AUGUSTINE AND LUTHER: A TALE OF TWO WORLDS
Farley Snell
(2014)

[Bibliographical note: There are excellent, short and recent biographies on Augustine and Luther in the Penguin Lives series—St. Augustine by Garry Wills (1999) and Martin Luther by Martin Marty (2004). On Augustine Peter Brown’s Augustine of Hippo, originally published in 1967 but now out (2000) with two supplementary chapters that review newly discovered letters and sermons, as well as more recent scholarship, is still the most thorough biography. He has a very helpful chapter on Augustine in his The Body & Society: Men, Women, & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity (1988, twentieth anniversary edition with long new introduction, 2008). Another, more recent (1999), biography that is highly respected (and long: 477 pages) is by Serge Lancel. The new biography (2005) by James J. O’Donnell seeks to break through some of the traditional ways of understanding Augustine. He has a very interesting interpretation of the Confessions and of Augustine’s role in inventing Catholicism and normative Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. There are many translations of the Confessions; a very good one is by Henry Chadwick. Chadwick has a good introduction to Augustine’s thought is Augustine: A Very Short Introduction. There are numerous other biographies of Luther. Richard Marius, Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death (1999), is a recent biography by a secular historian. Very readable, more thorough than Marty’s biography, and informed by latest scholarship, with interesting new interpretations. A highly respected biography is Luther: Man Between God and the Devil, 1989, by Heiko A. Oberman. A long time favorite is Roland H. Bainton’s Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther, 1950. To read Luther himself: Martin Luther, Three Treatises, (1943, 1957-1966) includes Luther’s 1520 treatises: To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and The Freedom of A Christian. These are the best introduction to Luther’s writings, just prior to his appearance at the Diet of Worms.]

Introduction
Augustine and Luther Compared and Contrasted

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) and Martin Luther (1484-1546 CE) are not only two of Western Christianity’s most influential thinkers. Their lives and views provide a window into the times in which they lived, and an opportunity for us to embrace, alter or reject what they thought.

Augustine was a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church in North Africa from 395 until his death in 430. He is most widely remembered for his autobiographical meditation Confessions in which he tells of his various personal struggles culminating in his conversion in 386, while in Italy for the only time in his life. What has attracted the most attention is his sexual struggle (people often quote his prayer, “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet”), and what has drawn the most blame is his consequent view on sex and human nature. His ideas on sexuality and marriage-- understood by few, and dismissed by many-- have fomented debate, especially in the modern era.

But his significance lies beyond this narrow (and even inaccurate) focus. His ideas have persisted, been debated, altered, rejected by some, affirmed by others. This is especially true of his own version of the idea of original sin (whereby all persons are born with a defective moral nature and with guilt). The same can be said of his ideas on grace and free will, accompanied by his teaching on predestination, which were reworked over the centuries, and which played a major role in Reformation thought. When Thomas Aquinas, the great Catholic thirteenth century theologian, stated that “grace does not destroy nature, but completes it,” he drew on the newly rediscovered works of Aristotle to discuss “nature,” and on Augustine to discuss “grace.”
Augustine’s understanding of God influenced most subsequent forms of western mysticism, as well as Anselm’s ontological proof of the existence of God in the eleventh century. His treatment of the two “cities” in City of God formed a basis for western monasticism. It played out in the medieval struggles between emperor and pope, and to some extent in discussions of church and state. His discussion of time (Confessions, XI) and his effort at a Christian philosophy of history in City of God have had continued influence. His version of the just war theory has been appealed to in many instances, but considered an oxymoron by many critics.

Luther was an Augustinian monk who taught at a newly formed university in Wittenberg in what was then Electoral Saxony (part of present day Germany). In 1517 his criticism of papal indulgences eventually led to the breakup of western Christianity (eastern and western Christianity parted ways in 1054), a breakup that had dramatic and continuing political and social impact on Europe and subsequently the New World.

In popular imagery he is remembered for being the champion of individual conscience (as a result largely of his “Here I stand” speech before the imperial Diet at Worms in 1520). He is credited with wresting authority from the papacy by appealing to Scripture alone (sola scriptura). In like manner, he is appreciated for having made the Bible available to common folk (he translated both Testaments into German). His idea of the “priesthood of all believers” is seen as freeing the individual from the domination of the clergy. His views of the “two realms” (the distinction between the political and religious realms) and his words on the peasants’ revolt have been seen as supporting the totalitarianism of the Third Reich. The holocaust in like manner has been traced to his anti-Semitism. His central teaching—justification apart from works of the law—has been embraced by many, but attacked by others.

Actually, Augustine and Luther were similar in many ways. Both achieved fame and influence from the geographical and political edge of the known civilized world (Augustine in Hippo in North Africa and Luther in Wittenberg in Electoral Saxony). Both were self confident and self reflective at the same time. Both were well educated and exceptional in the use of language. Both enjoyed and even reveled in controversy, and a good bit of what each wrote was against something or someone. Both were troubled and sought a sense of self that would bring a measure of peace. Consequently, both—though in distinctive ways—had a negative appraisal of human effort and championed divine initiative or grace. One could say that both ended their lives embittered. All of this within an understanding of scripture and Christian teaching.

But they lived in different worlds. For one thing, Augustine lived in a time when the Roman Empire sought with some success unity and stability, and a coherent and unified Christian doctrine and church to be the foundation of the Empire’s goals. By Luther’s time, what was left of the old imperial aspiration—in the form of the Holy Roman Empire—was weakened by external threats from the Ottoman Empire and by disintegration from within. And the Roman Church was itself beset by forces such as the conciliar movement.

More to the point, however, was that each struggled to give definition to the self in radically different intellectual settings. Augustine records his long search (ending in his conversion) in his historic autobiographical meditation, the Confessions. His experience of being driven by external satisfactions (what has traditionally been called “lusts the flesh”) left him unsatisfied, as did his preoccupation with what is partial, epitomized by the individual. Augustine felt the need, within himself and within the reality of which he was a part, to discover what is lasting rather than passing, and what is whole rather than what was partial—and to find his place within it. (This is one of the meanings of “mysticism.”) This was his “world.”
Luther inherited Augustine’s world, but in the final analysis Augustine’s world was not Luther’s. A major conceptual shift had occurred. This can best be explained in terms of a philosophical debate that transpired during the eleventh and twelfth centuries: the controversy between “Realism” and “Nominalism.” The Realists, following the tradition of Plato, held that Ideas or Forms were most dependable and hence “real.” For example, the idea of “tree” was to be preferred over any given tree, which was only a manifestation of the Idea “tree.” The idea of “table” was more dependable than any given table, and so forth. There was an Idea or Form of human, to which any given human must conform. God was the supreme Idea. Augustine was a Realist in this sense.

The Nominalists held that only specific things are dependable or to be taken seriously. They claimed that what the Realists call Ideas or Forms are only “names” (hence, Nominalism) or terms of convenience to identify specific things that share some characteristics. Individual things can be called “tree” in this sense, but there is no such thing as “tree.” This meant that there was no such thing as “human being,” but only individual persons. By Luther’s time, Nominalism had been given form (via moderna) by William of Ockham (c. 1285-1347) and Gabriel Biel (c. 1429-1495). For the Nominalists, the deity was another individual being, albeit an all-knowing and all-powerful being who could will as it chose—Ockham defended the “absolute Power” (potential absoluta) of God. In his thinking the deity could have chosen a different created order, and the moral order was dependent on divine fiat. On the human side, the individual was unique and given to what Stephen Greenblatt has called “Renaissance self-fashioning.” But this emerging individualism was to be worked out over against the divine omnipotence. The individual was in a state of anxiety in relation to such a deity. This was Luther’s world, and he was a Nominalist.

**AUGUSTINE**

**Augustine’s Life**

Augustine spent all but five of his seventy-five years in Africa. He was born in 354 CE in Thagaste, an interior agricultural town in North Africa (present day Algeria). His mother was Monica (who was a devout Christian) and his father was Patricius (who accepted baptism only at the end of his life, a common practice). He was educated in his hometown, then in two other African cities, Madauros and Carthage, a cosmopolitan port. In Carthage he read and was influenced by Cicero. There he also became fascinated with the Manicheans (we will discuss them later). While in Carthage, at the age of eighteen he began living with a woman. Augustine never gives her name; but Garry Wills (in his recent biography) calls her Una because he lived with her faithfully for fifteen years. They had a son, whom they named Theodatus (“gift of God”).

In 383 he began a five year sojourn in Italy. He taught in Rome for a year, then went to Milan the following year, where he was a professor of rhetoric. He (and Monica, who had joined his party there) had greater ambitions that necessitated sending “Una” back to Africa (without Theodatus, as would be expected). In Milan, Augustine heard the preaching of Bishop Ambrose. Ambrose illustrated that the Old Testament can be read other than literally for deeper meaning, which can produce a reading that is consistent with classical philosophical teaching. Augustine became familiar with the form of Platonism taught by Plotinus (whom Augustine quoted as his last words). While in Milan, or nearby, he was converted in 386 and baptized in 387. Monica died before the party left Italy; Theodatus died shortly after they returned to Africa.

On his return to Africa and Thagaste, Augustine had hoped for a life of communal reflection. However, while on a visit to Hippo in 391, he was forcibly ordained a priest (a common occurrence at the time). He was
consecrated bishop of Hippo in 395, and remained at that post until his death in 430, as the Christian Vandals were on the verge of taking the city.

Augustine lived in and through what he wrote (all right, dictated). He had written a few works before his ordination and consecration, but after 395 he wrote extensively. He wrote to distance himself from the Manicheans (he was often accused of being a closet Manichean). He wrote the Confessions (perhaps in 397, at least begun in that year). Beginning in 400 and for nearly twenty years, he wrote against the Donatists (more about them later). His many treatises against the Pelagians (again, more later) commenced in 412; his last reply to Julian of Eclanum was never finished. Three major writings were worked on over years, beginning around 410: On the Trinity, Genesis Taken Literally, and City of God. Of his several shorter works, On Christian Doctrine was completed thirty years after it was begun.

