

LUTHER'S POOR REFORM AND CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

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Latin American Evangelicals have readily accepted and assimilated Martin Luther's teaching about justification by faith alone. They have paid less attention to his serious attempt to bridge the gap between this basically individual tenet of personal salvation and the desperate plight of the poor parishioners of Saxony. He dismantled the haphazard medieval practise of almsgiving as a means of attaining spiritual merit but needed to replace it with some system of alleviating the physical suffering of the poor. The fact that he was not altogether successful in his attempt is one of the reasons why the Reformation followed different patterns in other areas of Europe. It may also serve as a salutary reminder to us that we need more than a personal promise of salvation if we are to address the needs of modern Latin America with the Gospel message.

The relationship between Martin Luther's theology and his contribution to Poor Reform is a contentious issue. Confessional theologians have fought frequent battles across the terrain of this vexed subject. It cannot be denied, however, that he was a moving force behind the Poor Reform in Wittenberg and his suggestion to set up a Common Chest was taken up across Germany and beyond, by both Protestant and Catholic cities. On the other hand, the very different interpretation that was placed on his basic theological motivations by other reformers must make us very wary in accepting a simple linear relationship between theology and social welfare in Luther's thinking. His blood-curdling advice to the princes that they should massacre the peasants in the Peasant's War of 1525 has always been ample evidence to his detractors that something is seriously wrong in Luther's approach and should cause us to tread carefully as we approach the subject. His work of 1520, entitled *The Freedom of a Christian*, is a beautifully written and very moving tract in which he sets out his theological reasons for Christian charity in action. Very clearly, Luther himself sees the concept of 'freedom' to be the mainspring for action. Indeed, Strauss

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goes so far as to declare that "The issue of freedom, more specifically of Christian freedom, seems to me to go to the heart of Reformation concerns; in an important sense it is what the Reformation was about."¹ We must, then, make a critical analysis of the document, with a special concern to discover its contradictions, if they exist, and to ask ourselves how Luther's freedom came to be interpreted and applied differently in other contexts. To set the scene, we shall begin with a brief history of Luther's contribution to the changes that occurred in Poor Reform, then we shall move on to an analysis of *The Freedom of a Christian*. Finally, it is hoped, we shall be able to shed light on the way other reformers used the doctrines, adapting them to their own circumstances.

The association of concern for the poor with reform of the church was not new.² Furthermore, the growth of poverty and the number of vagrants were problems that no civil or ecclesiastical leader of the time could ignore³. Luther had written the preface to Mathias Hütlin's *Liber Vagatorum* (1510) and so was conscious of the problem long before the Reformation. Grimm argues that Luther's ideas for poor reform came primarily from four sources, (1) the theory and practise of the medieval church, (2) the practical experiences of German city councils, (3) the reform programmes of humanists and (4) the Bible.⁴ Certainly, it was not uncommon for city councils to pass laws to try and regulate begging, neither was it uncommon for humanists to contrast the begging, able-bodied

¹ Gerald Strauss, "Three Kinds of 'Christian Freedom': Law, Liberty, and License in the German Reformation", in Gerhard Dünhaupt, ed., *The Martin Luther Quincentennial Conference* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1985), 291-306 and reprinted as Essay XV in Gerald Strauss, *Enacting the Reformation* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993).

²For example, the Lollards and John Huss. See Margaret Aston, "Cain's Castles: Poverty, Politics and Disenchantment" in Barrie Dobson, ed., *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century* (New York: St. Martins 1984) 45-81; and Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1993) 177.

³See F. Graus "The Late Medieval Poor in Town and Countryside" in Sylvia Thrupp, ed., *Change in Medieval Society: Europe North of the Alps 1050-1500* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto 1988) 314-324; Catherina Lis & Hugo Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979) 71-82; Lindberg, *Beyond Charity* 33-43.

⁴Harold J Grimm, "Luther's Contribution to Sixteenth Century." *Archiv. für Reformationsgeschichte* 81 (1990) 233; see also Lindberg *Beyond Charity* 71-84.

ied friars with the poor who were genuinely unable to sustain themselves. However, it is Luther's theological motivation which concerns us here.

