and might live on a small priestly income of your own or on your family inheritance!” (LW 31:337)

\textsuperscript{50} See LW 31:375; WA 7:71. The Devil and the demonic spiritual battle feature largely in Luther’s worldview and theology. The controversialists are often portrayed in terms of the dynamic struggle between good and evil, and as defenders of a system of captivity, they are the main point of contact in Luther’s Latin version of the freedom tractate.

\textsuperscript{51} It seems that Luther was rhetorically and politically capable.
It was your duty and that of your cardinals to remedy these evils, but the gout of these evils makes a mockery of the healing hand, and neither chariot nor horse responds to the rein. Moved by this affection for you, I have always been sorry, most excellent Leo, that you were made pope in these times, for you are worthy of being pope in better days. The Roman Curia does not deserve to have you or men like you, but it should have Satan himself as pope, for he now actually rules in that Babylon more than you do.

The theologians commissioned by the pope to defend this corrupt system are at the forefront of Luther’s polemical and pedagogical concern. The importance that faith and works play throughout the Latin version of the freedom tractate reveal how Luther continues to battle at the frontline with the teaching of works-righteousness, a position in direct opposition to the reformers understanding of biblical faith.

Giovanni de Medici

For a Christian, as a free man, will say, “I will fast, pray, do this and that as men command, not because it is necessary to my righteousness or salvation; but that I may show due respect to the pope, the bishop, the community, a magistrate, or my neighbor, and give them an example. I will do and suffer all things, just as Christ did and suffered far more for me, although he needed nothing of it all for himself, and was made under the law for my sake, although he was not under the law”. Although tyrants do violence or injustice in making their demands, yet it will do no harm as long as they demand nothing contrary to God.

Luther suffers the pope as Christ suffered the lack of responsibility by the religious leaders of his own time. It has been said that the Freedom Tractate was written in the hope that reconcilia-

52 Virgil, Georgics, i. 514.
53 LW 31:337.
54 LW 31:370; WA 7:68.
tion was still possible between the reformer and the pope.\textsuperscript{55} It is seen as a standalone document written in a concilliar and warm tone toward the pope. However, it is our contention that this opinion may not represent the whole truth of the matter.\textsuperscript{56} The history of Luther’s struggle throughout 1520 and his intense debate with the controversialists lays the background to his Latin \textit{Freedom Tractate}. On the personal level, it is assumed that Luther appears congenial and pastorally concerned toward the pope, though, in view of this research, it seems the congeniality is more tongue in cheek and filled with sarcastic pity. This study asks the question, was Luther aware of the antics of Leo? It contends that after several years in office, Leo’s debauched lifestyle would have been widely known and we detect Luther’s sarcasm throughout the Letter to Leo on several occasions.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} See \textit{LW} 31:329. See the introduction to the \textit{Freedom Tractate} by Lambert and Grimm (\textit{LW} 31:329-331).

\textsuperscript{56} Hamm sees the \textit{Letter to Leo X} and the \textit{freedom tractate} as a compositional unity. “In their unity they bring a programmatic message to the Latin and German speaking public, to scholars and the unlearned, to clergy and laity”. We want to make the distinction though that the German version had been edited in such a way that it read easily and warmly toward the German laity. The German also had the intention of heading of several of the controversialist’s writings that were currently being circulated in German at that time. The Latin version is composed in a more polemical manner and the letter to Leo and various points throughout the tractate make that clear. The Latin version is a lot more detailed than the German, which fits well with our understanding that the Latin has a more polemical focus to it. It is easy to see that Luther had the roman controversialists at the forefront of his Latin version and the German laity in mind for the less detailed German version.

\textsuperscript{57} Leo’s personal life can only be eclipsed by his dubious administrative failure. It seems that Luther was well aware of Leo’s “selling off” of the Roman offices in his earlier work \textit{To the German Nobility} (\textit{LW} 44:142). Leo had created an astonishing 2000 more official benefices at twice the usual cost to finance his lavish appetite for pleasure. See J. L. Allen, Jr., “Power, secrecy feed conspiracy theories in Vatican City”, \textit{National Catholic Reporter} 34.35 (1998): 1.

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At a transpersonal level though, Luther is undiplomatic and uncompromising, for the papacy appears as the antichrist.

Unless faith is at the same time constantly taught, this happens easily and defiles a great many, as has been done until now through the pestilent, impious, soul-destroying traditions of our popes and the opinions of our theologians. By these snares numberless souls have been dragged down to hell, so that you might see in this the work of Antichrist.

In the letter to Leo X Luther says,

As you well know, there has been flowing from Rome these many years—like a flood covering the world—nothing but a devastation of men’s bodies and souls and possessions, the worst examples of the worst of all things. All this is clearer than day to all, and the Roman church, once the holiest of all, has become the most licentious den of thieves (Matthew 21:13), the most shameless of all brothels, the kingdom of sin, death, and hell. It is so bad that even Antichrist himself, if he should come, could think of nothing to add to its wickedness.

Hamm proposes a twofold approach to understanding how Luther relates to Leo X. He advocates that Luther attacks the

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59 LW 31:375; WA 7:71.
60 LW 31:336. See also LW 31:343. “If the pope rules, while Christ is absent and does not dwell in his heart, what else is he but a vicar of Christ? What is the church under such a vicar but a mass of people without Christ? Indeed, what is such a vicar but an antichrist and an idol? How much more properly did the apostles call themselves servants of the present Christ and not vicars of an absent Christ?”
61 Thus Luther differentiates not only between the person of the pope and his “unchristian” dependence on the Roman Curia, but also—what is much more essential—between his person and the authority of his papal office and the abundance of power that comes with it. His own Roman See, the cathedri Petri, is the worst ‘prison’ in which he, as a person is imprisoned. See B.
false and enslaving teaching of the pope and his defenders sharply while holding on to a certain level of pastoral sensitivity. It is true that the papal nuncio Miltitz did play a role in a plea for final reconciliation between Luther and Leo and probably encouraged Luther to put away the polemical axe, though, in our opinion, Luther seems to replace it with the assassin’s dagger. Luther speaks as one in close pastoral relationship to the pope while denouncing his wicked see. It is our intention to show that the freedom tractate has a polemical edge, yet is sophisticated in the sense that Luther does not hang himself politically or doctrinally. Luther is more concerned with those that represent the pope—by directly attacking him—rather than the pope himself and his personal understanding. Yet the pope can be cited as the one ultimately responsible for the collapse of Christian freedom.

You (Leo) would be poisoned before you could begin to issue a decree for the purpose of remedying the situation.

It is our contention that a failure to recognize these important distinctions about Luther’s personal view of the pope, will affect the illocutionary force of his theology and his desired perlocutionary effect for his German Christian audience. Luther Hamm, “Luther’s Freedom of a Christian and the Pope”, unpublished article (2007): 6.

62 In the period between 1518 and 1525, Luther had up to seventy authors writing against him adding up to approximately 120 separate writings against him at one time. It is in this context that Luther’s sharp axe-wielding polemic should be discerned. The difference in the freedom tractate is that Luther is more veiled in his attack on the terrifica tyrannis (ecclesial tyranny) of the controversialists, in favor of putting forth his basic reforming views. On Miltitz and Luther see the letter dated August 20, 1520. See P. Smith, *Luther’s Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters* (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), 348.

63 See LW 31:336. Luther knew about the attempt to poison Leo X in the summer of 1517. Leo’s behavior and administrative failure incensed those within his own ranks to turn against him.
wanted to convey a general council against Leo and his administration.

One of the insightful powers of Luther’s theology is his radical allegiance to Christ and his Holy Scriptures. When it came to the demand from Rome for Luther to deny Christ’s teaching on freedom and to blindly accept the situation for which Leo was responsible, Luther could only follow his scriptural conscience. What may have started as a pastoral concern for Leo X over against his “flatterers” had turned into a sarcastic pity by the latter half of (1520).

Luther’s insight into Christian freedom, speaks of God’s free and gracious justifying action and the radical freedom imputed and imparted to the Christian in faith. Against the manipulative greed of Leo, this freedom had a real and concrete actuality, based on scriptural faith, which is to be proclaimed and enacted as open for the benefit of all. Leo encouraged his theologians to act against Luther’s views of scriptural faith. The first of those directly involved with Luther at the time of his writing the *Freedom Tractate* is Prierias.

**Sylvester Mazzolini: Prierias (1456-1523)**
The first mention of Prierias by Luther in the *Letter to Leo X* reveals the utter contempt with which he is held by the reformer. Prierias is a vain and self-seeking defamer. The history between Prierias and Luther stretches back to 1517; the full length of the war to date with “the monsters of this age”. Prierias, a Dominican theologian, was called to Rome to teach Thomistic theology, and in late 1515 became “master of the sacred palace”, the pope’s court theologian. The archbishop of Mainz, Albrecht of Brandenburg, had a considerable interest in the propagation of indulgences in his territories, for he had incurred

64 LW 31:334.
65 LW 31:334.
substantial debt with his acquisition of several bishoprics. In late 1517 he wrote to the pope denouncing Luther’s attack on Johann Tetzel’s preaching of the saint Peter’s indulgence. Prierias was commissioned to examine Luther’s 95 theses in response to this letter by Albrecht.

The commissioning of Prierias was the initial step in the canonical procedure against one accused of heresy. At the time of Prierias’ appointment to the papal court he had acquired a considerable reputation; however this reputation had been severely spoiled throughout Germany by a juridical process against Reuchlin. Luther’s first contact with Prierias would already have been shaped by the Reuchlin debacle and after receiving Prierias’ response to the 95 theses—a report titled Dialogus (1518)—Luther was disgusted to the point of disobeying the summons to Rome that accompanied it. Luther had sixty days to appear before Rome, for Prierias had found several points in the theses in which Luther was accused of heresy.