But Augustine gives us additional glimpses of himself, largely in his sermons and letters—things about his life but also about the kind of man he was. These sources have not always been utilized, and they have been expanded by the recent discoveries of heretofore-unknown sermons and letters. They reveal not so much his struggles, though they do that, as the manner in which he went about addressing and responding to the needs of his congregation in Hippo and the many persons who asked his counsel. They show us Augustine the pastor, the church administer, the public official, more often in a kindly light than not. For a man who produced the equivalent of forty three-hundred-page books totaling five million words (O’Donnell’s calculation), he had another full and busy life.

Augustine’s Intellectual World

Augustine wrote in the context of Greco-Roman thought, which to my mind attempted to deal with two needs: stability and order. The problem of stability (usually ascribed to the East, as with Alexandria) was simply that things could not be depended on. They changed (were mutable). Thinkers of Plato’s ilk posited that there were unchangeable (immutable) ideas or forms (of which things as we sense them are merely appearances or manifestations). These ideas or forms could be known or intuited without observation. Moreover, they could be counted on, in the midst of change. Later Platonists focused more on the problem of fragmentation, and posited an underlying unity, which Plotinus called the One. In both expressions of Platonism, the human endeavor had to do with the mind, with thinking. One could think oneself toward the changeless and the unified. It was Augustine’s distinctive achievement that he used the same insights, but redefined the human endeavor as having to do with the will, with desire or love.

The problem of order was more characteristic of the West. It centered on what was required to sustain society and resist social disruption. In this view, social chaos is always imminent because there are centers of energy and meaning that work against one another. Religiously, this was expressed in the existence of many divine beings, each pursuing its own ends. Over time, the need for order brought these deities into a pantheon, with each god assigned a specific role under a supreme god. Philosophically this led to a view that there was an unchanging order of nature, independent of circumstances, which could be known by rational beings and conformed to. Stoicism is an example of this view. In any case, the emphasis was on social obligations, on assigned functions within the whole, and on the dispassionate performance of duties. As we shall see, this impacted views of sexuality, as well as other human endeavors. In the case of Augustine, he was concerned about these matters—as evidenced by his affirmation of creation against its denigration by the Manicheans (discussed below) and his views on marriage in the debate with the Pelagian Julian of Eclanum (again, below). But his views were informed by his emphasis on the place of the will. For him, knowledge and performance of social duties was complex, as we shall see.
His Political and Cultural World

The political and cultural world in which Augustine lived was Africa and the Roman Empire in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. The history of the Roman Empire is a tangled web, full of divisions, wars, assassinations and killings, but uncannily united by imposed language, law, architecture, and culture. As an empire, it is usually dated from the time of Julius Caesar or from the time of Octavian (a.k.a. Caesar Augustus) just before the Common Era. Its territorial expansion reached its zenith during the reign of Trajan in 117. Occasionally it was ruled by a single emperor. Constantine did so from 324 until his death in 337. He moved his capital to “New Rome” or Constantinople, and gave Christians acceptance and favored treatment.

Theodosius was the last to rule as a single emperor (379-395). He made a serious effort to create a Christianized Roman Empire. In 380 he declared Christianity (by which he meant the Christianity of the Council of Nicaea) to be the only legitimate Imperial religion. In 381 he summoned, in a fashion reminiscent of Constantine, the Council of Constantinople to resolve a number of church issues, including some stemming from the Council of Nicaea. He fostered the destruction of prominent non-Christian temples, including the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. He intervened in local church conflicts to attempt harmony.

Theodosius died in 395, the year Augustine was elected bishop in Hippo. After that (395), the empire was divided east and west. In the west Honorius was emperor (395-423), ruling first in Milan and then Ravenna. It was during his reign that Rome was sacked in 410. His reign coincided with most of Augustine’s episcopate (Augustine died in 430). The western empire ended in 476, though portions of it were temporarily recaptured in the sixth century by the eastern emperor Justinian. The eastern empire (Byzantium) lasted another thousand years, until the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1454.

The portion of Africa where Augustine lived had been a Roman colony since 146 BCE. There were Christian communities there well before Constantine, probably as early as the second century. This part of Africa served largely as the breadbasket of Rome with the typical overlay of Roman culture and military presence. Roman culture expressed itself in traditional Roman religious practices even after Constantine marginalized them and after Theodosius banned them. More important, there was an underlay of local and provincial culture and of regional independence that informed African Christianity. But Roman culture was attractive as well as present to anyone with ambition. In many ways Augustine was always more Roman than African, even when he returned from Italy.

Augustine’s Project

Augustine’s life as bishop was consumed in part by controversies in which he became involved: against the Manicheans, against the Donatists, against the Pelagians. Before turning to these, I want to examine what I consider the core project of Augustine’s intellectual and spiritual life. I think it runs through and informs all that he wrote and did after becoming bishop in 395 (including his account of his life up to then in the Confessions, begun in 397). This focus runs the risk of oversimplification, and of ignoring the nuances of his life and work, but I think it is an approach that can bear scrutiny and at least provides “a coherent overview.”

Augustine sought to understand the nature of the self (this is my term; his was “the soul” or “the heart”). The most quoted line from Augustine comes from the opening paragraph of the Confessions: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” The self is “restless,” and all its efforts to find “rest” fail, until it finds its rest in God. For Augustine, “God” is the word that signifies what is unchanging and unified, and the self is unsatisfied with what is undeependable and fragmentary. The self hungers for stability and order.
I have always been struck by the phrase “in you” (not “with you”). So the self is “restless” or unsatisfied unless it belongs in something other than itself. This “something other” is not another thing or even a collection of things. It is that which is greater than and contains all things, including the self. It is the all-in-all, what Origen and Plotinus called the One. It is what classical philosophy called “Being itself.” It is what Paul Tillich, a twentieth century theologian, called the “ground of our being.” It is what the word “God” signifies. To use contemporary terminology Augustine was a “panentheist” (everything is in God), rather than a theist.

The self loves. (As noted above, this is one place that Augustine departed from the Platonists, including Plotinus. They had claimed that the self thinks, and by proper thinking, moves beyond what is changeable to the unchanging, from the many to the One. It was Augustine’s view that the self wills; that is, the self desires or invests itself. That is what he means by “love.”) The self loves, and is defined by what it loves.

But here precisely is its dilemma. The self can love God (the unchanging, the One) or love itself and what is less than God (the changing, the partial).

These two loves [“the perverse love which isolates the mind swollen with pride from the blessed society of others,”] and its contrary, “charity which seeketh not its own”—contrasted in the preceding paragraph] of which the one is holy, the other impure; the one sociable, the other self-centered, the one concerned for the common good for the sake of the heavenly society, the other subordinating the common good to self-interest for the sake of a proud lust for power… (Genesis, 11.15.20, quoted by R. A. Markus, Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine, p. 60)

There was another way in which Augustine departed from the Platonists--their conclusion that the physical body and material things are the problem, that they cloud clear thinking and entice the self into the changeable and fragmented world. This was also the conclusion of other Christians and of the Manicheans. But Augustine claimed that the creation was “good,” partly because the scripture asserted it and partly because in Jesus the divine Word became flesh. Consequently, he affirmed the physical world and the social duties of the self. He maintained that the physical body and material things could be a means of loving God, if they did not become the object of the self’s love. In On Christian Doctrine he does this by distinguishing between “enjoy” and “use.” To enjoy is to love something for its own sake (hence, only God and what is in God can be properly enjoyed); to use is to utilize something as a way of loving God. The danger, he says, is that the self becomes fascinated with what it should be using, and slips into enjoying the lesser and the partial. In that case the self’s love is misdirected.

A closer analysis of Augustine’s understanding of misdirected love stems from the trinitarian or triadic form of the self. Augustine wrote in the Confessions (XIII.xi): “The three aspects I mean are being, knowing, willing. For I am and I know and I will. Knowing and willing I am. I know that I am and I will. I will to be and to know.” (This was to be discussed more fully in his long and brilliant treatise On the Trinity, where, since in the biblical account humans were created in the image of God, the triad of the self is a clue to the Trinitarian nature of God. He begins there with an analysis of appropriate self-love as containing the lover, the loved, and the love that binds the two, all within the self, and works through to the trinity of memory, understanding, and will.)

Gary Wills and especially James J. O’Donnell, in their recent biographies, see this triad of the self as the clue to the Confessions. (O’Donnell in particular wants to read that work not as autobiography, but as a
meditative piece about God and the soul; it is after all addressed to God.) O'Donnell suggested that the misuse of the will is shown with Augustine’s inordinate interest (“hankerings of the flesh”) in, among other things, sex. The misuse of knowing (“hankerings of the eyes”) is expressed in curiosity, especially in matters of religion and magic, but including the variety of philosophies. The misuse of being is ambition. These three misuses are expressly the content of Books II, III, and IV. In his meditation, the beginnings of his recovery are, in reverse order, the abandonment of ambition, the accepting of scripture as authority over objects of curiosity, and finally (in the conversion scene in Book VIII), his renunciation of the life of the flesh.

Outside of recovery, the self consistently loves the lesser and the fragmented. Even when the self does what can externally be called good, the self does it to avert punishment or gain reward, hence out of self love. To be sure, there is a proper love of self (and of the neighbor) within the love of the greater good or God. But when it is love of the self as an end in itself, he calls it superbia, usually translated “pride.” This misdirected love --perversion of will or desire-- is what Augustine means by sin. This means that sin is more than an act; sin is a disposition of the self. Moreover, it so consistently and completely characterizes the nature of the self as we know it, that Augustine considers it something like a disease of the will, with which all are born. This is his understanding of original sin (that is, not the first sin, but the sin accompanying our origin).

The idea of universal sin, conceived as an inborn misdirection of love, presents a problem. Augustine must deal with the origin of original sin, since it cannot be that God created humans with a diseased will or misdirected love. He does this with several treatments of the Fall. In one such treatment, he claims that the first humans were created posse non peccare (able not to sin). Only they had the choice of what to love. After the Fall, all humans are non posse non peccare (not able not to sin). Once healed, they are non posse peccare (not able to sin). He can only explain this universal characteristic as having been inherited through the act of procreation.

Healing is required. The predicament of the self is that it cannot will to change the object of its love, unless the unchanging and whole draws the self out of its misdirected love, to love the Good for its own sake. Augustine often quotes Paul that through the Holy Spirit the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. This is what Augustine means by “grace,” the dominant theme of his writings against the Pelagians. (For this reason he has been known since 1298 as “Doctor of Grace.”) This drawing comes before anything a person can do (“prevenient grace”). Even the response is a gift (and this leads him into his views on predestination).