Luther's desire to act on behalf of the poor surfaced, briefly, in his Ninety-five Theses (1517) and his subsequent elaboration: "Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences."⁵ Here we meet Luther's giant step that would carry poor relief out of the field of individual, scattered alms-giving to organised programmes run by the secular authorities. He took the argument further in his sermons on usury⁶ and concluded that there should be no begging among Christians. He called upon the rulers to take action to support the needy, while condemning the usurers. Doubtless he felt vindicated when prices in Wittenberg doubled within twenty years while wages remained the same.⁷ This attack on early capitalism has won him applause from Marxist historians, to whom, however, it comes as no surprise that the princes paid little or no attention to Luther's appeals. His *Address to the German Nobility* (1520) is an important document which reiterates the arguments and extends them. His twenty-first proposal begins, "One of the greatest necessities is the abolition of all begging throughout Christendom."⁸

Practical action followed. The Wittenberg town council formulated its *Order for the Common Purse*, the *Beutelordnung*. Although Barge attributed the document to Karlstadt's leadership, Karl Müller discovered a manuscript of the Order annotated in Luther's hand. The city council records demonstrate that the chest with three keys, as demanded by it was bought on January 11th 1521.⁹ This chest was to receive the voluntary offerings for distribution to the needy. In Luther's absence at Wartburg, it fell to Karlstadt to lead the Wittenberg council into the fuller *Order of the City of Wittenberg*.¹⁰ This called for the income from the churches, brotherhoods and guilds to be collected together into a common chest. To this was to be added the endowments left over on the death of the recipient. Where the resources were insufficient, everyone was to contribute a yearly sum according to their

⁵Henceforth LW: Jaroslav Pelikan, and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg 1962) 31:29 and 31:204.

⁶LW 45:233-310.

⁷Lindberg, *Beyond Charity* 114.

⁸LW 44:189.

⁹See Carter Lindberg, "'There Should Be No Beggars Among Christians': Karlstadt, Luther, and the Origins of Protestant Poor Relief." *Church History* 46 (1977) 322-327.

¹⁰Reproduced in Lindberg, *Beyond Charity* 200-202.

means. The money was to be used to sustain those unable to work, orphans, and the children of poor people who were also to be supported through school from the fund. Artisans could be lent money when establishing themselves, maidens could be given an appropriate dowry, and, of course, the pastors were to be supported. Beggars, mendicant friars and foreign students with no means of support were banned from the city. Just two of the orders refer to the reformation of the mass and the abolition of images, but they were sufficient to cause a rift between Luther and Karlstadt that would cause irreparable harm.¹¹ However, on the Poor Reform, they seem to have been in agreement, and Luther went on to counsel the citizens of Leisnig in 1523 on the organization of their Common Chest¹² which recommended that property of dissolved monasteries be used to provide for the religious who chose to remain in their order until death and help those who wished to resettle. What was left over should be used for the needy unless the heirs of the original donors were in dire straits themselves. A tax was to be paid to the Chest - a "trifling annual contribution" of one silver groschen every quarter.¹³ Similarly, he influenced the councils of Altenburg, Nuremburg, Strasbourg and, through Johann Bugenhagen, Braunschweig, Lübeck and Hamburg.¹⁴ It is likely that the very influential Catholic document *The Poor Order of Ypres* (1525)¹⁵ was influenced by Luther, and the humanist Juan Luiz Vives claimed that his own work on Poor Reform was considered to be Lutheran.¹⁶

Let us now ask ourselves why Luther felt so obliged to act on behalf of the poor. Obviously, from a purely pragmatic point of view, having tried to persuade his parishoners to stop handing out alms haphazardly to the poor, something had to be put in its place. Yet, Luther's enthusiasm for caring for the poor welled up from a deep theological conviction which he expounded in the document we are about to discuss. Dillenberger comments that, "If one were to single out one short document representing the content and spirit of Luther's faith, *The Freedom of a Christian* would undoubtedly be at the top."¹⁷ The work itself is based on two propositions:

¹¹See James S. Preus, *Carlstadt's Ordinaciones and Luther's Liberty: A Study of the Wittenberg Movement 1521-22* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Theological Press, 1974).