Luther was disgusted by the fact that Prierias had shifted the focus away from an unresolved question—the role and legitimacy of indulgences—to one of papal authority. In writing the

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67 See Martin Brecht, Martin Luther. His Road to Reformation, 1521-1532 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981), 179.
68 See LW 48:45; Brecht, Martin Luther. His Road to Reformation, 1521-1532, 190-221; WA, Br, 1:114-115.
71 Prierias was berated by his contemporaries for overstepping his mark both theologically and diplomatically as opposed to the even-handedness of Cajetan. See David S. Yeago, “Gnosticism, Antinomianism and Reformation Theology”, Pro Ecclesia 2.1 (1996): 8.
72 In our opinion Luther maintained a desire to remain faithful to the Roman church during the publication of the 95 theses. We detect a shift in Luther after the confrontational hearing in Augsburg with Cajetan on October 12-14, 1518. In the letter to Leo X, Luther specifically blames Cajetan for the indulgence debacle and Luther’s continued accusation from the Roman court.
theses Luther had assumed the common belief that points of
document not fully ratified by council or canon law were open to
discussion. Prierias overlooked this and accused Luther of di-
rectly challenging the authority and majesty of the pope. Ta-
vuzzi sees this move by Prierias as a sophisticated theological
one.\textsuperscript{73} Wicks on the other hand states that Erasmus “Judged
Prierias’ critique of Luther arbitrary and extreme, and saw it
occasioning Luther’s reactive first step toward his contestation
of Papal authority.”\textsuperscript{74} We agree with Erasmus.

At the time of Luther’s theses on indulgence there was con-
siderable tension within the Roman church in regard to the in-
dulgence. None other than Cardinal Cajetan had expressed his
unhappiness with the state of indulgences.\textsuperscript{75} Bagchi cites Dolan
as agreeing that “many of the Romanists, such as Cochleucus
and the early John Eck, were reactionaries whose impact on the
reformation period was at best negligible and at worst exacer-
tory”.\textsuperscript{76} This disagreement among the Romanists places Prierias
in a context that was unprepared pastorally and theologically
for Luther. Their reaction to find more secure ground for po-
lemic based on papal authority pushed Luther in a direction he

In Luther’s view Cajetan could have put an end to the trouble at Augsburg
but failed to do so. Following this there was a gradual and hesitant move
away from Rome, yet still a respectful tone toward the pope. It is not until
1520 and the explosive Babylonian Captivity that Luther is finally forced by
the views of the contaversialists to move explicitly against the pontiff.
\textsuperscript{73} Tavuzzi, \textit{Prierias: The Life and Works of Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, 1456-
1527}, 106.
\textsuperscript{74} Wicks, “Prierias, Sylvester Mazzolini”, 341.
\textsuperscript{75} David V. N. Bagchi, \textit{Luther’s Earliest Opponents. Catholic Controversialists,
\textsuperscript{76} This thesis is given excellent foundation by David Yeago in his article “The
Catholic Luther”, \textit{First Things} 61 (1996):3. In it he says that “On the reading I
propose, the Reformation schism was brought about instead by contingent
human choices in a confused historical context defined less by clear and
principled theological argument (though that of course was present) than by
a peculiar and distinctively sixteenth-century combination of overheated
and ever-escalating polemics, cold-blooded \textit{Realpolitik}, and fervid apocalypt-
tic dreaming”.

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had not foreseen. Yet in making this move they “tragically under-estimated their opponents’ positions and were overconfident of their own”. Posterity seems to view Prierias in the light of Erasmus, who sees Luther driven early to a greater degree of division than he intended. More to the point, Prierias was berated by the Roman court because his Dialogus was rushed and full of weakness in contrast to Luther’s theses. Iserloh is more diplomatic:

In his Dialogus of 1518, his polemic was frivolous and clumsy. He showed little readiness to take up Luther’s concern but clearly grasped and stressed that the church, in both ecclesiastical and papal authority, was in question.

Luther received the Dialogus and citation to appear in Rome in Wittenberg on August 7 and rejoined with his Responsio. In it he appealed to the freedom of theologians to debate issues not yet decided by council or pope. He also discerned in Prierias a vain attempt at grandeur in his move from an issue yet to be consolidated to the charge of contesting papal primacy. Tavuzzi considers this as a ridiculous charge by Luther given that Prierias was 62 and beyond the days of glory seeking. Bagchi states convincingly that at 62 Prierias would have been at the peak of his career as a theologian and not exempt from the temptation to seek personal glory.

The juridical process proceeded into 1520 after a delay attributed to the priority of other matters. During 1520, in particular the months leading up to July, Prierias would have been in-

77 Bagchi, Luther’s Earliest Opponents. Catholic Controversialists, 1518-1525, 9.
78 E. Iserloh, J. Glazik and H. Jedin, History of the Church, vol. 5 (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 199. See also Luther’s letter to Sylvester Prierias at Rome, August 10, 1518 in P. Smith, Luther’s Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), 98.
79 WA 1:647.
81 Bagchi, Luther’s Earliest Opponents. Catholic Controversialists, 1518-1525, 21.
volved in the consistories that considered Luther’s case and eventually drafted the *Exsurge Domine*. Earlier in March 1520 Prierias published his three volume *Errata et argumenta*, and in it he defined several major doctrinal points against the reformers now, more consolidated position. The first point states that the “Pope as the head of the universal church (Roman Church) is the head of all churches”. The second is that the universal church cannot err when it decides on faith and morals, so also for a “true” council, meaning the pope cannot err in his official capacity. Third, he who does not hold to the teaching of the Roman Church and the pope as an infallible rule of faith, from which even the Holy Scripture draws its power and authority, is a heretic. Fourth, there follows a corollary that states “He who says in regard to indulgences that the Roman Church cannot do what she has actually done is a heretic”. Prierias’ contemporaries viewed this line of argumentation as extremist and denigrating of sacred Scripture. Yet the main

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83 Leo exploits this doctrine; see Pope Leo X to Frederic, July 8 1520. “Having convoked a council of our venerable brothers, and of others, including all who are expert in the Canon Law and the Holy Scripture, after thorough ventilation and discussion of the affair, at last, under the inspiration of the holy Ghost, who in such matters is never absent from the holy see, we issued a decree (*Exsurge Domine*)”. See Smith, *Luther’s Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters*, 335.

84 This type of statement infuriated Luther and for good reason. It is basically saying that every deed of the church is not to be subject to scrutiny and is without accountability. Obviously the conciliar movement at this time had been considerably weakened. Luther’s visit to Rome and the continuing reports of extreme debauchery of the popes themselves convinced him that the wool had been pulled over people’s eyes. In his work addressing the nobility of the German nation he exposes the fact that the church had robbed the people of its “rod” of accountability. See M. Tavuzzi, *Prierias: The Life and Works of Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, 1456-1527* (London: Duke University Press, 1997), 104.

controversialists at the time in whom we are interested shared Prierias’ convictions, some to a lesser, and some to a greater degree. One of those who shared his convictions to a greater degree was Johann Eck.

**Johann Eck (1486-1543)**

John Eck belonged to no particular order. He was a German Catholic theologian who had sympathies with the Franciscan school and nominalism, yet he claimed to be well versed in a great variety of schools in general. Luther had been on cordial terms with Eck until he sent Eck a copy of his 95 theses. Upon reading and making certain decisions about the theses Eck published a tract (*Obelisks*) against Luther without informing Luther of his intentions. Luther was appalled and responded with his *Asterixs*.  

Eck was an influential theologian and had published prior to the struggle with Luther. His *Chrysopassus* (1514) shows a clear preference for a works-based righteousness with which Luther would later have significant disagreement. Eck espoused positions on merit and freewill, and held that predestination to rewards and punishments is based on God’s foreknowledge of human merits and demerits. He was involved with Prierias in the drafting of the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, and was commissioned in 1520 as a special nuncio to publish the bull throughout the empire. In the letter to Leo, Luther says in regard to Eck that “Satan opened his eyes and filled his servant Johann Eck, a notable enemy of Christ, with an insatiable lust for glory”.  

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86 WA 1:281-314.
87 Luther’s 1520, *Treatise on Good Works* (*LW* 44:15-114; *WA* 6:202-276).
88 Wicks, “Eck, Johann”, 17.
89 *LW* 31:338. Luther also sees Eck as a boastful braggart, frothing and gnashing, puffed up with the prospect of abusing papal authority (*LW* 31:338). Another discreet backhand against the pope and his flatterers. The lust for glory that Luther perceived in his opponents would have aggravated his sense of loyalty to his already developed *theologia crucis*. See his 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation* thesis no. 21. “A theologian of glory calls evil good and
connection with Eck, Luther cynically and sarcastically claims that the pope’s salvation is in danger and that he is therefore forced to act as a called servant of the word to inform the pope of the error in his see and that this letter is a public bill of his divorce from Rome. The tension between Eck and Luther was exacerbated when the peace arrangement between them was broken with the Leipzig debate. What started out as a tractate arm wrestle between Eck and Luther’s colleague at the time, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, was soon to become what Eck admitted to be the aim all along, a public debate with Luther himself. Eck’s theological position is well aligned with Prierias’, though considerably more sophisticated.

For Eck the Roman church is the bride of Christ, and “if the church was wrong, how could Christ desert his bride for so long? If the church here is called the kingdom of heaven, how could error and falsehood reign in that kingdom for a thousand years?” Obviously a particular understanding of the visible kingdom underpins Eck’s theology. “The church never errs, because she is always ruled by the teaching authority of the Holy good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is” (LW 31:40).