While it is not a focus of Augustine’s thought, he always views the self as existing within society. “There is nothing as social by nature and anti-social by corruption as the human race” (City of God, 12.28.1, quoted by Markus, p. 95). In part this is because he shares the western concern for order. The two loves discussed above are characterized as two societies, the two cities:

…two loves have built two cities: self-love in contempt of God the earthly city, love of God in contempt of self the heavenly…(City of God, 14.28, quoted by Markus, p. 60)

When the two loves are characterized as two cities—“earthly” and “heavenly”—these cities are not places (such as earth and heaven), nor can they be identified as “Rome” and the church. They are precisely two social entities reflecting two loves, and they are in conflict with one another, while being intertwined historically.
In this world the two cities are inextricably interwoven and mingled with each other, until they shall be separated in the last judgement. (*City of God*, 1.35, quoted by Markus, p. 62)

Both “cities” are intrinsically interested in and committed to order (and both are opposed to disorder), though their ultimate loyalties differ—one to what is changeless, the other to what is contingent or changeable. “In this world” both are working for the same effect, though for different reasons. In what they achieve there is no way to determine which of the “cities” is responsible and to what degree.

At one point Augustine joined other Christian thinkers (Markus cites Eusebius and Ambrose) in thinking that the Roman Empire in its Theodosian Christian form might be the embodiment of the City of God-- largely because of its success and promise in overcoming social disorder. In his later years, he concluded that the kind of order achieved by the Empire (and any society for that matter) was not sufficient, since it was based on external order (what Augustine calls temporal or earthly peace) and not love of order. “Never again did he consider the institutions of society and government as agencies concerned with helping men to achieve the right order in the world. Their task was now to minimize disorder.” (Markus, p.84)

We can now turn to the three major groups he most expressly opposed, for which opposition he is most often remembered in histories of Christian theology, to see how his understanding of the self informed his position as he opposed each. They are the Manicheans, the Donatists, and the Pelagians.

**Augustine Against the Manicheans**

After Augustine was ordained priest (391) and later consecrated bishop (395) he began to argue against the Manicheans. Of the groups he was to oppose over time, this is the only one with which he had associated, and whose teachings he had earlier embraced. Some thought (including the Pelagian bishop Julian of Eclanum) that Augustine had never really freed himself of Manichean leanings, and O’Donnell wonders as much. It may be that precisely because his views continued to share much with theirs, that he set about to distinguish (and distance) himself from them.

So what did Augustine and the Manicheans have in common? They both shared the view, actually permeating many of the philosophies and religious cults of the Mediterranean world, that there is more to the self than its body. Humans are distinguished from animals because there is something in them—variously called the soul, the mind, the spirit-- that allows them to function on another and higher level than the body. With some, this encouraged asceticism, disciplining the appetites, and sexual abstention.

The various groups and philosophies described this reality in different ways and with different mythologies. The Manicheans had their own version, part philosophy, part cosmology, part ritual. It was a very large movement, marked by social organization, friendship and loyalty (from which Augustine benefited in his teaching days at Carthage and in Rome), intellectual stimulation, and spiritual fellowship. Founded by Mani a full hundred years before Augustine, the movement understood life as a struggle between two forces, characterized by light and darkness. The physical body manifested the force of darkness, within which there was captured a residue of light (not unlike Plato’s soul imprisoned in the body), straining to be set free. This gave Augustine an explanation of the struggle he felt within himself.
So how did Augustine differ? In the *Confessions* he recalls that his disenchantment with the movement came when he finally heard a highly touted Manichean teacher named Faustus. Impressed by his ability at speaking, Augustine nonetheless was less than impressed by the content. He found Faustus ignorant or misinformed, especially—and I find this interesting—on matters of astronomy and explanations of the physical world. I say interesting, because it hints at Augustine’s single real difference from Manichaeism (and, indeed, with many of the philosophies with which he otherwise had some agreement): Augustine did not consider matter and the body as the realm of darkness. He turned from Manichean myth and cosmology to the Book of Genesis, with its emphasis upon the goodness of the material world. In this context he distanced himself not only from the Manicheans but from Christian ascetics such as Jerome, by claiming that marriage and sexual intercourse were part of the original creation (and not a result of the Fall, for example). Augustine held that it is the misuse of matter that is the problem for the self, not matter itself.

**Augustine Against the Donatists**

If against the Manicheans Augustine was pretty much in a monologue in which he was distinguishing himself from an old friend, in the Donatist controversy he was seeking to enfold another group of Christians, first by persuasion but finally by coercion. Peter Brown gives an excellent and thorough account (*Augustine of Hippo*, chapters 19-21 and 28), including an analysis of what characterized the underlying views of each group.

The church in which Augustine was brought up and in which he became a bishop was not the only Christian church in Africa, not even the majority church. The other church (called “Donatist” by Augustine’s group, after Donatus, one of their bishops) had been present since the beginnings of Christianity in Africa. It followed the same liturgy and confessed the same creed as Augustine’s group (whom the “Donatists” identified with a bishop named Caecilian). Despite these similarities, the two churches were locked in an often violent struggle over the nature of the church and over legitimacy within what was now a Christian empire.

The conflict began after the last great persecution, under Emperor Diocletian in 303-305, fifty years before Augustine was born. A claim was made that Bishop Caecilian had been consecrated by a bishop who, like many others, had handed over the Christian scriptures during the ordeal, which made him unworthy to ordain anyone—and that consequently Caecilian’s ordination was invalid. There were other related issues: whether sacraments administered by such “unworthy” clergy were valid, whether “unworthy” persons had to be rebaptized, and actually whether infant baptism was legitimate. The Caecilianists (the group to which Augustine later belonged) took the opposing position. At the heart of their claim was that the sacraments are valid, whatever the worthiness of the clergy administering them.

An appeal was made to Constantine (recently converted and now something of secular head of the church), who ruled in favor of the Caecilianists. A divided African church resulted. In most cities, towns, and rural areas there were two churches and two bishops. For many, a live and let live attitude prevailed, but others sought a single church, in which the other group would be absorbed.

Around 347 an imperial high commissioner named Macarius attempted to force the “Donatists” into submission to the Caecilianists. It lasted for eleven years, and hardened the lines between the two groups. Beginning in 393, Augustine and his colleagues took the offensive, in an impressive propaganda barrage. In 405 an imperial “Edict of Unity” was issued, disbanding the “Donatist” church. Their bishops were removed and their church properties turned over the Caecilianists. Then in 409 and 410, largely because of pressures on Italy
from Alaric, the restrictions on the “Donatists” were suspended. Subsequently (in 411) Emperor Honorius arranged a formal hearing in Carthage, conducted by an even-handed Marcellianus, to bring the conflict between the two churches to a final resolution. Predictably, the Caecilianists prevailed, and a period of coerced conformity resulted. Augustine had originally opposed the use of force, simply because the internal change the self required could not by definition be coerced. He came to espouse coercion under the theory that the self could be forced into the church, where it could then receive the healing sacraments needed to effect internal change. Many have seen this theory as leading to later forms of religious coercion, including the Inquisition.

What lay behind this conflict between two Christian churches in Africa? The consensus is that it was two versions of Christianity, and Brown (pp. 208-211) offers a clear presentation of their differences. It was, as one of my seminary professors characterized it, that one saw the church as virgin, and the other as mother. The “Donatists” held the former view: the church was marked by its moral purity, sustained by the sacrifice of its martyrs, unstained by contact with those outside its ranks. They often used the image of Noah’s ark to describe the church in its saving separation from the world. On the other hand, Augustine understood the church as a spiritual hospital, designed to provide within it all stages of healing of the self, whose love is misdirected. Moreover, he saw this healing process as designed to transform the world, rather be removed from it. He is fond of alluding to the parable of the wheat and tares, which coexist until the final judgment.

Some have seen beneath this a cultural difference, as between rural and urban ways of life, the one more demanding, the other more accommodating. Perhaps it was an indigenous or provincial African set of values versus those of the Roman colonizers. O’Donnell argues a version of this, as a main theme of his biography, that this struggle was part of the larger fourth and fifth century effort (stemming from Constantine’s adoption of Christianity) to invent the Catholic (universal, ecumenical) Church and normative Christianity. That is why I have refrained from using “Catholic” with reference to Augustine’s group (actually both groups, meaning different things by the term, sought to claim the word to designate its position). And why I have placed “Donatist” in quotation marks, since it was an attribution by Augustine’s group, not what the “Donatists” called themselves. O’Donnell prefers “African Christians.” I suppose “imperial Christians” might be Augustine’s group. Augustine identified himself with this new form of normative Christianity for several reasons. He was prone to think more as a Roman than an African. Philosophically, he understood truth to be one. He saw Christianity as transforming the entire human race, and specifically this meant the Roman Empire.

We now know that prior to Constantine there was no single Christianity, but rather many Christianities. The discovery of the so-called Gnostic texts in the middle of the last century, and even the careful scrutiny of the distinctive points of view in the four gospels, indicates that there were many versions of Christianity from its very beginnings. Normative Christianity did not exist (except in the minds of individuals or groups) until the time of Constantine, who called and presided over the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325, which dealt with the nature of God. The first list of the New Testament books as we have it dates from 367.

This runs counter to the traditional reading of the history of Christianity. In that reading there was always an orthodox or normative set of beliefs, from which diverged a number of erroneous ideas, which came to be called heresies. According to O’Donnell, Augustine helped form that impression, nowhere more than his dealings with the indigenous African church.
Augustine Against the Pelagians

Beginning in 412 and until his death, Augustine was engaged in the controversy for which he is most remembered in theological circles—the increasingly heated debate with the Pelagians. Many recent commentators consider it an unfortunate interchange that drew from Augustine extreme ideas that were unnecessary and even have had disastrous consequences.

Pelagius was a British monk committed to a life of high moral standards who after 400 developed a following in Rome, then elsewhere. He appealed to those who were challenged by the goal of human perfectibility, and the possibility of achieving it by human effort. He taught that persons were given all that they needed for this effort: the ability to choose (free will), the law itself (by which correct behavior could be known), and the example of Christ.