¹²LW 45:159-194.

¹³*Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁴Lindberg, *Beyond Charity*(1993), 28-145.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 202-206.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁷John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961) 42.

The Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
The Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Luther admits that the two propositions seem to be contradictory but states his desire to see if they can be harmonized. In other words, he is seeking a moral imperative in an ethically passive framework of total liberty.

His first principle, that the believer is completely free, is established by an exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith: "It is clear that the inner man cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all, and that these works, whatever their character have nothing at all to do with this inner man."¹⁸ Faith alone justifies the believer and to believe is to worship by trusting obediently in God's promises. When God sees such belief, He glorifies the believer by reckoning his faith as righteousness. Faith unites the soul with Christ, as a bride is united with the bridegroom, freeing the Christian from all sins, freeing him from death and hell, endowing him with internal righteousness, life and salvation. As for works, these can be done to glorify God if faith is present. However, it is false teaching to say that the commandments must be fulfilled by works. On the contrary, the commandments must be fulfilled by faith in Christ's sacrifice before any works can be done. So: "Faith alone is the righteousness of the Christian and the fulfilling of all the commandments."¹⁹

Having established the grounds of the Christian's salvation, Luther goes on to consider, briefly, some consequences of his faith, notably the priesthood and kingship of all believers. We become lord over all in the sense that we need nothing more to save us. All things are subject to us, in a spiritual sense, because we do not have necessity of them. Luther is not talking about physical domination here, but spiritual. Our priesthood allows us to appear before God, pray for others and teach them divine things. In conclusion, then: "A Christian is free from all things and over all things so that he needs no works to make him righteousness and save him, since faith alone abundantly confers these things."²⁰ It is a clear exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith, but it involves the relegation of Scripture to the role of a convicting and illuminating influence. Luther, quite deliberately, removes from it any normative demands for Christian living. Scripture is composed of commands and promises. However, the purpose of the commands is only to convince man of his sin: "They are intended

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 62.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 64.

to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognise his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability. That is why they are called the Old Testament..."²¹ In contrast, the promises of God fulfil the law, and therefore belong to the New Testament: "...the Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law, for "the law is not laid down for the just"[I Tim 1:9]. This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness and salvation"²² As we shall see, his colleagues and friends found such a role for Scripture to be inadequate for their needs

To expound his second principle, he feels obliged to begin, not surprisingly, by defending himself against those who question why we need good works at all. We can be sure that he was challenged on the question by many people.²³ It is worthwhile remembering that even his friend Karlstadt had pointedly chosen to lecture at the University on the Epistle of James! Luther's vehemence really does beg the question of why one should need to do anything else at all, having believed. Or, to go back to his original propositions, what logical reason is he going to find to connect such absolute freedom with moral imperatives? He has emptied Biblical commandments of their power to govern us, so what is left to lead the Christian towards good works? He avoids any suggestion that the Bible tells us to perform them, and instead bases his premise on gratitude. His argument is that the Christian is so joyful because of what Christ has done for him that his one occupation is to serve God joyfully. When we understand how much He did in order to give us salvation so freely we cannot help but love him the more. Now this is undeniably true, but it still does not answer the question of why we should drive ourselves to do good. Logically, we would be just as saved and just as eternally blessed if we did nothing more at all. However, Luther's rejoinder is that if we were perfect people then there would most certainly not be any need to strive to do good because we would do good without any further prompting. However, in real life, when we try to serve God joyfully we meet the opponent of our own flesh which needs to be subdued and brought under control. While the Christian is in this world he cannot relax and just enjoy his salvation. He must

²¹*Ibid.*, 57.

²²*Ibid.*, 58.