90 Wicks, “Eck, Johann”, 338.
91 Maybe a veiled allusion to Exsurge Domine? See Wicks, “Eck, Johann”, 338.
92 Miltitz had played the diplomat between the pope, Eck and Luther. After Luther had published his 95 theses Eck had responded and a growing amount of antagonism between them placed Luther under considerable pressure in regard to his loyalty to the church. Miltitz had arranged for Luther to travel to Altenburg on January 4, 1519 to negotiate Luther’s position in regard to Tetzel’s accusations. Luther conceded that if his opponents would keep silent he would in the future do the same. See Brecht, Martin Luther. His Road to Reformation, 1521-1532, 268. Luther held to this position until he was forced to react to Eck’s publication of his theses planned for the Leipzig debate. “He believed that he and the university were obliged to respond, even though the subject considered was that of papal authority”. See Brecht, Martin Luther, 271.
Spirit”. The church has authority over the Scriptures—against which Luther based his reforming critique and paradigm—because the church is older than scripture, and the Scriptures are not authentic without the church’s authority. Eck seems to trump Luther on the basis of authority but Luther replied with erudition and composure. Eck also had recourse to the precedents set by the church in the condemnations of Huss and Wycliffe and charged Luther with the same heresy. This accusation was considered a joke by Eck’s fellow controversialist Emser, and Luther’s interpretation of the Bohemian situation was defended as sound.

Inevitably the debate rendered no official decision, for those entrusted with the decision—for either political or theological reasons—could not come to a conclusion. Regardless though, both sides claimed victory for their respective positions. Eck however enjoyed the spoils of the Leipzig patrons for many days after the debate, including the attentions of the city’s women. Luther and his team left with the customary case of

94 Ibid., 9.
95 Both Wycliffe (1330-1384), and Huss (1372-1415), had challenged the papal authority in regard to the indulgence problem. A problem that should not have been labelled as heretical but still open to debate as with Luther. Wycliffe states ‘I confess that the indulgences of the pope, if they are what they are said to be, are a manifest blasphemy, in as much as he claims a power to save men almost without limit.’ Huss states “In view of these things it is to be held that to rebel against an erring pope is to obey Christ the Lord”. See C. Lindberg, The European Reformations Sourcebook (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 15-16. Luther would surely have been aware of these positions, and cited the condemnation of Huss by the Council of Constance (1414-1418) against papal authority, as a precedent against papal supremacy.
96 There were many points in Huss’s theology that coincided with Luther’s own views. These points were biblically sound and unchallenged by many Roman scholars at the time.
97 Those entrusted to render a decision on the debate were the theologians and canon lawyers from Erfurt and Paris. They did not, or could not, reach a conclusion. Duke George forced a response, via bribery, from Louvain and Cologne in favor of Eck. See Brecht, Martin Luther. His Road to Reformation, 1521-1532, 338.
wine. Iserloh comments on Eck’s approach by saying that “despite an abundance of scriptural citation his encounter with them was not creative. He was unable to make them sufficiently fruitful in a religious and theological sense”.98 This lack of creativity was probably due his position on biblical authority.99

In the struggle with Luther, the debate came to focus sharply on the primacy of the Petrine office. To this Luther focused on the Sitz im Leben of the church as a direct and concrete example that spoke against the way the pope had exercised the office of Peter. Luther saw the office to be one of love and self sacrifice, not one of power, greed and immorality.100 This very theme would be spoken implicitly against the pope in the freedom tractate. In The Address to the German Nobility and The Babylonian Captivity, Luther explicitly develops his understanding of the gross abuse of the papist system. For Luther it stood in direct opposition to the biblical picture of Peter, a servant of the Servant-Lord. For Luther the church owed its existence solely to Christ its head.101 From this conviction stemmed Luther’s growing animosity toward the conception of the Church of Rome as a powerful ecclesiastical estate.102 He saw Roman power and

99 We mention this as a possible reason for Eck’s lack of creativity in the understanding that acceptance of ecclesial authority over the scriptures would force one into acquiescing to the traditional understanding of the texts and their assertions. In fact this is the basis for much of the controversialist approval of sovereign papal authority. Luther on the other hand, under the framework of oratio, meditatio and tentatio, had the Spiritus creator behind his exposition and application of the biblical texts because of his passive acceptance of the sole authority of Holy Scripture. See Oswald Bayer, Theology the Lutheran Way, Jeffrey Silcock and Mark C. Mattes trans. and ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 42-65.
100 Bagchi, Luther’s Earliest Opponents. Catholic Controversialists, 1518-1525, 47.
101 According to Luther the pope could only be the Vicar of Christ if Christ himself was absent (LW 31:342).
102 LW 44:311.

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supremacy derived more from papal decrees and politics than from the Holy Scriptures.

**Cardinal Tommaso de Vio Cajetan (1469-1534)**

Cajetan was a Dominican theologian with a preference for Thomistic and Aristotelian thought. In 1501 Cajetan was called to Rome to serve as the official Dominican liaison with the Curia Romana. From 1508 to 1518 he was master general for his order. While Cajetan has been praised by many for his personal sobriety and scholarly approach he is still to be clearly seen as a staunch defender of Roman papistic teaching.\(^{103}\) As early as 1511 we see in his mobilization of the Dominican order against the council of Pisa a clear advocacy for the superiority of the pope over general councils.\(^{104}\)

Having been named cardinal in 1517, he was sent as a papal legate to the imperial diet of Augsburg in mid-1518. It is in Augsburg that Cajetan and Luther first came into contact. Apart from the other purposes at Augsburg, one was the examination of Martin Luther as part of the canonical procedure resting on the accusation of error and heresy.\(^{105}\) Cajetan examined Luther’s writings and arrived at a differentiated judgment, for Cajetan could see much to be commended in the Augustinian monk’s theology.

While Cajetan only understood Luther’s views imperfectly, and regarded them as temerarious and mistaken, he was ready to recommend that they receive further discussion and discussion before a final judgment was reached.\(^{106}\)

Nevertheless, Cajetan defended Luther’s opponents in principal, and was therefore compelled to call Luther to account and


\(^{104}\) Ibid.

\(^{105}\) Ibid.

subsequently demanded Luther’s recantation, which Luther vigorously and famously denied three times.

From this point on, against the advice of his confessor, Staufnitz, Luther could not assent to the blind acceptance of scholastic and papal doctrine, and was incensed against Cajetan. Luther had promised to keep silent on the unresolved issues relating to indulgence, but saw Cajetan’s examination as going beyond his responsibility as papal legate and forcing him into a defensive position. At the time of his writing to Leo in 1520, Luther would say of Cajetan that he was unwise and unfortunate, unreliable and a seeker of personal glory. In the same letter Luther would explicitly state that all the blame was to be given to Cajetan,

Therefore Luther is not to blame for what followed. All the blame is Cajetan’s, who did not permit me to keep silent, as I at the time most earnestly requested him to do.107

Possibly the blame accorded to Cajetan by Luther lies in the fact that at the time of the Augsburg diet, Cajetan did not put to rest the unjust accusations of heresy and therefore is seen as the official figurehead in the papal controversy. In the near future it would be made clear that Cajetan was a vigorous supporter of papalism.

**Augustine Alfeld (b. 1480)**

Alfeld joined the battle after the Leipzig debate. As a Franciscan monk in the Leipzig monastery he would have been well aware of the proceedings of the debate. In January 1520 he promised Miltitz that he would write against Luther’s teaching although he was advised by his superiors not to get into an argument with Luther. After several delays he published his work *Concerning the apostolic see*. For Alfeld the primacy of the pope was at the heart of the Roman church. Any infringement upon this vital doctrine was absolute heresy. When Luther received Al-

107 LW 31:339.
feld’s work he considered it “so simpleminded, unspiritual, and crude that he would not waste any time in answering it”. That task was to fall to Luther’s famulus, which in itself was an obvious sign of disrespect. Lonicer produced a work in reply that was a “crude, insignificant, beginner’s work”. It is possible that Luther knew what state Lonicer’s reply would take, and if so, would only add to the insult. Luther seems to have been happy to leave it at that until he was informed that Alfeld had published his work in the common German language. Luther was outraged and immediately responded with his On the Papacy (June 1520), and then more fully with his Prelude to the Babylonian Captivity of the Church. Luther was concerned that this “ape-like” book would poison the minds of the laity and he is seen to be justified in his thinking because of statements from Alfeld reflected by the following.

Who needs money if he has the sacraments? Is it not true that the curia is immoral? Yes, but you must do as they say and not as they do.110

The rampant contradiction of this statement apparently flows through the entirety of Alfeld’s work and is interspersed with vile seething and personal attack.111 The Leipzig academic community was unhappy with Alfeld’s writing and was quick to distance itself from him, for Alfeld made assertions about several understandings of church practice that were already being challenged within the Roman church itself and the Leipzig

108 Brecht, Martin Luther. His Road to Reformation 1483-1521, 343.
109 Brecht, Martin Luther. His Road to Reformation 1483-1521, 344.
110 Bagchi, Luther’s Earliest Opponents. Catholic Controversialists, 1518-1525, 51.
111 Brecht comments that Alfeld’s attack on Luther was not because of questions of faith, “but because he (Luther) had infringed upon Rome’s power and financial interests”. See Brecht, Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521, 345. Against this claim of papal power, Luther cited Ulrich von Hutten’s publication that exposed Lorenzo Valla’s Donation of Constantine as a forgery. This document was essential to the papacy’s defense of political power. See Brecht, Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521, 346.
community did not want a fight with Luther. Luther’s ability to discern how the papal system had created for itself “walls of protection” played a significant role in dismantling the bondage it created for the people.\footnote{In his \textit{Address to the German Nobility}, Luther identified and tore down the three walls that prevented any accountability for the pope and his see (\textit{LW} 44:120).}

In his \textit{The Babylonian Captivity} Luther reached into the heart of the sacramental system, exposed and dismantled the utter corruption of God’s good and free word.