… they allege that such attainments are not made without God’s help on this account, namely, because God both created man with the free choice of his will, and, by giving him commandments, teaches him, Himself, how man ought to live; and indeed assists him, in that He takes away his ignorance by instructing him in the knowledge of what he ought to avoid and to desire in his actions: and thus, by means of the free-will naturally implanted within him, he enters on the way which is pointed out to him, and by persevering in a just and pious course of life, deserves to attain to the blessedness of eternal life.

We, however, on our side affirm that the human will is so divinely aided in the pursuit of righteousness, that (in addition to man’s being created with a free-will, and in addition to the teaching by which he is instructed how he ought to live) he receives the Holy Ghost, by whom there is formed in his mind a delight in, and a love of, that supreme and unchangeable good which is God…A man’s free-will, indeed, avails for nothing except to sin, if he knows not the way of truth; and even after his duty and his proper aim shall begin to become known to him, unless he also take delight in and feel a love for it, he neither does his duty, nor sets about it, nor lives rightly. Now, in order that such a course may engage our affections, God’s “love is shed abroad in our hearts,” not through the free-will which arises from ourselves, but “through the Holy Ghost, which is given to us.” (The Spirit and the Letter, 4-5)

Augustine also claimed that human beings could choose to conform to the requirements of the law. He shared with Pelagius a concern for order. But he also was concerned about the stability or dependability of order. If the conforming act was performed out of fear of punishment or promise of reward, and the consequences were changed or removed, the act could not be counted on to be repeated. If, on the other hand, the conforming act was performed out of love for the greatest good or the all-in-all (what he meant by the word “God”), no change in circumstances would affect its being repeated.

…not that the law is itself evil, but because the commandment has its good in the demonstration of the letter, not in the assistance of the spirit; and if this commandment is kept from the fear of punishment and not from the love of righteousness, it is servilely kept, not freely, and therefore it is not kept at all. For no fruit is good which does not grow from the root of love. If, however, that faith be present which worketh by love, then one begins to delight in the law of God after the inward man, and this delight is the gift of the spirit, not of the letter… (The Spirit and the Letter, 26)

The former produced an unstable social order; the latter a stable social order. This distinction is what lies behind Augustine’s delineation of the “two cities” in City of God.
Augustine maintained that doing what is good should be done for the good itself, and not for any consequences of the act. The problem, as he understood it, is that persons are so addicted to the consequences of their acts, they cannot act for the good in itself. This is the universal state of human nature, and is what Augustine meant by original sin. This led him to affirm the necessity of infant baptism, to develop the theory that sin is transmitted in conception by sexual intercourse, and to assert predestination as an explanation of why some respond to grace and others do not. The addiction to consequences as a motivation for acts is so dominant, that only an intervention by God’s grace can attract the self to the good itself.

This was offensive to Pelagius. He saw Augustine’s views as undercutting all moral endeavor. He rejected any idea that human beings were so morally bankrupt that they could not do anything about their situation. And he rejected the idea that the only way they could accomplish a good act was for God to become the responsible agent. Both of these Pelagius saw in Augustine, and he wrote a treatise called *On Nature* in opposition to Augustine’s views.

The matter came to a head in 411 when an enthusiastic follower of Pelagius named Caelestius sought ordination in Carthage. He was denounced for his Pelagian views, six propositions of which he refused to withdraw. Pelagius himself received vindication on a visit to the east (always friendlier to his ideas) at a synod held at Diospolis in 415. A council in Carthage subsequently (in 416) found him in error. Both parties turned to the bishop of Rome, where the success of each shifted with the wind—until in 418, under imperial pressure, Zosimus formally condemned Pelagianism.

Pelagianism was not silenced, however. The cause was taken up by the brilliant young bishop of Eclanum, Julian by name. His writings against Augustine took on a more personal tone, whether because (as some have suggested) he was defending Italian culture against what he considered an African rogue, or perhaps because this was something of a generational fight. For Julian, Augustine was an ageing closet Manichean. And Augustine responded in kind. It was this interchange that some recent commentators lament.

It centered on the worthiness of marriage. Marriage actually focused a basic tension in Greco-Roman and in early Christian values. There was, as we noted, a conviction that sex itself was problematical. Among other things, it diverted the attention of the self from contemplation of the changeless and the unified. It was this conviction that led to the attraction of virginity and sexual abstinence. At the same time, this conviction was in conflict with the societal need for a constantly replenished population, and thus for procreation. Peter Brown’s book *The Body & Society* traces the history of this tension in early Christianity, and his chapter on Augustine (Chapter 19) carefully demonstrates the way it was expressed in the debate between Augustine and Julian. “In the debate on marriage and sexuality between Augustine and Julian, we can witness the confrontation of two worlds” (Brown, *The Body*, p. 409).

Julian’s views coincided with the values of Italian society— that there was a basic obligation of persons, and especially among those of families of wealth and power, to marry and produce heirs. Christian couples were admonished to “be fruitful and multiply.” In this way of thinking, sex and sexual pleasure are (and always have been) a natural part of procreation, which are necessary and can be managed. He claimed that Augustine considered sex as evil (the “Devil’s gift”) and disparaged marriage, because according to the African bishop married couples produced infants who were without exception sinful.

Augustine had no problem with the social dimensions of the self, and its obligation to replenish society through procreation. Marriage and sexual activity itself are not evil, and before the Fall they were harmonious
and totally pleasurable. For him, even after the Fall sex retains a legitimate purpose in the procreation of children, and if physical pleasure accompanies that purpose, so be it. In any case, Augustine’s interest in sex and marriage occurs in the context of his debate on original sin with the Pelagians, and seldom is revealed in his sermons. (Garry Wills has a very helpful discussion, pp. 127-137.) Brown, O’Donnell and Wills, each in his own way, document that Augustine was far less interested in sex than his psychological interpreters have suggested.

Augustine’s problem lay on another level. He believed that the spiritual disease of willful self-interest was inherent to human nature as we know it, that everyone is born with it, and that—unless God created the sin—it must have passed on from the first couple after they embraced self-interest. After the Fall, sexual activity has become infested with self-interest, and the members of the body have come to desire their own ends, as the self had chosen to desire its, and it is this proclivity that is passed on by the members.

The catastrophe that needed to be explained was not the fact of human society, where men and women married, made love and begot children. That would have happened had Adam and Eve not fallen. What remained a dark enigma to him was the distortion of the will of those who made up society. The twisted human will, not marriage, not even the sexual drive, was what was new in the human condition after Adam’s Fall. The fallen will subjected the original, God-given bonds of human society—friendship, marriage, and paternal command—to sickening shocks of willfulness, that caused these to sway, to fissure, and to change their nature. (Brown, The Body, p. 204)

The Legacy of Augustine

One thing historical studies do for us is to show us that ideas we have received, adopted, or resisted are in fact creations of particular persons in particular settings. Once we realize this, we are free to embrace, alter or reject any idea that has been transmitted to us. In the case of Augustine, his great and influential ideas—including those on sin and sexuality—can be seen for what they are, his answers to his questions. And we are free to evaluate them in terms of our questions.

There is plenty to wonder about, and it largely depends on some clarity about our own values. This is true of sexuality. “Augustine never found a way…of articulating the possibility that sexual pleasure might, in itself, enrich the relations between husband and wife” (Brown, The Body, p. 402). If we understand sexuality more broadly than procreation, we will find Augustine’s views too narrow.

Or on the nature of good acts: if we think that what one does is more important than why one does it, we will find Augustine’s views unhelpful. Or human nature itself: if we believe that it is essentially good, we will question his emphasis on original sin. Or on the nature of religious commitments: if we think that they are highly personal or local in nature, we will reject his emphasis on a common or normative set of beliefs—and we will certainly reject any idea of a state church. Or—and this is really important—if we think of roles in society as dynamic and subject to change, we will question Augustine’s static definitions. Or, of course, we may find ourselves in agreement with Augustine’s worldview and the conclusions he drew.

In some cases his questions and his answers, once freed from their authority over us, will challenge and expand ours. In my case, I have found the ideas that are most difficult to appreciate from the vantage point of our present interests, are precisely the ideas that stimulate my thought.
Take predestination, the idea that God has decided before everything who will be saved and who will not. If true, this seems eminently unfair. Read one way, it would discourage human effort. I think at least two things get in my way. One is that I think of “salvation” in physical and objective terms. It is identified with ending up after death in either a desirable or undesirable place. The second is related to it: that God is like a person who has tickets to these places, and—being God—can distribute these tickets arbitrarily. It is on precisely these two points that Augustine is generally misunderstood. For him, salvation is a state of mind or spirit, not a place. It is the culmination of a process by which the self is being saved from misdirected love. God is not a person giving out tickets to a place, but an unchanging and unified state of being drawing selves to itself. The idea of predestination is an effort to explain why some are drawn and others are not. To credit God with this distinction is merely to acknowledge that the experience of the selves involved seems passive—like “the idea suddenly hit me” or “it never made any sense to me.” That is, predestination is an idea that acknowledges the mystery of response. I think that is what Augustine attempted by it. But he used the idea to speak about another mystery—the outcome of the process the self is in. That outcome is never predictable, and seems to lodge outside ourselves.

Then there is Augustine’s propensity for introspection. When he questions enjoyment of the physical world, he seems to denigrate things in themselves. And when he ascribes self-interest to all acts, he seems to discourage moral effort. There is good reason to resist this introspection, and many have done so.

In the case of moral activity, most people of common sense agree with Pelagius. For them, the important thing is to do good and not worry about why one does it. It is the consequences of acts that are important, not the motivation. But I think there is another way of coming at Augustine’s claim. It is that our actions are more productive and sustaining when they are not done with calculation as to outcome. The claim is that good can be done with more abandon and less worry when it is done for good’s own sake. I think that the energy sometimes used in keeping records on who did what and who is at fault or deserving of credit, could be better used in doing good.

Related to this is the idea that we are not deeply satisfied unless we are ultimately invested in a reality that lasts and unifies, and that investing ourselves in anything less leaves us unsatisfied. Limited loyalties and loyalties to limited realities are not bad, they are just unsatisfying. Going with that is Augustine’s idea that all things are good and our use of them is good when it is a way of enjoying them within the greatest good or underlying unity. We simply do not do them justice when we make them an end in themselves. This is true of sex, for example.