²³His *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), LW 44:21-114, was written at the suggestion of Spalatin because of this.

fast, pray, discipline and control his body so that his gratitude may emanate in good works. The inner man, then, must wage war on the outer man if he is to fulfil his desire to "serve God joyfully and without thought of gain, in love that is not constrained."²⁴

What of the good works themselves? He argues that works are only good if done in faith. Once again, Luther seems to be sailing close to the wind. By writing off every good work as evil, unless done in full consciousness that it is not for salvation, he could well be accused of offering no stimulus to those who are unsure or uncaring of their own particular salvation, neither does he place any moral brake on those who feel that the desires of the flesh are irresistibly strong. There is no imperative for social transformation, and this is another important point to which we shall return later in this study. He does, however, hold up an ideal of good works towards one's neighbour "A man does not live for himself alone,... but also for all men on earth; rather, he lives only for others and not for himself."²⁵ He subjugates his body so that he may serve others. He should work with his hands so that he may give to the needy. Therefore: "We should devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus with which he can by voluntary benevolence serve and do good to his neighbour."²⁶ In conclusion, the Christian ought to think: "Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbour, 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 neighbour, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ."²⁷

He stresses the the word 'freely', continuing, "... we ought freely to help our neighbour through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another."²⁸ True freedom is spiritual and frees

²⁴Dillenburger, *Martin Luther: Selections* 67.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 73.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 75.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 76.

our hearts from all "sins, laws and commands."²⁹ He ends by stressing that the ceremonies of Christian polity are of secondary importance and should not be despised nor used as reason for boasting about freedom. The strong should observe the laws with the weak and so win them. Freedom means that we should not compel people to change their form of external worship even though we may be right. The form of religion should be altered voluntarily, not by coercion. This, then, is Martin Luther's Reformation. It is to be a voluntary change, based on the freedom of justification by faith, which will result in a new commitment to one's neighbour. Other supporters expressed the same ideas. An anonymous pamphlet (perhaps by Joachim Vadian.), *On the Old and the New God, Faith and Doctrine* (1520), follows a similar pattern in that the Bible leads to understanding about God, which leads to stronger faith which leads to loving ones neighbour³⁰. Both Bucer and Spengler used similar arguments.³¹ Ozment concludes that "Individual freedom and humble self-confidence were the watchwords for the first protestants."³²

Has Luther proved his point? Does his individualistic doctrine of justification by faith lead to a commitment to the poor? Is there a linear relationship from his theology to poor reform? Bonnie Lee Brummel points out that he does not use the word 'poor' here at all. Although he mentions the 'needy', he prefers the more general term 'neighbour'.³³ In her analysis of the Biblical language of the poor used by Luther she sees four stages which serve as a 'sensitive barometer' to the various historical and theological pressures that Luther was feeling at the time he wrote his various works. These are:

²⁹*Ibid.*, 80.

³⁰See Alister E. McGrath, "Justification and the Reformation: The Significance of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith to the Sixteenth Century Urban Communities." *Archiv. für Reformationsgeschichte* 81 (1990) 14.

³¹Martin Bucer, *One Should Not Live for Oneself Alone But For Others* (1523) in Robert Stupperich, ed., *Martin Bucers Deutsche Schriften*, vol. 1 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1960) 29-67; Lazarus Spengler, *Die haubt artickel durch welche gemeyne Christenheyt bysshere verfuret worden ist. Daneben auch grund und antzeygen eyns gantzen rechten Christenlichen wessens*, ed. Nicolaus von Amsdorf (Wittenberg: Nickel Schirlenz, 1522).

³²Steven E. Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth Century Germany and Switzerland* (New Haven: Yale University 1975) 120.

³³B. L. Brummel, "Luther and the Biblical Language of Poverty", *Ecumenical Review* 32 (1980) 40-58.

1. From 1513 to 1516 the poor are understood only in spiritual terms.

2. From 1516 to 1519 he sees the poor much more in socio-economic terms and criticises the secular and ecclesiastical authorities for their lack of concern for the poor.

3. From 1519 to 1530 his new emphasis on justification by faith leads him to see the need of the poor as spiritual, and his development of the theology of the cross led him to annex the biblical language of poverty to his concept of the suffering, humble despised Christian. The physical needs of the poor are not mentioned. "Liberation in the spiritual sphere implied oppression in the temporal."³⁴

4. After visiting the churches in Saxony in 1530 he was scandalised and returns to recognise that being needy is sufficient for the Christian to respond. He feels that "Next to the proclamation of the Gospel, it is the task of a good pastor to be mindful of the poor"³⁵