The first captivity of this sacrament,\footnote{Referring to the reception of one or both kinds.} therefore, concerns its substance or completeness, which the tyranny of Rome has wrested from us.\footnote{\textit{LW} 36:27.}

Luther says the second captivity of the sacrament, referring to transubstantiation, is less grievous to the conscience, but finds its corruption in the penalties for challenging the doctrine of transubstantiation itself. Luther considers it a matter of free choice, not a matter of condemnation and death.\footnote{\textit{LW} 36:28.} The mass, as sacrifice, is the most “wicked” abuse in Luther’s opinion. “This abuse has brought and endless host of other abuses in its train”.\footnote{\textit{LW} 36:35.}

By the time the freedom tractate was written the stakes were high and “all matters of faith” where on the table for reform. The conflict between Luther and the Roman controversialists reached its climax in the year 1520 with the freedom tractate, for there would be a decisive shift in focus for Luther after the diet of Worms and his subsequent condemnation. Yeago points to the ineptitude of Alfeld and Prierias at this time as provoking Luther’s final break with Rome. This is an overstatement, for despite Alfeld’s incompetence he still represented a system of thought and practice that for Luther could no longer be tole-
rated. Though Yeago,\textsuperscript{117} makes an important point about the theological confusion at the time of the church schism, he overstates his passion for the catholic Luther by downplaying the continual spiritual distress Luther had—due to tyrannical Roman practice—that could not be reconciled with his already considerable and growing biblical convictions. That Luther came to a contrasting theological position with the Roman church is comprehensively derived from his intense study of the Holy Scriptures. Broadly speaking, Luther never fit well with the Romanists despite his concern for the universality of the church. One of the key theological understandings of Luther’s, that contrasted the legalistic views of the papal controversialists, was his dynamic, threefold view of baptismal faith. We turn now, to Luther’s position on baptism, with the intention of highlighting it as an implicit paradigm by which Luther constructs his views of freedom in the tractate both in a negative sense against the papal controversialists and a positive sense, as an expression of genuine Christian freedom.

The Bondage of Spirit and Baptismal Liberation
At the beginning of the Latin version of the freedom tractate, Luther identifies “those” who had not experienced and tasted the courage of genuine Christian faith,

Many people have considered Christian faith an easy thing, and not a few have given it a place among the virtues. They do this because they have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith. It is impossible to write well about it or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one

\textsuperscript{117} “On the reading I propose, the Reformation schism was brought about instead by contingent human choices in a confused historical context defined less by clear and principled theological argument”. The distress Luther experienced was both personal-existential in the early struggle and social-existential in a theological sense as he became aware of the Romanist abuses and the self-justification for the abuse they championed with blind vigor. I agree with Yeago’s emphasis on Luther’s Catholic “turn” rather than it being a “sectarian” turn. See Yeago, “The Catholic Luther”, 38, 41.
time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a man when trials oppress him.118

“They” are the monsters, the literalists and subtle disputants with whom Luther had been in desperate struggle for nearly three years.119 For Luther, the experience of faith is more than a theoretical additive (or virtue) to the common teaching and practice of the Roman church. He also identifies, in the Latin proem, that his twofold theses on Christian freedom are an implication of how the spirit is conditioned,

I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.120

Throughout the Freedom Tractate, Luther’s distinctions about the condition of the anthropological spirit and the experience of faith are a deeply theological critique of a system that enslaved its participants from birth to the grave via the false theological and ecclesiastical heteronomy championed by scholastic theology.

The controversialists appealed to the scholastic tradition as the only means by which to understand ecclesial doctrine.121 According to the via antiqua, the tradition best represented by Thomas Aquinas, God’s dealings with the human race are totally predictable, and he will act and always act (de potentia ordinata) in the ways laid down by scripture, tradition and the sacramental system of the church.122 It is, therefore, impossible for any new teaching or practice to be introduced into the church for it stands against God’s predictability. Therefore, any change to the system was seen as outside the predictability of God and

118 LW 31:343; WA 7:49. Another veiled reference to the controversialists.
119 LW 31:234.
120 LW 31:344; WA 7:49.
121 Bagchi, Luther’s Earliest Opponents. Catholic Controversialists, 1518-1525, 34.
122 Ibid., 25.
therefore likely to be heresy. The via moderna (Ockham school), was in complete opposition to this and stated that God does as he pleases, short of acting contrary to his nature. Luther had deep problems with both points of view. Luther’s defiance of the Thomistic bondage of the controversialists is based on his discernment that Thomism—if viewed as the only way to discern Church theology and ethics—is another wall of bondage that dismisses papal accountability. For any other thought than that of the scholastic tradition is seen immediately as heresy and therefore, dismissed.\textsuperscript{123}

Yet, it is Luther’s contention that scholasticism’s influence on the sacramental system encourages anything but “courageous” and experiential faith. The Ex opere operato placed the emphasis on the correct performance of an act of grace already accomplished and finished without reference to any faith or lack of faith on the part of the person for whom it is performed.\textsuperscript{124} The papal system therefore relied on the bondage of conscience to drive its sacrificial greed—via the “second plank” penitential laws—as people paid for the sacrament as an act without genuine faith. In his Babylonian Captivity it is the papal law that deprives the conscience of liberty,

I lift my voice simply on behalf of liberty and conscience, and I confidently cry: No law, whether of men or of angels, may rightfully be imposed upon Christians without their consent, for we are free of all laws.\textsuperscript{125}

The same is reflected throughout the Freedom Tractate,

On the other hand, use your freedom constantly and consistently in the sight of and despite the tyrants and the stubborn so that

\textsuperscript{123} Rubeus stated that scholastic authorities were not merely legitimate; they were the only means of presenting a reasoned account of the Christian faith. See Bagchi, Luther’s Earliest Opponents. Catholic Controversialists, 1518-1525, 72.
\textsuperscript{124} LW 36:37.
\textsuperscript{125} LW 36:72.
they also may learn that they are impious, that their laws are of no avail for righteousness, and that they had no right to set them up.\textsuperscript{126}

Luther’s opponents saw any deviation from the laws championed by scholastic theology as Bohemian;\textsuperscript{127} in fact Prierias identified the source of all Luther’s errors in his rejection of Aristotle and also of Aquinas.\textsuperscript{128} In this regard, Bagchi correctly recognizes a fundamental difference in methodological approach between Luther and his opponents.\textsuperscript{129}

The controversialists had acquired a long history of synthetically compounding its authoritative theological sources upon one another. They were able to defend their position by moving in degrees. Luther took his analytical-reductionist razor and cut through to the heart of church practice and doctrine with his \textit{Sola scriptura} principle. It is at this point that the controversialists spoke mockingly of Luther’s “Pauline theology” and the charge that “all heretics” take the path of scripture alone.\textsuperscript{130} Despite the mockery, Luther’s \textit{Scripture alone} principle would become an unshakable foundation for his reforming critique and his alternative positions. The Scripture principle and the efficacy of the “word” are fundamental to his exhortation in the freedom tractate.\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{126} LW 31:374; WA 7:71.

\textsuperscript{127} Referring to the condemnation of the Bohemian church and their “Hussite” views, for which Huss had been unjustly condemned and killed. It was later seen as a clear precedent for the disavowal of all thought in opposition to scholastic dogma. Leo X appeals to this precedent as a means of compelling Frederick the wise to capture and deliver Luther to Rome. See Letter from Leo to Frederick July 8, 1520, “(Luther is) moved by ambition to resuscitate the old heresies of the Wyclifites, Hussites and Bohemians”. Smith, \textit{Luther’s Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters}, 334.

\textsuperscript{128} Bagchi, \textit{Luther’s Earliest Opponents. Catholic Controversialists}, 1518-1525, 76.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 80.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 90.

\textsuperscript{131} LW 31:345; WA 7:50.
At a latter point this research will bring to light the expectation Luther had toward the enactment of genuine Christian freedom; that “being” (substance) determines the integrity of the act. Therefore, the phenomenon of acts—whether good deeds or mortal sins—can reveal something of the nature (integrity) of the heart (the inner person). The freedom tractate is crystal clear that freedom in lordship and servitude express themselves in certain ways.\textsuperscript{132} It is in this light that he sees the monstrosity of the Roman see and their disregard for the spiritual conscience. Its extravagant greed reveals the heart of one that is anti-Christ. When Luther was prompted to act against the poisonous work of the “goat at Leipzig”, he set about addressing the fundamental contradictions between his reading of Holy Scripture and with papal authority. Alfeld had championed the authority of the papal see over both the spiritual and temporal estates and claimed that this authority was divinely given. Luther pointed out that the papacy’s actions betrayed an authority of a more dubious and diabolical nature.\textsuperscript{133} Simply by pointing out the magnificent money-making machine that had become the Roman church—and the lack of giving it had embraced—convinced Luther that it had long since dismissed its divine and biblical imperative. Luther launches into a well-informed account of the many money-making institutions (indulgences being one of many) that exposed the greed and hunger of the papacy and its administrative imposition.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{132} See exposition of Matthew 7:15-20; LW 31:362; WA 7:62. It is important to note that Luther has an inner to outer progression on how the soul affects acts. Yet the reversal is not true. Outward acts do not affect the heart (\textit{coram Deo}). The only thing or being capable of external to internal efficacy is the word of God (\textit{LW} 31:345).