I’ll mention one more instance of his introspective tendency. It is his analysis of the nature of the self as triadic. (This analysis is mentioned in the *Confessions* and is the basis of his long work *On the Trinity.*) We are at the same time, he says, beings that are aware of themselves, that can know themselves, and that can desire (or will or love) their being and their knowing themselves. Put another way, our consciousness of self always pictures itself or puts itself into words, and affirms both the self awareness and the self expression as belonging to one another. The technical language he uses is memory of self, understanding of self, and willing of self. The advantage of this idea is that it affirms both the dynamic unity and the ordered complexity of the self.

Then there is something about him. Augustine could think and write while being actively involved in the world as it was handed to him. So that the world informed his thinking and his thinking gave form to his world.
And even when he was “just” thinking and writing, he said that he wrote while he was thinking and thought while he was writing, and that—as in life itself, that long process of being healed and made whole—there is always room for going beyond anything one thought and wrote and was, on any given day. “Let us seek as expecting to find,” he wrote characteristically, “and let us find as expecting still to seek” (*On The Trinity*, IX.1). Even so, O’Donnell wants us to know that Augustine never freed himself of ambition, and that he always wanted to prevail. As he lay dying, with his great library and collection of his writings nearby, being catalogued and earlier commented upon with an eye for modification, he chose to be left alone in his room, with a collection of penitential psalms on the walls for his reading.

That may be beyond most of us, but it is a great and humane model.

**LUTHER**

**Luther’s Life**

There seems to be no end to the interest in Martin Luther. In recent years there have been a PBS special (a kind of reconstructive documentary complete with commentary by several scholars) and a commercial film, starring Joseph Fiennes and Peter Ustinov.

Understandably, the chief focus has been Luther’s break with Rome. It needs to be pointed out that his quarrel with Rome was not an isolated event. There was widespread resentment of the financial and political power centered in Rome at the time. The Roman Church had been a political force since the time of Constantine in the fourth century, and had over the centuries gained control of vast land holdings in all parts of Europe, in addition to revenue sources. This resentment was not limited to Germany (think of Henry VIII in England), but it was particularly acute there. Luther urged the German princes (there was no German nation until 1871) to reclaim the German Church for Germans. One could think of Luther as a sixteenth century German Patrick Henry.

There was also widespread disgust with what is broadly termed the moral and religious depravity of the Church, especially in Rome itself. The common view of Luther has always been that his protest against Rome was largely on this basis. This understanding, by the way, has been reinforced in recent treatments of Luther, as a result of a closer look at a trip Luther made to Rome as a monk in 1510-11, at which time his high spiritual expectations were met with a disillusioning experience of the Church in the Holy City. Surprisingly, Luther did not mention this experience in his writings between that time and 1517, the year of his Ninety-Five Theses and the beginning of the indulgence controversy, which eventually led to the break with Rome. Indeed, the point of his criticism of Rome took a very different form. It was only much later, when he was looking back on his life, that he spoke of this trip.

This is a good place to say something about Luther’s life before the break with Rome. He was born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben to peasant stock, Margaret and Hans Luther. Luther’s father had risen socially, being somewhat successful as a miner, and had ambition for his bright son, presumably in law. Martin attended several schools as a youth, and ended up at the University of Erfurt, where he earned the B.A. and M.A. Just before he was to enter the study of law, by his own account, he was caught in a thunderstorm. Frightened for his life, he cried out, “Help me, Saint Ann, and I will become a monk!” Several days later, to the dismay of his friends and the disappointment of his father, he entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt in 1505.
By all accounts (questioned by his detractors), Luther was a good monk, but his efforts brought him nothing but a sense of failure and doubt. He was eventually sent to Wittenberg, a small city in Saxony where the Elector Frederick the Wise (“Elector” because he was one of a small group of German princes who elected the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; called “the Wise,” my professor once said, because he said little) had recently founded a university. There Luther taught, principally Bible, for the rest of his life. In 1517 he wrote (in Latin), ostensibly for scholarly debate, ninety-five theses, occasioned by the sale of indulgences in Wittenberg by the Dominican preacher Tetzel. (We will look at the content of this document later). This ignited a controversy that culminated in his being excommunicated by Pope Leo X and in his appearance at the Imperial Diet (assembly) at Worms in 1521, where he refused to recant and after which he was put under imperial ban. He was placed in protective custody by his prince and hidden in the Castle Wartburg, where he lived in disguise as “Knight (or Junker) George” until his return to Wittenberg the following year.

During these years (1505-1521) Luther continued to struggle with his personal psychological and spiritual problems, and to seek some relief. And it is here that the biographers show the greatest interest. Just what was troubling him and what solution did he find?

Luther’s detractors, Roman Catholics until the later twentieth century, claimed that Luther’s problem was that he could not keep his monastic vows. He could not bridle his fleshly desires, they claimed, especially sexual ones, and he sought a definition of God’s expectation that would allow him release from his vows. They claimed that he had misread Paul on the righteousness of God, and ignored a long history of interpretation of Paul and related matters. Luther, they said, ended up fat and fearful. His defenders, Protestant and mainly Lutheran, claimed that the Catholic emphasis upon justification by works misrepresented the Gospel, especially as expressed by Paul—that justification is a gift of God, received by faith.

In 1959, Erik Erikson (a professor of psychoanalysis and a Freudian) took a different tact in a controversial study called *Young Man Luther*, in fact a study of adolescence by a scholar whose best known book is *Childhood and Society*. Put too simply, Erikson saw Luther’s dilemma as a conflict between his experience of his demanding father and his desire for a friendly God. Though criticized, this book opened the way for biographers to move beyond religious debate to the psychological struggles within the individual. The same can be done with Augustine.

One of the more recent biographies—by Richard Marius (1999)—persuasively identifies Luther’s problem as the fear of death. What Luther feared was not judgment or hell, Marius argues, but annihilation. His religious crisis was difficulty believing in the resurrection, or to put it more precisely, his struggle between doubt and belief, which he never transcended.

So what was troubling Luther?

**Luther’s Personal Struggle**

As I understand him, Luther’s problem was that he was trying to fulfill himself in a world in which the traditional definition of the self was no longer valid. Traditionally, a person found its true self by losing itself in prescribed and static terms in the greater good. Augustine’s statement was “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” To consider oneself apart from the greater good was pride, Augustine’s definition of sin.
By Luther’s time, there was the beginning of a shift to the individual, and the individual’s destiny in fulfilling its uniqueness apart from the greater good. This was reflected in Hans Luther’s achievement in moving out of peasantry into ownership, and in his aspirations for Martin. What this caused in the case of individual persons was a greatly increased sense of anxiety. The individual could not understand itself in terms of any universal (and, importantly, any universal social definition), and the question of its worth reached the level of anxiety or existential doubt: what Luther called “unbelief.” (This, by the way, was investigated brilliantly by Soren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century; William J. Bouwsma has written very instructively on anxiety in the sixteenth century.) The individual either had to prove its worth (“by works”) or receive its worth from beyond itself (“by grace”). Luther was persuaded that God granted worth to the individual as a gift, by grace—what he meant by justification by grace through faith.

I have been thinking about Marius’ 1999 biography Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death and his claim that Luther’s central problem was death. According to Marius, Luther was not concerned with hell, but with death itself. I think he has a point, because Luther certainly referred to death and resurrection (hence, the afterlife) throughout his writings. Marius claims that this issue provided his ongoing struggle between belief and doubt.

But I wonder why. Part of the answer, as Marius hints, is the overwhelming presence of death in Luther’s time, especially in light of the repeated attacks of the plague. Persons close to him died, many “before their time” (two of his own children died young). But in every time and culture death itself is a threat, largely because it breaks familial ties. Life after death assures that these ties will remain intact. In Christian conviction, this is expressed in the resurrection of the dead, with God as the guarantor. Luther spoke in these terms, as in his beautiful and reassuring letter to his dying father in 1530.

I think there is more. There is more because of the emerging idea of the individual. I see Luther’s fear of death in the context of his anxiety about his worth. When God Justifies us as a gift, God is “justifying” or making sense of our individual lives in a way known only to God (what Luther calls the “hidden God”). It certainly cannot be quantified in this life, but only received in trust. The confirmation of justification and the revelation of its content, so to speak—how our lives are made sense of—lies beyond the grave. That is why, by the way, there is a final judgment. Death is indeed a threat and the resurrection is a necessity, in the context of justification.

In any case, Luther’s central religious insight was justification by faith alone, and it was the key by which he read scripture, opposed the pope and others, interpreted the sacraments, discussed the place of the law and good works, defined the state, and sought authority for his views.

Just when Luther made his discovery is not entirely clear, and there has been much scholarly debate concerning it. We know from his later accounts that no matter how hard he tried as monk, beginning in 1505, he found no satisfaction but only increased torment. We also know that his mentor in the monastic order, Johannes von Staupitz, was of help to him, especially after Luther’s final transfer to Wittenberg in 1511. Staupitz thought Luther was taking himself too seriously and that he had a problem common to new monks: scruples. He advised Luther to meditate on the wounds of Christ rather than his own shortcomings. More important, recognizing Luther’s talents, he encouraged Luther to take the doctorate and teach in the university, ostensibly to get his mind off himself and on to the tasks of lecturing.

He was still wrestling with his problems and criticizes traditional church teaching, but no clear resolution is apparent. What is apparent is that he is drawing on a variety of sources in search of relief: Augustine, especially his polemic against free will and his distinction between the Spirit and the letter; the *Theological Germanica*, a medieval treatise that counseled poverty of the spirit; and an idea Luther developed, contrasting the “theology of the cross” and the “theology of glory.” By his own account, he had not resolved the problem of a judgmental God with the idea of “justification by faith alone” when he began his second series on the Psalms in 1519. This is after the Ninety-five Theses (1517) and in the midst of the indulgence controversy.

Luther’s distinctive predominant view—undergirding the doctrine of justification by faith alone—is the theology of the Word, which came to full expression in 1520 (in his treatises *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Freedom of a Christian*). By the “Word,” Luther is not referring to the Bible, but to the promise God has made through Christ to freely justify the individual.