Brummel's analysis, coming, as it does, out of modern Latin America where the needs of the poor are so evident, forces us to look critically at Luther's concept of the Christian's 'neighbour' in *The Freedom of a Christian*. Her contention is that at this phase of his life the needs of the neighbour "are almost never specified; on the few occasions when he elaborated them, Luther underscored the neighbour's almost exclusively spiritual needs".³⁶ Like some social historians who would portray Luther as a social defeatist whose "vision of the Christian faith obscures man's moral and social meanings of human existence and evades man's responsibility,"³⁷ her judgement is too harsh. She ignores the fact that, as we have seen, in the tract there is a call to work for and to give to the needy.³⁸ Furthermore, Luther was actively involved in working towards the alleviation of the worst poverty in Wittenberg and in his appeal *To the Christian Nobility* of the same year (1520) called upon the elites to eliminate begging by caring for the city's poor and refusing entry to vagrants. Yet, the Christian Freedom Luther preaches is spiritual, not temporal, and Brummel concludes that he "had no theological basis to respond to peasant poverty or their call for social change."³⁹ Certainly, when he wrote *On Temporal Authority* (1523) his advice to the aggrieved poor was "You have the

³⁴*Ibid.*, 55.

³⁵LW 26:105.

³⁶Brummel, "There should Be No Beggars" 48.

³⁷Lindberg, "Luther and the Biblical Language of Poverty" (1977), 332 citing the views of Neibuhr, Troeltsch, Marius and Kahler.

³⁸Dillenburger, *Martin Luther: Selections* 73f.

³⁹Brummel, "Luther and the Biblical Language of Poverty" 56.

kingdom of heaven; therefore, you should leave the kingdom of earth to anyone who wants to take it."⁴⁰ In case there should be any doubt he explains clearly and simply that "Christian Freedom has nothing to do with the body or with your ordinary lives. It has to do with the soul."⁴¹ He could well have subscribed to the Victorian hymn: "The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate; God made them, high and lowly, and ordered their estate."⁴²

The princes had their own interpretation of Luther. After the Twelve Articles of the German peasants with its very different rendering of "Christian Freedom"⁴³ the aristocracy insisted on preaching the pure Gospel culminating in good works. Christian freedom meant "Keeping God's commonwealth and doing good works with a free, willing heart and with pleasure,... and being obedient to authority"⁴⁴ While Lindberg is partially correct in stating that Luther did not spiritualise his understanding of poverty,⁴⁵ his attempts to localise Luther's Poor Reform in his theology lead him to founder, like Brummel, on this same contradictory rock with its twin peaks of concern for the poor and rejection of social change.⁴⁶ It hardly helps Lindberg's case to appeal to Luther's doctrine of vocation, which served to maintain the *status quo*, nor to quote Luther's plaintive pleas to the princes to shoulder the social responsibilities he placed before them.⁴⁷ Similarly Leonardo Boff seeks a principle of "liberation" in

⁴⁰LW 45.102.

⁴¹*Sermon on Jeremiah 23:5-8* (1526), cited by Strauss, 297.

⁴²"All Things Bright and Beautiful" by Cecil Frances Alexander, 1818-95.

⁴³Henry J. Cohn "The Peasants of Swabia" in Janus Bak, ed., *The German Peasants War of 1525* (London: Frank Cass, 1970) 10-28.

⁴⁴Peter Blickle, *Communal Reformation: The Quest for Salvation in Sixteenth Century Germany*, trans. Thomas Dunlap, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992) 201.

⁴⁵Lindberg, *Beyond Charity* 107, n. 127.

⁴⁶"Two concepts...lie side by side in quiet contradiction in Luther's thought. The one concept concerns itself with individual salvation ... the other ... concerns itself with society, is orientated towards the princes and warns against rebellion and riot." Gerhard Brendler, *Martin Luther: Theology and Revolution*, trans. Claude R Foster Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University 1991) 374.

⁴⁷Lindberg, *Beyond Charity* 109. Unfortunately, Lindberg does not record the date of his citations, nor attempt to distinguish between the early and the mature Luther. Here he quotes from the 1530 commentary on Psalm 82, written after Luther had been rudely awakened to the plight of the poor by a recent visitation to Saxony, and was addressing the princes on the eve of their meeting with the Emperor in Augsburg. Brummel uses the same quotation to support her case.