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{LW} 39:59.

\textsuperscript{134} This accounts for the fact that Luther was aware of the abuses of Rome and of Leo X himself. It highlights our point that where some see pastoral concern for Leo by Luther, we see a biting sarcasm directed—although in a veiled way—toward the ridiculous (bordering on absurd) nature of Pope Leo X.
The formal nature of the indulgence controversy was instigated by the bishop of Mainz’s lust for power and his acquirement of eight bishop’s pallium which cost an exorbitant amount. To pay for this power he asked for an indulgence, which Tetzel was to promote throughout his jurisdiction under an agreement with Leo that was seen apart of the indulgence directed to the building of the Basilica. Luther discerned here the false heteronomy of the clergy over the laity in the sense that the clergy were profiteering for personal gain and the laity were forced to submit to this state of affairs.

Part of the extensive money making machinery of the papacy, in addition to the St. Peter’s indulgence, where the papal months, annates, pallium and the creation of multiple appointments, all of which were lucrative for the papacy. On July 31 Leo X created thirty one new cardinals for which he received 300,000 ducats,\(^{135}\) and it is in this light that Luther saw the fulfillment of prophecy from Daniel (Daniel 11:39, 43) “The antichrist must seize the treasures of the earth”.\(^{136}\) In light of this, the freedom tractate has a twofold edge. First, how the Christian may be free from the dominion of the anti-Christ policies of the papacy, and second, how a correct doctrine of freedom surpasses the papal justification of the controversialis.

On August 18, 1520 Luther published his *Address to the German Nobility*. Primarily in conflict with Prierias, Luther laments “and now farewell, unhappy, hopeless, blasphemous Rome”.\(^{137}\) Luther had come to the sound resolution that the state had to

\(^{135}\) J. L. Allen, Jr. “Power, Secrecy Feed Conspiracy Theories in Vatican City”, *National Catholic Reporter* 34.35 (1998): 1, estimates that Leo X spent over 5 million ducats during his 9 year papacy and left it another 1 million ducats in debt. Most of this money was spent on himself with unreserved opulence. For example he would frequently give 65 course meals in which nightingales or naked boys would appear out of puddings. In comparison to his predecessor, Leo created an extra 2150 saleable offices during his term. In comparison, Julian II’s creation of 650 offices seems insignificant, yet at the time Julian was deemed “greedy” by his critics.

\(^{136}\) *To the German Nobility, LW* 44:141.

\(^{137}\) *LW* 44:118.
intervene in the ecclesiastical abuse of the church, especially since the Germans bore the burden of Leo’s expensive habits.\textsuperscript{138}

He holds out a reward of sorts by stating that,

> When necessity demands it, and the pope is an offence to Christendom, the first man who is able should, as a true member of the whole body, do what he can to bring about a truly free council.\textsuperscript{139}

In his appeal for such an intervention, Luther removes the walls that protected the papacy from criticism and reform. The first was the removal of the distinction between clergy and laity. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers placed the entire ecclesial system on the same level as the laity (1 Peter 2:9).\textsuperscript{140} The laity was now encouraged to stand as sons and daughters, justified by faith on the basis of Scripture. This appealed to the German nobles for political as well as spiritual reasons, for the Gravamina movement had been aware of the unjust state of affairs in regard to its overwhelming financial responsibility to Rome.\textsuperscript{141} Second, Luther directly challenged the belief that the pope was the only one who could rightly interpret the Scriptures. The priesthood of all believers played a significant role in this as Luther reinterpreted the Petrine succession and the role of the office of the keys. Luther placed biblical interpretation into the hands of the whole church. In doing this Luther was challenged by the papists with the threat that if the scripture were to be placed into the hands of the people, then it would lead directly to increased laxity and immorality. It can be stated

\textsuperscript{138} LW 44:120.  
\textsuperscript{139} LW 44:121.  
\textsuperscript{140} LW 44:127.  
\textsuperscript{141} The Gravamina nationis Germanicae, was a list of abuses presented to every diet in the German empire. It was particularly focused on the Roman church were the papacy was seen as an enemy for robbing the German nation of its wealth, freedom and dignity. See Bernhard Lohse, Martin Luther: An Introduction to his Life and Work (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 10, 127. The burden placed on the German people by the papacy was very heavy and out of proportion to other territories, especially during the papal rule of Leo X.

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though that the level of laxity and immorality at the time under the papacy, was at a particularly immoral peak.\(^{142}\) Third, Luther demolished the understanding that the pope had sole right and authority over church councils. With this authority the pope could dismiss any challenge by a council if it should actually take the risk of convening without his approval.

Luther appeals to the nobility with the accusation that the papacy has cunningly stolen “our” three rods from us that they may go unpunished.\(^{143}\) They have therefore taken away our freedom without any proof from Scripture.\(^{144}\) “We ought not let the Spirit of freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17) to be frightened off by the fabrication of the popes”.\(^{145}\) Against Prierias’ claim for papistic monarchy and dominion, Luther states that the “pope’s office should be nothing else but to weep and pray for Christendom and to set an example of utter humility”\(^{146}\) a theme that plays a major role in the freedom tractates discussion of servanthood and the outer man.\(^{147}\) A woodcut from this time reflects the problem Luther had with the papacy’s doctrines of freedom. One side of the woodcut pictures Christ washing the disciple’s feet, and on the other, the pope on his magnificent throne is having his feet kissed by the kings and princes of the earth.

After Luther demolishes the walls of papal self-protection, he drives at its heart, its sacrificial system. Luther wrote his *Prelude to the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* between four to six

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\(^{142}\) The emphasis given to the free interpretation of the Scriptures did lead to dramatic problems and will be addressed in relation to the radical reform movement. It reveals, what will become, the *Danger of Freedom*.

\(^{143}\) *LW* 44:126.

\(^{144}\) *LW* 44:133.

\(^{145}\) *LW* 44:135.

\(^{146}\) *LW* 44:140.

\(^{147}\) An interesting sentiment in light of the fact that when an assassination attempt on Leo failed, he hired an assassin himself to exact revenge for the attempt on his life. Allen, “Power, Secrecy Feed Conspiracy Theories in Vatican City”. Ironic given that Leo deemed himself “servant of servants”.

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weeks before his freedom tractate. In this work Luther exposes three main points of slavery imposed by the Roman church. First, is its withholding of the cup from the laity, second, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and third, the Mass as a sacrifice. In his critique of the sacramental system he is lenient toward all nonessentials, but inexorable toward everything truly essential, that is, scriptural. Erasmus plainly saw that after the publication of this work the breach with Rome was irreparable. For Luther, the denial of the cup for the laity was wicked, wicked in the sense that it had become an unscriptural law that should have been a matter of free choice and open to discussion. On the basis of his understanding of patience and the weaker brother, Luther proposed that the sacrament of both kinds be open to individual choice, yet for those that forbid the choice nothing is left for them but wrath.

If they wrest this right from the laity and deny it to them by force, they are tyrants; but the laity are without fault whether they lack one kind or both kinds.

This understanding of choice and force will become more prominent when we discuss Luther’s theology of freedom at work in the struggle with the radical reformers. It is helpful to recognize here the early development of the sine vi sed verbo which will play a major role in 1522 and 1525.

An interesting irony attached to the background of this work is that when Henry VIII received this work he wrote a book in opposition to it. The book so pleased the pope that he granted ten years indulgence to all who read it (LW 36:9). An interesting illustration justifying Luther’s judgment on the pope’s flippant manhandling of forgiveness.

LW 36:7. The principle of what is essential and non-essential is well developed and brought to bear on the Wittenberg Iconoclastic crisis of 1522. See The Eight Wittenberg Sermons, LW 51:70-100.

LW 36:9.

LW 36:27.

LW 36:27.
The problem with transubstantiation is rooted in the denial of the word of promise to the laity. Luther holds the doctrine itself to be a matter of choice but states his own position against transubstantiation, for it is a figment of the mind that rests neither on the Scripture or reason. The denial of the word of promise stems from the practice of the day where the priest uttered the words of institution in whispers and in high Latin. Behind the doctrine of transubstantiation is a philosophical edifice that speaks of accidents and the like that try to rationalize the actual change from bread and wine into flesh and blood. The communion service was therefore dependent on the papal system and disregarded simple, liberating faith. For Luther, both natures are simply there in their entirety, as per Christ.

The Mass as sacrifice is the practice which most grieved Luther and his concepts of liberating reform. Because of the *Ex opera operato*, the mass had been turned into mere merchandise, a market, and a profit-making business. One did not even have to be present at the service to acquire the benefits. One was not even questioned about belief or the lack of it. In fact if you were wealthy enough you could pay in advance and have the priest say mass for you, your family and your deceased relatives without the exercise of, or experience of faith. Luther directly challenged this abuse on the ground that the word of God and his sacramental grace are promises. They are gifts. How then can we offer God anything in regard to his provision except the response of faith? This promise of faith is for Luther a personal and experiential affair,

Therefore, let this irrefutable truth stand fast: where there is a divine promise, there everyone must stand on his own feet, his own

153 *LW* 36:30.
154 *LW* 36:31.
155 *LW* 36:35.
156 *LW* 36:35.
personal faith is demanded; he will give an account for himself and bear his own load (Galatians 6:5).\textsuperscript{157}

For Luther the doctrine and reality of baptism is the key foundational presupposition to denying the sacrificial mass. He states thankfully that this doctrine had been hardly touched or abused by the papacy, yet needs to outline his understanding of baptism in relation to the Roman sacrificial system.\textsuperscript{158} For Luther the enslaving practice of the sacrificial mass placed the laity at the mercy of the Romanist clergy and ultimately gave authority to the pope. The freedom bestowed by baptism is for Luther the real source of Christian dependence and freedom of the conscience, because it does away with the “second plank” penitential system that gave the papacy so much of its control over the conscience of the laity.