**A Personal Disclaimer: Farley’s Luther**

My own attempts to understand Luther go back to 1955, in my first year at Union Theological Seminary in New York. To be honest, I was almost completely unprepared for theological studies, and I only gradually worked my way out of the consequent fear. Since I had studied Greek for two years in college, I decided in my first semester to take a Greek exegesis course on Paul’s letter to the Galatians with Professor John Knox, a gentle man. He was also one of the first to insist that Paul’s authentic letters alone, and not the Book of Acts, be used to ascertain his thought. Somewhere in the midst of that course Professor Knox made a startling statement. He said that Paul is not interested in God’s forgiveness, since that simply returns the one forgiven to the law, and nothing is changed. Professor Knox said that Paul was interested in God’s justification, “which declares the law unconstitutional.” Then he added, “That is why Martin Luther loved this book so much.”

After all these years, I still think that those words changed my life, as no other words have. I had long outgrown my childhood fears of hell. I did not feel guilty, and in fact felt quite good about myself (thanks to my parents’ confidence and the affirmation from all my teachers). In fact, I think I felt intellectually and morally superior. Remember: I was young. The concomitant of this was that I needed to perform well, and that my personal and individual performance was more important than being helpful or even productive. My professor’s comment on God’s justification declaring the law unconstitutional completely changed the rules of the game for my life. And I had a sense of great relief.

Put in religious language, this means that God justifies my life as a gift, and I can only access the benefits of that justification by faith (trusting in it). And this can relieve me from self-preoccupation and at least allows me to love others. That is what I understood and understand Luther to be saying. I have had to do a lot of refinement of this over time, but the basic position has remained unchanged and vitally important to me. I had a friend in graduate school who used to say, teasingly, “There is but one Luther, and Snell is his prophet.” Perhaps this section of the course should have been titled, “My Martin Luther: In His World and Mine.”

I tell all this to issue a warning. I have difficulty reading Luther dispassionately. I read Luther through my own experience; I expand on Luther when I think he is not clear enough; I restrict him when I think he wanders from the central point of his thought. In fact, where Luther occasionally disagrees with my understanding of him, I think I know what he means better than he does. But have I altered what he thought and believed? —I honestly do not think so. If anything, I have made it more helpful to people like me. But you need to keep all this in mind.
Luther’s Thought

Luther was not a systematic thinker, but he was generally a very consistent thinker (perhaps, some thought and may think, to a fault). He applied his core experience and thought—having to do with justification by faith—to other central concepts within Christian thought: the nature of sin, the work of Christ, the function of the sacraments, the place of good works and works of the law, the role of the state, and the foundation of authority. In each of these, his core view caused him to reinterpret traditional concepts. We turn to these.

The Nature of Sin

For Luther, sin is unbelief. It is the opposite of trusting God’s promise to freely justify the individual. “The First Commandment forbids us to have other gods, and thereby commands that we have a God, the true God, by a firm faith, trust, confidence, hope and love, which are the only works whereby a man can have, honor and keep a God; for by no other work can one find or lose God except by faith or unbelief, by trusting or doubting; of no other works none reaches quite to God” (1520).

The great sin, Luther never tired of repeating, is not to believe that God is gracious to us. “That kind of unbelief accuses God’s promise of being a lie, and this is the greatest of all sins” (1529). Unbelief binds the conscience and drives us to attempt to justify ourselves. It is a power, a fear, which holds our hearts and consciences in bondage. Actually, unbelief does not precede belief, but is a product of it. Doubt is only present where the promise is given. Hence, Luther can speak of the continuing attack (Anfechtung) of unbelief on belief. This may be what he means when he says that the Christian is “simultaneously just and sinful.”

This is different. Commonly, sin is a word used for specific acts that are out of conformity to what is expected by God or the community. Or, with greater sophistication, sin is thought of as a disposition or tendency—Augustine defined sin as pride (the positing of the individual as more important than God or the greater good); Calvin thought of it as disobedience (the rejection of creaturehood). But for Luther, what estranges us from God is not primarily pride or disobedience or moral failure, but unbelief, distrust. And it is our lack of trust in God’s promise of justification freely given that must be overcome.

The Work of Christ

Christ is the promise (Word) of God made flesh to overwhelm sin as unbelief in the individual. Unbelief generates the powers that hold us in fearful bondage—sin, death, and the law. God in Christ confronts these powers and unbelief itself, defeats them and reclaims the individual for the God of promise.

This idea is similar to a very old idea of the work of Christ, called the ransom or Christus Victor theory of the atonement. It was especially prominent in eastern Christianity. In it the action is between God and Satan. What happened according to this theory is that humanity itself has fallen into captivity to Satan, representing the powers of mutability and fragmentation. Sin in this view is not disobedience, but forgetfulness or ignorance. Humanity is ignorant of its true nature and place.

God as the unchangeable and the prime unity of all things seeks to reclaim (ransom) from Satan what belongs to God. This is done in several different ways. One is by reminding human beings of how they are to see and understand themselves as part of the divine immutable and unity (God). This can be done by sending a
reminder of what being one with God and within God looks like. Jesus Christ, as the Word made flesh, is that reminder.

Another related way is that the power of Satan (that is, the attractiveness of mutability and fragmentation) needs to be dealt with. In this scenario, Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word engages Satan in order to expose the illusionary nature of mutability and fragmentation. This leads, in the drama, to “tricking Satan” and ultimately to triumphing over Satan.

Luther’s view is similar and different. It is similar in that the drama is between God (incarnate in Christ) and Satan, in a struggle to reclaim humans to their proper place with God. The difference for Luther is that the power to be dealt with is unbelief in the lives of individuals. For Luther the Word of promise seeks to drive out unbelief and foster belief, or trust in God’s promise.

In this Luther departed radically from the theory of Christ’s work that was the dominant view in western Christianity, in the Roman Catholic Church and among many of Luther’s own followers. That view held that the drama was enacted, not between God and the powers, but between God and humanity. What was called for was not God reclaiming individuals from the power of unbelief, but Christ acting on behalf of a sinful humanity as a sacrifice to God, in order to achieve forgiveness of sin, and reestablish the order God intended. Luther rejected this idea, because even the work of Christ acting on behalf of humanity was based on the law and not on promise. In other words, in this view the work of Christ validated the law as the basis of being right with God, and for Luther righteousness under the law always gave a false sense of security. Indeed, it questioned God’s ability to justify freely, as a gift.

The Sacraments

This gave rise to Luther’s redefinition of the sacraments. By 1520, in The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, he criticized the Church’s teaching on the sacraments. The Church held to seven sacraments; Luther reduced the number to three, then two—baptism and the Eucharist. He supported the idea of the Eucharist in both kinds (the Church withheld the cup from the laity), but did not insist on it, since the benefit fully existed in each. He agreed with the Catholics on the real physical presence of Christ in the sacrament, though he disagreed with their philosophical explanation of it (which they had attempted through the doctrine of transubstantiation).

What Luther chiefly objected to was the Church’s position that the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a sacrifice.

Now there is yet a second stumbling block that must be removed, and this is much greater and the most dangerous of all. It is the common belief that the mass is a sacrifice, which is offered to God. Even the words of the canon seem to imply this, when they speak of “these gifts, these presents, these holy sacrifices,” and further on “this offering.” Prayer is also made, in so many words, “that the sacrifice may be accepted even as the sacrifice of Abel,” etc. Hence Christ is termed “the sacrifice of the altar.” Added to these are the sayings of the holy fathers, the great number of examples, and the widespread practice uniformly observed throughout the world.

Over against all these things, firmly entrenched as they are, we must resolutely set the words and example of Christ. For unless we firmly hold that the mass is the promise or testament of Christ, as the words clearly say, we shall lose the whole gospel and all its comfort. Let us permit nothing to prevail against these words—even though an angel from heaven should teach otherwise [Gal. 1:8]—for they contain nothing about a work or a sacrifice. Moreover, we also have the example of Christ on our side. When he instituted this sacrament and established this testament at the Last Supper, Christ did not offer
himself to God the Father, nor did he perform a good work on behalf of others, but, sitting at the table, he set this same testament before each one and proffered to him the sign. Now, the more closely our mass resembles that first mass of all, which Christ performed at the Last Supper, the more Christian it will be. (On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520), Luther’s Works, Vol. 36, pp 51-52)

Other Protestants accepted the idea of sacrifice, but objected to the idea that the sacrifice of Christ needed to be repeated—which they thought the Catholic doctrine of the real physical presence conveyed. Luther’s objection, as we would expect, was that Christ’s physical presence, even in Palestine, is never a sacrifice. Luther’s view was that Christ’s human existence was at all times merely a sign of the promise. Whether in Palestine or in the elements, nothing is done for God, but is the means by which God addresses the individual with the divine promise of justification in concrete form.

The same holds true of baptism. In baptism, the individual receives the promise of God, which is valid even if there is no prior and appropriate response. It is in this context that Luther defends infant baptism. In all cases, the water is again merely a sign, but the advantage of a sign is that the promise is now addressed to an individual.

*Works of the Law and Good Works*

Luther always said, following his reading of Paul, that we are justified by faith, apart from works of the law. He even talked of the law as one of the enemies of faith. The criticism of Luther’s position by some, even in his own time, was that he left the Christian with no moral requirements. The traditional charge was antinomianism (literally, “anti law”). The real fear was anarchy.

Luther was sensitive to the criticism that he left no place for good works, and he made an initial and interesting response in a treatise (On Good Works) published in 1520 in German. He made several points. The most important and essential “work” a Christian must do is to trust the good will of God, expressed in Christ. He likes to quote John 6.29, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” Everything one does that can be called “good” is done in faith (that is, in the assurance of God’s good will); otherwise it seeks some other reason, such as the benefit of the person who performs the work. All works are done to benefit the neighbor, and all works done in faith for the neighbor are equally good. That is, good works are performed in the mundane world in the person’s everyday work or “calling”—and not, for example, by members of religious orders.

The answer his followers and most subsequent Protestants gave in his defense goes this way. While it is true that we receive justification by God without any merit of our own and as a free gift, once we are justified we then obey the law out of gratitude. This has been called the third use of the law (we will discuss the other two below).

As I read Luther, this does not comply with his teaching. He does not think of justification as the first step in the Christian life. Justification by faith is the Christian life: the just shall live by faith (Romans 1.17), to which Luther often added “alone.” Works of the law are invalid within the context of promise, throughout life.