Baptism is a life time promise, to be nourished and strengthened until death by continual remembrance. Therefore, when we rise from our sins and repent, we are merely returning to the power and the faith of baptism from which we fell.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{157} LW 36:49.

\textsuperscript{158} The lack of polemical controversy over the doctrine of baptism will presuppose our contention that for Luther it was taken as a given in his freedom tractate. It also has a polemical edge in that he did not want to give the controversialists room to appeal to baptism without recognizing the importance of faith alone. There is an unmistakable lack of explicit baptismal ontology in the freedom tractate that leaves the work as a whole underdeveloped, though underdeveloped for a reason. It will be our intention to bring this important aspect into the discussion of freedom according to Luther.

\textsuperscript{159} LW 36:59. In regard to Luther’s \textit{reditus baptismus} it is perplexing to read that Althaus has mistakenly created a division between Luther and Paul over the nature of baptism. Althaus thinks Paul has only a past tense view of baptism and that the present continuous and eschatological view of Luther is incorrect. ‘I can find no single passage in Luther corresponding to Paul’s statement that we have died with Christ in Baptism. See Paul Althaus, \textit{The Theology of Martin Luther} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 357. Kleinig easily dispatches with Althaus’ errant view (J. Kleinig personal e-mail dated
This theology stood against the stranglehold the Roman system had over excommunication and its political and economic leverage. For Luther says,

You see how rich a Christian is, that is, one who has been baptized! Even if he would, he could not lose his salvation, however much he sinned, unless he refused to believe.160

This understanding of baptismal freedom stood directly against the papal claim to discern a person’s salvation or condemnation according to the papal law’s systematizing of penance and satisfaction. The liberation of conscience before the mountainous edifice of papal law and intimidation is a decisive ontological presupposition for Luther and his reforming theology. It cuts through the synthetic compounding of laws and loopholes that bind the conscience. Luther’s analytical methodology provides a simple and profound freedom that states that “the baptismal vow is the only vow”.161 There is no “second plank”.162 In one broad sweep Luther clears the decks of all unnecessary law and bondage and places baptismal union with Christ as the foundation for a life of genuine Christian freedom. Against the power of this restatement of biblical theology, the controversialists would founder upon the question of papal or scriptural authority.

**Baptism as the Concrete Ground of Freedom**

*The Babylonian Captivity* was published a month before *The Freedom Tractate*. In it Luther exposes the sacramental system of the Roman church to a scathing critique. One ray of hope shines through when he comes to consider baptism.


160 LW 36:60.
161 LW 36:75.
162 As per Jerome, see J. D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1994), 134-137. See also LW 36:60-62.
Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to the riches of his mercy (Ephesians 1:3, 7) has preserved in his church this sacrament (baptism) at least, untouched and untainted by the ordinances of men, and has made it free to all nations and classes of mankind and has not permitted it to be oppressed by the filthy and godless monsters of greed and superstition.\textsuperscript{163}

Luther here is referring to infant baptism in the polemical context against those filthy and godless monsters—the same monsters mentioned in the letter to Leo X accompanying the Freedom Tractate.\textsuperscript{164} Luther is not so confident in the case of adult baptism though, for he sees it as being “quenched by Satan in adults who do not call to mind their own baptism … it has been placed in competition with works”.\textsuperscript{165} Baptism and its relationship to the faith vs. works battle stands as one of the centerpieces of Luther’s arsenal against the controversialists and is a presuppositional framework for his development of Christian liberty in the Freedom Tractate.

When Luther came to frame his understanding of baptismal freedom in the tractate, it is clear that it had been well developed in his polemical writings during 1520. The freedom tractate is largely about the relationship of faith and works with faith being mentioned 161 times and works 189 times in contrast to freedom 18 times and servitude 15. At the core of Luther’s freedom tractate, in his effort to place faith and works in their right relationship, he exposes a profound understanding of Christian being. He states with great precision that what a Christian is will conform to what a Christian will do. At the beginning of the Latin and German of the freedom tractate Luther

\textsuperscript{163} LW\textsuperscript{36}:57.

\textsuperscript{164} “Living among the monsters of this age with whom I am now for the third year waging war, I am compelled occasionally to look up to you, Leo, most blessed father, and to think of you. Indeed, since you are occasionally regarded as the sole cause of my warfare, I cannot help thinking of you” (\textit{LW} 31:334).

\textsuperscript{165} LW\textsuperscript{36}:58.
builds on this very understanding. He states that his intention is to reveal thoroughly what a Christian is. His famous twofold thesis on freedom is a statement on Christian ontology, what a Christian is,

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.\textsuperscript{166}

It is a complex of diversity that goes beyond the normal twofold schema, for a Christian is a free lord and a dutiful servant, yet he/she is also spiritual and bodily, this is what a Christian is.\textsuperscript{167} It speaks of a fourfold relationship that includes harmony: lord-servant\textsuperscript{168} and conflict: inner-outer.\textsuperscript{169} It is our contention that this ontological state of being is in fact derived from Luther’s baptismal theology. What seems to stand against this thesis is the fact that baptism is only explicitly mentioned once in the

\textsuperscript{166} LW 31:344; WA 7:49.

\textsuperscript{167} LW 31:344; WA 7:50.

\textsuperscript{168} The reason we see the lord-servant relationship as a harmony is because it is an imputed state of being. It is what a Christian is as specifically defined in Luther’s freedom thesis. It therefore belongs to the spiritual person. Lordship and servanthood are not in conflict, otherwise Luther’s whole programme of freedom falls to bits. The conflict, \textit{Anfechtung}, comes when the new person as a spiritual lord and servant come to battle the flesh nature of the old person (\textit{LW} 31:344). This is taken up by Luther in relation to his exposition and application of Galatians 5:17 (\textit{LW} 31:344). He also appeals to the twofold nature of Christ in Philippians 2:6-7. The form of a servant is not seen as a conflict of nature within Jesus. The new life of the Christian is one of lordship and servanthood in regard to its state of being. As the spirit and word move the Christian in conformity with Christ to resist the flesh nature, the lord-servant paradox will express itself in worship and acts of love. If the lord-servant relationship were to be seen as an antithesis, then the struggle between sonship (perfect lords) and servanthood (perceived as the negative) would imply that servanthood is killed off with the flesh nature in the struggle for the spirit filled life. This is not what Luther is driving at in the freedom tractate. He sees the superabundance of faith dominating the flesh nature to the point that lordship and servanthood become active in sacrificial love.

\textsuperscript{169} LW 31:350; WA 7:50.
whole of the tractate.\textsuperscript{170} Yet most of the tractate is taken up with what a Christian is. For example the three powers of faith in the section dedicated to the inner life of a Christian speak of the profound ontological union, honor and freedom that come from faith.

From what has been said it is easy to see from what source faith derives such great power and why a good work or all good works together cannot equal it. No good work can rely upon the Word of God or live in the soul, for faith alone and the Word of God rule in the soul. Just as the heated iron glows like fire because of the union of fire with it, so the Word imparts its qualities to the soul.\textsuperscript{171}

When, however, God sees that we consider him truth and by the faith of our heart pay him the great honor which is due him, he does us that great honor of considering us truthful and righteous for the sake of our faith. Faith works truth and righteousness by giving God what belongs to him. Therefore God in turn glorifies our righteousness.\textsuperscript{172}

The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh (Ephesians 5:31–32).\textsuperscript{173}

These three passages reflect the baptismal change in a Christian’s ontological being. First, faith affects the condition of the soul. Second, God imputes righteousness and third, the soul is united in royal marriage.

The section on the outer life of works that flow from righteousness is derived specifically from Luther’s understanding of the superabundance of union with Christ; this union is de-

\textsuperscript{170} LW 31:347; WA 7:52.  
\textsuperscript{171} LW 31:349; WA 7:53.  
\textsuperscript{172} LW 31:351; WA 7:54.  
\textsuperscript{173} LW 31:351; WA 7:54.
fined in the *Freedom Tractate* as the faith-baptism relationship.\(^{174}\)

It is my opinion that the lack of a more explicit baptismal theology—as opposed to Luther’s previous writings of 1520—in the tractate, is due to the polemical nature of this writing with the Roman controversialists. For Luther already had at this point a high regard for efficacious nature of baptism, a regard that continued to grow exponentially until his death.

In *The Babylonian Captivity* Luther has already identified one of the poles in his struggle with the defenders of papal supremacy as being the correct recognition and honor paid to the baptismal state of being. Luther says that the controversialists,

> With such wicked teaching they delude the world, and not only take captive, but altogether destroy the sacrament of baptism, in which the chief glory of our conscience consists.\(^ {175}\)

The papal Magesterium had dogmatised Jerome’s idea of penance as a “second plank” to be travelled in the Christian life and that baptism was relegated to a past event of no real present significance. The papacy could therefore enslave its constituents to a lifetime of being bound to their penitential system. For Luther, a return to a true understanding of baptism does away with the idea of a “second plank” altogether and he states that the first plank or the ship of baptism is sound and seaworthy and in no need of other devices.

Trigg says that “Where baptism is lacking in Luther’s earlier writings it must be assumed”.\(^ {176}\) We agree with Trigg on this point, but why? Jetter in Trigg states he can find no external factor to explain the absence of Luther’s baptismal theology.\(^ {177}\) He

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\(^{174}\) “Therefore true faith in Christ is a treasure beyond comparison which brings with it complete salvation and saves man from every evil, as Christ says in the last chapter of Mark (16:16): ‘He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned’. See *LW* 31:347.