Luther was fond of citing Paul’s discussion of Abraham. In Galatians, Paul says that the promise came to Abraham and preceded the law by four hundred years. The law was added, Paul says, because of transgressions (3.19). “Now before faith came...the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to the disciplinarian” (3.24-25). This is traditionally the first use of the law: to restrain us until faith comes.
The second use of the law, again drawn from Paul, is that of a hammer to break down our pride and arrogance. Those who chose to justify themselves by adherence to the law will break themselves against it, and their failure will leave no recourse but to seek the promise of God.

Luther endorsed the first two uses of the law, but rejected the third—that the law has anything to do with the life of trust in the promise of God. From Luther’s point of view, works of the law are measurable and give a false sense of well-being, which constantly slips toward unbelief. Worse, works of the law are performed for the benefit of the one doing them, not other persons.

While Luther rejects works of the law, he does not reject good works. He says that the person who is no longer preoccupied with its own justification, is liberated to love and serve others. It is not gratitude that motivates good works; it is freedom from self-justification. In *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), perhaps his best work, he writes in a beautiful passage:

…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.

***

…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.

Behold, from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one’s neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss. For a man does not serve that he may put men under obligations. He does not distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness, but he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has, whether he wastes all on the thankless or whether he gains a reward. As the Father does, distributing all things to all men richly and freely, making “his sun to rise of the evil and the good” [Matthew 5.45], so also the son does all things with that freely bestowing joy which is his delight when through Christ he sees it in God, the dispenser of such great benefits.

…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 should become as it were a Christ to each other that we may be Christs to one another…Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs to one another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us.

In short, for the justified person, love replaces law.

**The State: Authority in Civil Matters**

Luther’s followers on occasion wondered whether the law could be abandoned in the context of faith and love. Philip Melanchthon, his closet ally, wrote to Luther while he was at the Wartburg, pondering whether the civil authority with its “sword” was needed in a Christian community. And later Johann Agricola, in the mid-thirties, proposed that the law had no place in the Christian life (since love directed human acts).
Luther was far from being naïve or sentimental about human nature, and he never claimed that Christians of his persuasion were any better morally than their Catholic counterparts. He once commented, after having visited congregations in Electoral Saxony (in 1529), “now that the gospel has come, they have learnt well enough how they may abuse their liberty.”

Because persons need restraint on their behavior, while the promise of God has not yet taken full effect, the law is valid. This is the first use of the law, to which Luther subscribed—that of disciplinarian (after Paul’s discussion in Galatians 3.24-25). Luther can speak of the law in this sense as the “left hand of God” or God’s “alien work” (the promise of God or the gospel is the right hand of God or God’s “proper work”).

This understanding of the purpose of the law—sometimes called the civil use—led Luther to posit two realms. One realm was where God did God’s proper work, the activity of the Word or promise. The other realm was that of God’s alien work, the use of the law to establish order in society—presumably because the Word worked better in a stable situation. These realms were roughly represented by the Church with its ministry of Word and Sacrament and the State with its coercive power (the “sword”) to maintain social order.

In May or June of 1524, peasants rebelled in the Black Forest region, setting off a widespread series of revolts throughout Germany. The causes varied and were often local in nature, mostly but not entirely economic. Early on the movement took on religious and scriptural justification, and even an appeal to Luther’s idea of liberty. There were informed and capable leaders, articulated in a manifesto widely circulated. There were some successes. The Peasants’ War lasted until 1526, but by March of 1525, the Protestant and Catholic forces had turned the tide, and quite brutally. This exercise of force to maintain order was entirely consistent with Luther’s views. In May 1525 he published Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, which has brought Luther into disrepute with all who seek social justice. Luther was no advocate for social change.

Luther intended the two realms to be distinguished from one another, but in reality they tended to become separated, and often with ominous consequences. The State claimed for itself divine authority in all matters having to do with social order and relegated the Church to matters concerning salvation and personal morality.

**Authority in Religious Matters**

Within the religious realm itself, however, Luther faced a special problem. On what basis did he repudiate the authority of Rome and, indeed, the tradition of the Church through fifteen hundred years?

He enlisted a strong ally: the Bible. When he refused to recant his writings in his now famous speech at the Imperial Diet at Worms in 1521, he said, “Unless I am convicted by the testimony of scripture or plain reason… I am bound by the scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.” He could appeal to ancient church thinkers (he was especially adept at using Augustine), and he often appealed to a “future council,” but the Bible remained his bulwark.

It was an ally with which he was familiar. He lectured on books of the Bible throughout his teaching career. Of the fifty-five volumes in the American Edition of his works (selected and translated from the nearly one hundred folio volumes in the Weimar Edition), twenty-nine are his lectures on the Bible. He translated the Bible from its original languages into German (he translated the New Testament from Erasmus’ Greek edition in eleven weeks while in hiding at the Wartburg, publishing it in 1522; the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew and appeared in 1534).
But the Bible to which he turned as his primary authority on theological matters was not the Word of God—it, as some would phrase it, contained the Word of God. This was an old claim: that the Bible throughout had but one simple message. This was called the “rule of faith,” a term first used by Irenaeus in the third century. Augustine, for example, had said that the whole of scripture could be read as espousing the Great Commandments (love of God; love of neighbor). For Luther the Word contained in the Bible from start to finish was the promise of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ. Though he claimed he simply read the “plain sense” of scripture, he actually read the Bible Christologically, throughout. He could say to some of his fellow Protestants, “If you cite the Bible against me, I will cite the Lord of the Bible against you.”

When in 1530 at the Diet of Augsburg (called by the emperor to attempt some rapprochement between Protestants and Catholics, principally because of the threat by the Turks), his colleague Melanchthon asked what concessions could be made, Luther (restricted to the nearby Coburg) wrote, “As I have always written, I am ready to concede all things [to the opponents] if only the gospel is permitted to remain free with us. What is contrary to the gospel, however, I cannot concede.”

What Luther did was to take his own religious experience (being delivered from unbelief by the promise of justification) and absolutize it. He accepted no other meaning of the gospel, found it expressed in Paul, and then throughout the Bible. He was ultimately his own authority.

Luther in Controversy

Christians may have loved one another, as Tertullian (in the third century) claimed and as Luther hoped, but they never agreed. The history of the Christian Church is marked by theological controversy, from the New Testament itself through the often bitter and violent conflicts over the nature of God and of Christ in the third through fifth centuries, to the writings of Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries (against the Manicheans, the Donatists, the Pelagians), and on in to our own time.

Luther was embroiled in controversy from the time he wrote the Ninety-five Theses in 1517 until his death in 1546. The sixteenth century was one of those times of controversy, in this case energized by the new printing press, and Luther never backed away from controversy over what he considered an attack on his position. In fact, he reveled in it more and more.

Indulgences and Papal Authority

This started innocently enough. Luther objected to the crass sale of papal indulgences by a Dominican preacher named Tetzel in a nearby town. He expressed his objection in a letter to his superior the Archbishop of Mainz, accompanied by a set of ninety-five theses that presumably were to be debated.

The sale was based on the presupposition of purgatory, a state or place this side of heaven where souls were working on their perfection. The time this takes—even millions of years—could be reduced by an indulgence, whereby the merits of the saints were credited to the soul in purgatory.

Luther’s objection was not to the sale of indulgences, but to the idea that perfection was something that was done by a person, rather than in a person. His objection hinged on the difference between penance and repentance: one is a penalty, the other a change of heart. Someone else can do penance for you, perhaps, but no one--and certainly no indulgence--can change your heart for you. This objection, by the way, was in no way
based on the idea of justification by faith, but rather on Augustine’s distinction between love of self (working to gain reward or escape punishment) and love of God (desiring nothing but the greatest good).

The subject was never seriously debated, because it was immediately seen that the real issue was Luther’s challenge to church tradition and the authority of the pope. The Catholics—such as Thomas More in England, the reform minded Thomist Cardinal Cajetan, and the brilliant Johann Eck—hammered Luther with one basic point. Surely Christ would not have permitted his church to remain in error for fifteen hundred years, and the successor to Peter (the pope) is the guarantee against multiple versions of Christian truth. Luther responded that history shows that popes and even councils have been in error. Moreover, the Eastern Church had never acknowledged the primacy of Rome. In fact, no pope was present at the great Councils at Nicaea and Chalcedon. And of course none of this was ever settled.

Whatever Luther’s interest at the time or his later conviction about the Gospel, it was his opposition to the authority of pope that riveted the attention of people in the German lands and accounted for his immense and growing popularity.

Reforming the Church

It was one thing to oppose tradition and the pope, and to effect a break with both. It was quite another to establish something in its place. Luther was not inclined in this direction, nor was he trained in institutional reformulation. In many ways, he was inept at it.

Part of the reason, as we might expect, is that he was primarily interested in the preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments, rooted in his understanding of the promise. All other matters were important only in respect to this commitment, and most other matters were only incidentally important.

Actually, Luther believed that institutional change, even in important matters, would follow in time from the preaching of the Word. He could say, “I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word…did everything.”

Others were not so confident. While Luther was cloistered as an outlaw at the Wartburg, they moved with vigor to reform the church in Wittenberg. The leader was Carlstadt, a senior colleague of Luther’s at the university. At Christmas 1521, wearing no vestments, he celebrated the Eucharist in the vernacular (the first to do so), administered the elements in both kinds (bread and wine) to the laity, and with no reference to the sacrifice. Subsequently, he declared that confession was unnecessary before communion, rules of fasting were not binding, and that images had no place in the church. Outbreaks of actual destruction of altars and images resulted.

Luther returned to Wittenberg in March and delivered a series of sermons (later published as the Eight Wittenberg Sermons, some of Luther’s best writing) in a successful attempt to restore order. He reminded his listeners that the Christian’s whole life and being is faith and love—faith directed toward God and love toward one’s neighbor. Faith is never compelled (matters should be “left to God, and his Word should be allowed to work alone, without our work or interference”). Love means patience in matters of outward reform: “In all these things love is the captain.” On outward matters (including images) the Christian is free (“What God has made free shall remain free. If anybody forbids it…you should not obey”) but should not make liberty a law. (Luther
was to write a fuller and thought provoking treatment on images in a later treatise against Carlstadt in 1525, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*.

Radical change was stifled. Order was restored. A conservative approach to church reform was in place. Luther settled in for a frustrating life as “pope of Wittenberg.”