\(^{175}\) *LW* 36:60.

\(^{176}\) Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, 78.

\(^{177}\) Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, 124.
lists four tentative possibilities based around Luther’s theological upbringing.\(^ {178} \) Trigg however says there are three real possibilities for the absence of explicit baptismal references, first, that Luther was conscious or unconscious about downgrading it in his theological hierarchy\(^ {179} \), second, that baptism is non-controversial and marginalized not because it is peripheral but because it had not yet been questioned\(^ {180} \) and third that Luther’s reverence for baptism produced hesitation in making it an object of questioning and debate.\(^ {181} \) Trigg has a preference for number two.\(^ {182} \) Number three is obviously wrong; for Luther’s reverence for things made him all the more vocal if they were being abused.\(^ {183} \) Trigg’s preference for number two is in my understanding incorrect, because The Babylonian Captivity had already—prior to the tractate—brought forward Luther’s struggle against the abuse of baptism and laid the responsibility for that abuse directly at the controversialist’s (the filthy monsters) feet.\(^ {184} \)

However, it is, therefore, my contention that the explicit lack of Luther’s baptismal theology in the Freedom Tractate is a conscious act on his part (Trigg’s number one). Luther does not want to concede polemical ground before the controversialists—with their abuse of the works-faith issue by an appeal to

\(^ {178} \) According to Jetter they are first, that Luther was a nominalist and due to the potentia ordinata, could in no way diminish the sacramental tradition; second, that German mysticism is a possible cause of devaluation of the sacraments in the young Luther; third, a disregard for baptism due to the influence of the Brothers of the Common life; and fourth the influence of Luther’s confessor and vicar-general, Staupitz. See Trigg, Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther, 124-128.

\(^ {179} \) Trigg, Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther, 131.

\(^ {180} \) Ibid., 131.

\(^ {181} \) Ibid., 131.

\(^ {182} \) Ibid., 132.

\(^ {183} \) “Speaking now in behalf of the church’s liberty and the glory of baptism, I feel myself duty bound to set forth publicly the counsel I learned under the Spirit’s guidance” (LW 36:77).

\(^ {184} \) LW 36:60.
the fact that they also have been baptized and therefore can precede on the basis of a “second plank” theology that majors on penance over against existential faith. That they also have the same benefits and gifts imputed to them through baptism without the need for an active faith. The over abundance of the faith-works issue throughout the tractate on freedom gives clear indication that the matter of faith is still the major point of contention in Luther’s battle against a system that enslaves through its dependence on its penitential system at the expense of the true state of Christian being. Luther had said in the *Babylonian Captivity* that,

Our whole life should be baptism, and the fulfilling of the sign or sacrament of baptism, since we have been set free from all else and given over to baptism alone, that is to death and resurrection.\(^1\)

By the time Luther wrote the freedom tractate he was fully aware that to relegate baptism to the past and not have it as a preset continuous factor in the life of a Christian was to undermine the gospel. For Luther there is a direct correlation between baptism and the present-continuous nature of Christian freedom.\(^2\)

Above it was stated that the Roman Catholic penitential system had taken spiritual and temporal authoritative control over the whole of human life—from birth to the grave. Luther had stated emphatically—prior to 1520—that the whole of Christian life should be controlled by baptism and the implications for

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\(^1\) *LW* 36:70. The vehemence of his language in 1520 is a sign of a recent discovery of truth, which a few months earlier was only half perceived—the freedom of the sinner justified by God’s grace in Christ is a baptismal freedom. See Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, 149.

\(^2\) Trigg says of Luther’s baptismal belief that, “to marginalize baptism by confining it to the past is to destroy the gospel, because the gospel of forgiveness through faith in Christ and the covenant of baptism are one and the same thing”. See Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, 149.
that life. The reason we propose for the lack of explicit baptismal reference in the freedom tractate is what we consider to be a profound attack on the papal system in his writing of the freedom tractate in the manner that he does. Although Luther could say in his latter period that God is able to save without baptism, this saying must be seen in relation to how Luther can make distinctions within Christian necessities, “but in the church we must judge and teach, in accordance with God’s ordered power, that without baptism no one is saved”. This teaching of Luther’s stands directly against the “second plank” theology of the Roman theologians, but he did not want to guide the controversialists back to the saving efficacy of baptism without first destroying the “second plank” and reinstating justification by faith as the primary and incontestable necessity for Christian salvific freedom. He therefore refrained from stating explicit baptismal reference in favor of continuing to develop his faith-works reform.

Implied Baptism

There is a compelling correspondence in what Luther says about the power of faith in the Freedom Tractate and the significance of baptism. At the beginning of the tractate Luther points out a fourfold distinction in the Christian and when he moves to the more obvious aspect of this state of being, he focuses on the twofold nature of people. In the conflict between the spirit and the flesh (Galatians 5:17) it is what the new person is and

187 Luther’s 1519 Holy Sacrament of Baptism, “Therefore the life of a Christian, from baptism to grave, in nothing else than the beginning of a blessed death” (LW 35:31). Schlink adds, “The command to walk in the newness of life does not abrogate the new life which God has created through Baptism, but it asks for the Yea of the baptized to this divine deed. In none of (the) imperatives does God demand anything different from what He has already bestowed in Baptism”. See E. Schlink, The Doctrine of Baptism (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 55.

188 LW 3:274.

189 LW 31:344; WA 7:50.
is becoming and will eventually be, that serves as the blueprint for what conformity to Christ and the service to the neighbor look like for Luther. His *simul iustus et peccator* is derived directly from his now/not yet baptismal eschatology with which he had already developed prior to 1520.\(^{190}\)

The acknowledgement of Luther’s doctrine of sin—fundamental to Luther’s view of freedom—at the front of and woven throughout the *Freedom Tractate*, stands against the idea held by the papacy that innate concupiscence was not really sin.

Let us start, however, with something more remote from our subject, but more obvious. Man has a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily one. According to the spiritual nature, which men refer to as the soul, he is called a spiritual, inner, or new man. According to the bodily nature, which men refer to as flesh, he is called a carnal, outward, or old man, of whom the Apostle writes in II Corinthians 4(16), “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day”. Because of this diversity of nature the Scriptures assert contradictory things concerning the same man, since these two men in the same man contradict each other, “for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh”, according to Galatians 5(17).\(^{191}\)

The Roman view—that *mortals interiora* had no salvific implications after baptism—was eventually made into a decree in 1546 at the council of Trent. It basically posited that there was no such thing as internal sin and sharply focused on the external nature of sinful acts. Luther recognized in this a foundational collapse of a genuinely scriptural theological system. With this over-realized eschatology, the papacy could determine what

\(^{190}\) “These people err greatly who think that through baptism they have become wholly pure. They go about in their ignorance and do not slay their sin. They simply persist in it, and so make baptism of no effect. They continue to rely on a few external works”. See Luther’s 1519, *Holy Sacrament of Baptism, LW* 35:36.

\(^{191}\) *LW* 31:344; *WA* 7:50.
was and was not actual sin. In doing so it did away with inner Anfechtung, which intentionally reveals God’s active presence against the flesh nature in the divine act of conformitas Christi. Luther says from the outset of his Freedom Tractate that,

Many people have considered Christian faith an easy thing, and not a few have given it a place among the virtues. They do this because they have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith. It is impossible to write well about it or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a man when trials oppress him.\(^{192}\)

At this early stage, Luther sees that the “only” sure and concrete form of faith in this now/not yet tension—for the struggle between spirit and flesh—is the concrete and existential sacramental observance of baptism. For Luther it is not that we do not sin but that sin and its guilt are no longer imputed to the faithful.\(^{193}\) We are freed spiritually inside. The inner man is untouched by the external practices of the church.\(^{194}\) Luther’s developed understanding of the declarative and factitive signi-

\(^{192}\) LW 31:343; WA 7:49.

\(^{193}\) Luther held this view throughout his career “After baptism original sin is like a wound which has begun to heal … it remains in the baptized until their death, although it is in the process of being rooted out. It is rendered harmless, and so it cannot accuse or condemn us”. See Table Talk, 1531, LW 54:20.

\(^{194}\) At the time Luther wrote the freedom tractate, the theology contained within it is reflected in his second Psalms lectures at the time. His exposition of Psalm One reflects a direct correlation between his teaching and writing. His emphasis on the experience of faith in the opening of the tractate (LW 31:343) is reflected in his treatment of Psalm 1:3 “I have said that the blessedness of this man is hidden in the spirit, i.e. in God, so that it cannot be known except through faith or experience”. See LW 14:298. The same can be said for his use of analogy to express the relationship between being and act. See LW 31:360-361. See also Luther’s exposition of Psalm One “A tree represents a man, a good tree a good man, and a bad tree an evil man; as also Christ teaches (Matthew 7:17ff)”. See Operationes Psalmos, LW 14:299, Psalm 1:3.
The present-continuous significance of baptism is that the old man is killed (drowned) and the new man is raised daily. This is explicitly stated in the *Freedom Tractate* in that the old nature is wasting away and the inner nature is being renewed every day.\(^{196}\) The tractate reflects Luther’s conviction about the daily return to baptism (*reditus ad baptismus*). It is in this return to the baptismal vow that God creates what is not found. It is in this struggle between flesh and spirit that baptism stands as a bulwark for the free conscience and defines genuine cruciform struggle.

In Luther’s discussion on what is able to affect the inner man and the total inability of external things or works to affect the state of the inner, we may ask the question of the sacramental use of baptism, is it not just another external thing? The answer is simply, no, it is not. Here we see another profound connection between baptism and freedom for Luther. As he sets up his discussion of the threefold power of faith he lays the foundation for what follows on the word of God. “One thing and only

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\(^{195}\) LW 31:358; WA 7:59.

\(^{196}\) LW 31:344; WA 7:50.
one thing, is necessary for the Christian life, righteousness and freedom. That one thing is the most holy word of God”.\textsuperscript{197} If the soul has the word of God it needs nothing more.\textsuperscript{198} But it is precisely the word of God, in faith, that affects baptism. As Luther says prior to 1520,

Yet only by lack of faith in its operation is the benefit of baptism cancelled out. Faith in turn, removes the hindrance to the operation of baptism. Thus everything depends on faith.\textsuperscript{199}

It is in this connection that Luther would fight against the enthusiasts who held to a scholastic view of baptism, which denied its present-continuous, eschatological nature, and deemed it to be a purely past-historical and outward act. For Luther it is the word that creates what it does not find and defines the relationship between faith, water and the sacramental implications.\textsuperscript{200}

Luther’s threefold power of faith can be directly related to a baptismal state of being, for in baptism, this union is given a concrete grounding. The first power of faith saves without works and adopts into the family of God.\textsuperscript{201} It is the word of God that effects this adoption. The second power of faith is the

\textsuperscript{197} LW 31:345; WA 7:50.
\textsuperscript{198} LW 31:345; WA 7:51.
\textsuperscript{199} LW 35:38.
\textsuperscript{200} Luther has a magnificent trust in the efficacy of the word and its ability to create. As early as 1518 at the Heidelberg Disputation this concrete reformation principle is given precise definition: \textit{Die Liebe Gottes findet nicht, sondern schafft, was ihr liebenswerth ist; die Liebe des Menschen aber entsteht aus dem, was ihr liebenswerth ist}, Walch 2, 18-39. The love of God does not find but creates that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it (LW 31:41). The word that creates is intrinsic to Luther’s understanding of the relationship between faith, water and word. This is why he can be more positively disposed toward baptismal immersion rather than sprinkling, yet hold that the form the sacramental act takes is open to free choice because of the word that creates.
\textsuperscript{201} LW 31:345; WA 7:50.
reciprocal effect of honor. As we honor God in faith so he honors us as children. In a sense, the faith and trust a Christian exercises in the return to baptism and the devotion to the single vow of baptism, reflects the respect one pays God in the appeal to baptism in the struggle of life between the Spirit and the flesh. Luther, when continuously pressed into unbelief and despair, appealed to the concrete act of baptism (*vita passiva*). The third power of faith and possibly the most profound for Luther is the power of marital union. In faith, what is Christ’s becomes the sinner’s, and what is the sinner’s becomes Christ’s. This is the heart of baptismal freedom.

Isn’t this now, nothing but a joyous state of affairs, when the rich, noble, godly bridegroom takes the poor, despised, evil whore in marriage, to rid her of all her wickedness and adorn her with all good? It is now not possible for sin to condemn her, for they now lie in Christ and are devoured by him.

This statement in the freedom tractate reflects what Luther says happens sacramentally at baptism. We are drowned in Christ and Christ is born in us. One of the insightful understandings of Luther’s baptismal theology is that it stands against pietistic imitation and complies with the idea that conformity for the new person is actually Christ in us. It is the receptive (*vita passiva*) posture before the God that creates. It stands against works piety, for the life lived in the Spirit against the flesh-nature is the conforming to the presence of Christ in Spirit in us. The wealth of this exchange compels one to serve the neighbor with complete disregard for oneself (over against papal greed) because in this new relationship we have all good things, for all good things are Christ’s.

202 *LW* 31:350; *WA* 7:53, 54.
203 *LW* 31:351; *WA* 7:54.
204 *LW* 31:351; *WA* 7:54.
205 *LW* 31:352; *WA* 7:55.
206 2 Corinthians 5:14 “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”
Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.  

A further explication of this is that Luther says we are now in fact kings and priests. The acts that flow from this state of being are a profound freedom in service. One does righteous works for one is a free lord and servant. It is in his/her very nature to express the lord-servant paradox for it is part of the new state of being. The new state of being is the actual taking up of residence by Christ “in the Spirit” within the baptized life. This state of being is given precise definition in the outer-man section of the tractate’s discussion on “being” as the source of genuine act. Luther uses a series of analogies to demonstrate how “being” gives rise to act. And in that sense, this fundamental understanding of “being” has Luther convinced that the papacy—due to its tyrannical acts—has a devious state of being, even to the point of considering that state antichrist. As Luther says with his analogies, “it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person, as Christ also says, ‘A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit’”.  

The analogies progress through a discussion of Adam and Eve, the office of Bishop, the tree and its fruit and of trades to clearly show how “being” precedes “act”. Baptism theology has

207 LW 31:367; WA 7:65.
208 This realization by Luther that the new person in the Christian is actually Christ is a radical pre-emptive theological block to works righteousness. How can we boast of our works if they are actually Christ’s works working through us? We must, therefore, boast of Christ.
209 Matthew 7:18; LW 31:361; WA 7:61.
its firm place here because it makes much of the fact that both being and act for the Christian are works of the creator acting upon his creature.\textsuperscript{210} The controversialists are “blind”\textsuperscript{211} if they look to their laws and doctrines about works. “Those that teach works over against baptismal faith are Leviathan”.\textsuperscript{212} They are wicked teachers that have destroyed countless men.\textsuperscript{213} This language is far from conciliatory and reflects the tractate’s nuanced polemical edge. Luther has found the middle course\textsuperscript{214}, and his freedom tractate has given a precise presentation of the insight he has into the human condition and the freedom given it in Christ, the Lord of the \textit{theodidacti},

Therefore there is need of the prayer that the Lord may give us and make us \textit{theodidacti}, that is, those taught by God (John 6:45), and himself, as he has promised, write his law in our hearts; otherwise there is no hope for us.\textsuperscript{215}

\textbf{Conclusion}
An historical and theological context to Luther’s 1520 \textit{Freedom Tractate} provides the reader-interpreter with a solid basis for examination of Luther’s intentional thought process in regard to how he develops a polemical stance on the basis of the new ontology of Christian freedom. It seems to be certain, in our opinion, that Hamm’s distinction between the personal and transpersonal engagement with Leo X, by Luther, is correct. However, we have nuanced this personal-pastoral perspective by highlighting that it is possible to read a certain level of sarcasm into Luther’s congeniality toward Leo X. At the transpersonal level—the polemic directed toward the papal controversialists—Luther is scathing and heavy handed in both the Open

\textsuperscript{210} \textit{Heidelberg Disputation}, thesis 28, \textit{LW} 31:41.
\textsuperscript{211} \textit{LW} 31:362; \textit{WA} 7:63.
\textsuperscript{212} \textit{LW} 31:363; \textit{WA} 7:63, twisting serpents, see Isaiah 27:1.
\textsuperscript{213} \textit{LW} 31:363; \textit{WA} 7:63.
\textsuperscript{214} \textit{LW} 31:372; \textit{WA} 7:70.
\textsuperscript{215} \textit{LW} 31:376; \textit{WA} 7:73.
Letter to Pope Leo X and throughout the Freedom Tractate. In the Freedom Tractate we see a comprehensive, early formulation of evangelical Christian freedom over against the false heteronomy of the Roman curia—in a negative sense—on the one hand and an insightful exposition of the implications of freedom—in a positive sense—on the other. This positive and negative inter-relationship is clearly defined throughout the Freedom Tractate using the text/anti-text paradigm described by Rieger.

Where Luther has been criticized for an underdevelopment of certain themes in his exposition of freedom, I have contended for a conscious attempt by Luther to emphasize certain points, at the explicit expense of others, for polemical reasons. This chapter has also developed the view that, although baptism is not explicit in the freedom tractate, it underpins the whole work implicitly and parallels the first major section in the tractate devoted to the ontological reconfiguration of the inner nature, by the efficacious word of God. The relationship between the ontological state of being and the deeds that flow from that state, find their genesis for Luther, in baptismal faith. One of the profound theological discoveries made by Luther during the year 1520 was the threefold schema intrinsic to baptismal freedom. The past reality of baptism in Christ, the present-continuous nature of baptism as a posture of humility in the vita passiva, and the eschatological hope that we have—as we are comforted in freedom of conscience—that we will pass through death into the resurrection of eternal life. This chapter has argued that Luther deliberately avoided using the concrete historical act of baptism in his polemics with the papists because of the priority he wanted to give to the word of faith, and the experience of such faith.

For the faithful, baptism is a concrete sign of the freedom we have been given in the form of the lord-servant nature of spiritual union with Christ. It defies scholasticisms cognitive-theoretical mental gymnastics and comforts the believer with

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the concrete fact that baptismal faith in Christ is perfect and conducive to utter salvific certainty (Heilsgewißheit). One simply needs to return to this fact over and over again to receive the comfort of salvation and in this simple movement Luther does away with the entire machinery of “second plank” theology that drove the papacy’s financial endeavors. The freedom this implies is staggering. When pushed to despair by the Roman insistence on works-righteousness, Luther experienced profound comfort in the baptismal promise. In the sense we have argued for, it lays the present-continuous foundation for examining the dialectical nature of Luther’s lord-servant ontology; the subject of our following chapter.

Luther’s baptism song:

The eye alone sees the water
How it is poured by men,
Faith alone understands the power
of the blood of Jesus Christ.

And it is for him a red flood
colored by Christ’s blood,
that heals all the injuries
inherited from Adam,
and also committed by ourselves.217

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