**Infant Baptism and the Real Presence**

Curiously, it was with others who rejected the pope and tradition that Luther had to contend. Examples are those who insisted on adult baptism (the Anabaptists) and who rejected the real physical presence of Jesus Christ in the elements of the Eucharist (Zwingli).

The Anabaptists (from the Greek for “re-baptism”) received that name because they required that those baptized as infants be baptized again as adults. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* delineates seven groups that can be categorized under this name, including the Mennonites. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin were among their enemies. They were widely persecuted and executed, often—in a cruel irony—by drowning.

The crux of the difference was baptism. Since Luther claimed that faith was necessary to access the promise, it would seem that he would agree that one needed faith in order to be baptized—that baptism was a confirmation of belief. He did not. For him the water of baptism was merely a physical sign of the promise, and the promise is given without any prior condition, such as faith. Since the promise is a gift without precondition, it can and should be given to all people, including infants. If faith is required for baptism, when could one be sure that she or he believed and believed enough? --as faith took deeper form, a person would need to be baptized time and again, as Luther wrote in 1528 (*Concerning Re-baptism*).

Luther had already laid out his criticism of the Catholic Mass or Eucharist, especially in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520). But he also differed from others who objected to the Catholic sacrament. They held that the sacrament was a memorial of Christ’s death. Luther held that Christ was bodily or physically present in the Eucharist; and wrote extensively on the subject through the 1520’s.

Religious and theological differences continued within a highly charged political scene in Europe at the time. One of the reasons the emperor was unable to enforce his ban on Luther, for example, was that the empire (actually the German states, Spain and a part of northern Italy) was under threat by the Turks. The emperor could not afford to alienate any of the German princes. Another factor was the fact that the German states themselves were split between Catholicism and Luther’s movement (now called Evangelical). The supporters of the break with Rome needed unity within their ranks, and it became important to resolve religious and theological differences among the Protestants (so called after the Diet of Speyer in early 1529).

In an attempt to achieve this unity, Philip of Hesse called for a colloquy to convene at Marburg later in 1529 to resolve Protestant differences over the Eucharist. Though it involved a number of theologians from both sides, it was essentially a meeting of Luther and Zwingli (from Zurich). All involved were superbly educated in the Christian tradition and brought a full command of Greek to the discussions of New Testament texts.

Zwingli taught that in the sacrament people remembered and benefited from what Jesus Christ had done “once for all” in Palestine: obedience to God on behalf of humans on the basis of which Jesus is now seated (as a
place honor and influence) “at the right hand of God.” Luther held that the fleshly body of Jesus Christ was and is a sign of the promise of God extended to all who partake in the sacrament; hence Jesus is as truly present as promise in the sacrament as he was in Palestine. For Luther the “right hand of God” is not the place of honor for the obedient son, but rather the ever active right hand by which God does the divine work.

No agreement on the key issue was achieved. As with many controversies, these two camps were like two ships flying under the same flag, embarking from different ports and en route to different destinations, colliding but not touching.

On Free Will or Its Bondage

There were others beside Luther and before him who sought reformation of the Church. Of these many sought to address the corruption and abuses in Church, among them some who opposed Luther and never left the Catholic Church—including Cardinal Cajetan, who engaged him at Augsburg in 1518, and Erasmus, the great scholar and writer.

Erasmus’ interest was in a good society, peopled by persons of morals and good character. He attacked the abuses in the Church, sought to get beyond theology and ritual, and espoused what he called the “philosophy of Christ.” He produced a critical edition of the Greek New Testament and commented on it. He saw Christ as portrayed in the Gospels, one who exemplified and taught the spiritual life, expressed in large part by moral behavior.

Luther had taught all along that even good works done outside faith were sinful, and that faith itself followed the promise and was created by it. So even faith was a gift rather than a decision by the believer. There was nothing a person could do to please God.

For Erasmus, this cut the nerve of the moral life. His whole hope for society and the individual rested on the human ability to choose good and resist evil.

In 1524 Erasmus, at the urging of many of his friends, wrote a short treatise attacking Luther. He did not choose to debate Luther on the question of the authority of the pope and church tradition, since he probably shared—albeit in a milder form—Luther’s views on these items. He chose rather to attack Luther’s position on free will, and his treatise was entitled On the Freedom of the Will, which he purported to argue strictly from scripture. He was on solid ground, because most of the Bible, including the teachings of Jesus, assumed that people could choose.

Luther’s long and vitriolic response came in 1525 in On the Bondage of the Will. Luther’s underlying position was his version of that taken by Augustine (Luther had been after all an Augustinian monk) in a controversy with Pelagius, whose views were not unlike those of Erasmus. Augustine had held that even good works were of no value if done out of desire for reward or fear of punishment—because, if the reward or threat were removed, there would be no reason to do them, and hence they were undependable and not good. Works, he claimed, were only good if they were done out of a desire for the good itself or the greatest good—what he called love of God, as distinguished from inordinate self-interest. He further claimed that the love of God (hence properly motivated works) could not be chosen, but was instead given “by the Holy Spirit shed abroad in our hearts” (Paul). Luther simply substituted, as consistent with his views, “faith in God” for “love of God.”
Their debate did not really address this difference. Instead, it sank in the murky waters of predestination, foreknowledge, fate, determinism and providence. They agreed, in discussing these matters, that there was much about God that cannot be known. From this Erasmus concluded that we should be content with our moral tasks. Luther predictably maintained that we know the promise (“God revealed”) and should cling to it. They liberated themselves, each from the other.

The Legacy of Luther

[For a brief and helpful discussion, read Martin Marty’s “Afterword: Luther in the New Millennium,” in his Martin Luther, in The Penguin Lives (2004).]

Luther has been acclaimed as the great champion of religious freedom, the hero standing up to authority in matters of faith. There is some truth to this, as the recent film on Luther maintains. But the claim has to be balanced by the fact that Luther was also the great champion of his own version of right thinking, and he tolerated no disagreement. There was no religious tolerance in Wittenberg.

He has been blamed for totalitarianism, especially as it came to expression in the Third Reich. This claim comes from his teaching on the two realms: that God is active in distinct ways in the religious and the political realms, and the two should never be confused. But since the political realm operates under the authority of God, it cannot be questioned or opposed. This was the position of the German-Christians in support of the Third Reich.

Luther has been credited with turning the attention of Christians to Scripture. His translation of the Bible into German as well as his extensive and probing commentaries underscores this claim. His insights are always stimulating. He sought the obvious meaning of the text—he called this the literal meaning, but he was no literalist. At the same time his insistence that the Bible is consistent throughout in having a single meaning (Christ as “the central point of the circle around which everything else in the Bible revolves”) has led to a kind of biblical right thinking and a cross-reference approach to studying the Bible that is in conflict with modern analytical approaches, which expose the diversity of thought within scripture.

He has also been blamed for the rabid anti-Semitism that culminated in the holocaust during the Third Reich. It may be pointed out that the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, is anti-Semitic, and Luther only showed its influence. Moreover, there was a long tradition of hatred and suspicion of the Jews, which Luther simply adopted and expanded. Interestingly, Luther reserved his greatest vehemence for the rabbis, who refused to join with him in finding Christ throughout Hebrew Scriptures. Whatever the reasons, Luther was a towering figure in German consciousness, and what he wrote carried authority on this matter. Anti-Semitism received his stamp of approval.

Even though he lived at the edge of the modern era and in one way at least anticipated it, Luther was a medieval man with little to say on present day issues. Not on ecological matters, not on women’s issues, not on the problems of democracy, not on comparative religions and cultures (though we can well imagine what he would say). Even though he ridiculed the efficacy of relics, he was superstitious. He believed that storms and plagues really were “acts of God.” He thought the world was filled with devils, many incarnate in his adversaries. Two witches were burned in Wittenberg (in his absence, but there is no evidence that he disapproved).
For all of that, Luther’s understanding of anxiety and his way of living with it under his understanding of justification by faith, has continued to speak to our time, and have a helpful and challenging word to certain personality types. There are many branches of Lutheranism (with sixty three million adherents worldwide), all of which claim to be the heirs of Luther. My own view is that in many important respects they have departed from his key religious insight. There has always been discussion of whether his colleague Philip Melanchthon fully understood the nuances of Luther’s thought, and it was Melanchthon who gave the initial systematic treatment of Lutheran doctrine, first in his many editions of his *Loci communes* and then as principal author of the Augsburg Confession (1530). In any case, the Formula of Concord, drawn up in 1577 to reconcile divergent views among Lutherans, emphasized the sacrifice of Christ and the third use of the law, both of which differ from my reading of Luther. The fact that in 1999 Roman Catholics and most Lutheran leaders could sign a joint declaration on the doctrine of justification, leads me to think that Luther misread the Catholic position originally or that his followers have misread Luther.

One of the things that continues to fascinate some is the sheer humanity of Luther. He was by all accounts witty and warm. He was exceptionally sensitive to persons suffering anxiety in spiritual matters, writing beautiful and helpful letters.

For those who tire of civility and compromise, he was at the same time a person of unbending conviction, who could be vitriolic in his attacks on those he disagreed with. He was not easy to get along with, as Melanchthon commented at his funeral. He came to be disgusted with the people of his congregation, like teachers who grow to detest their students.

For those who are pleasantly surprised by coarse language, Luther’s was, to put it politely, scatological. He suffered from chronic constipation, hemorrhoids, and urinary problems, and his language is full of references to his rectum and to his feces. Examples: “I know that without the grace of God, nothing good is in me and that I am nothing more than a stinking piece of shit.” “I am the ripe shit; so also is the world a wide asshole; then soon we shall part.” Some claim that this was not unusual for his time and for his background in Saxony, but he certainly did not restrain himself, nor want to.

He liked to drink beer. He liked music. He liked the marriage bed (“Katy’s naked body in bed was the instrument of God for his depression,” he said). He liked to talk, excessively so.

He never pretended to be something he was not.

He never hid his deep and continuing doubt.

In 1521, he wrote to Melanchthon from the Wartburg, “God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death and the world.”

In commenting on those words of Luther, Martin Marty (in the closing words of his biography) writes, “...he said, ‘sin boldly,’ and did; and for those reached by his interpretation of the Christian gospel, he taught them to believe and to rejoice even more boldly, as he did.”

My kind of Christian.