Luther's theology and, although moved by the elaboration of freedom through justification by faith, he is forced to admit that: "Luther was not able to control the movement he unleashed. He was not even aware of its sociopolitical implications."⁴⁸ In *The Freedom of a Christian* Luther had nailed his colours to the mast of voluntarism, only to see them later ripped to shreds by the bitter winds of economic hardship, peasant revolt and princely indifference.

However we must now ask two questions: Firstly, did Luther's wider audience give the doctrine of justification by faith the same precedence as he did? Once again, we find disagreement. Ozment⁴⁹ claimed that the early reformers shared a common commitment to the doctrine of justification by faith, which offered relief from the suffocating demands of medieval piety and so attracted the urban masses to the Reformation. The Reformation passed from an early liberating phase in its original Wittenberg days into an oppressive social institution.⁵⁰ Moeller, on the other hand, argued that the doctrine of justification by faith was introspective and individualistic, reflecting the princely domination of small-town Wittenberg rather than the urban communities as experienced by Bucer and Zwingli. However, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and Luther's views on the religious value of work sanctified daily life and restored a sense of communal identity to counteract the social tensions and the increasing reliance on external political bodies.⁵¹ These emphases were used in Southern Germany and Switzerland to turn the city into a sacral corporation. Blickle comes to similar conclusions with respect to the rural communities' adoption of Luther's "incipient congregationalism".⁵² Brady emphasises the class struggles in the cities, arguing that the Reformation was adapted to preserve the vested interests of the oligarchies.⁵³ McGrath has tried to reassess the importance of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and refutes Ozment's

⁴⁸Leonardo Boff, "Luther, the Reformation, and Liberation," in Dow Kirkpatrick, ed., *Faith Born of the Struggle for Life*, trans. Lewistine McCoy (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988) 207.

⁴⁹Ozment, *the Reformation in the Cities* See especially Ch. 2 "The Burden of Late Medieval Religion", pp. 22ff.

⁵⁰For Poor Relief and Social Discipline see Robert Jütte, "Poor Relief and Social Discipline in Sixteenth Century Europe", *European Studies Review* 11 (1981) 25-52.

⁵¹Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972)

⁵²See also Hans-Cristolph Rublack, "Martin Luther and the Urban Social Experience" *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985) 17.

⁵³See Thomas A. Brady Jr., *Ruling Class, Regime and Reformation at Strasbourg 1520-1555* (Brill: Leiden 1978).

theory by arguing that the Swiss and German reformers had different publics.⁵⁴ While Luther's preaching of justification by faith may well have been sweet music to the ears of a weary German public, tired of seeking salvation in pilgrimage, indulgences and the endowments of mass, the Swiss reformers sought a theology which would lend authority to the search for urban unity. Indeed, they laid very little emphasis on the doctrine so close to Luther's heart. McGrath concludes "While Luther's vision was ultimately that of a renewed individual believer ... Bucer, Zwingli and Calvin, worked together towards the vision of a renewed community, eschewing both the individualism and subjectivism which they felt were entailed by Luther's preoccupation with the doctrine of justification."⁵⁵ The doctrine simply did not carry with it a programme for social reform. The Swiss reformers felt that *sola scriptura* offered far more and set out to work for a complete reformation of social life and moral behaviour on the basis of it. McGrath seems to be correct. Luther's freedom through justification by faith made sense to him, but it was hardly enough to satisfy the aspirations of growing cities. While he certainly persuaded the citizens of Europe to spend less, or even nothing, on ensuring their well-being in the afterlife, they seem to have desired rather more than a feeling of liberation in the here-and-now.

Secondly, we must ask if the wider Reformation assumed Luther's moral imperative of joyful gratitude to serve their neighbours? Oberman examines the adherence of Luther's colleagues to his second proposition in *The Freedom of a Christian* and concludes that in the interpretation of liberty as 'freedom for service' his fellow reformers "step off the common platform to give ... differing interpretations in Basel and Strasbourg, in Wittenburg and Bremen, in the *Reichsritter* revolt of Sickingen, and in the more widely spread but equally abortive Peasant Revolt"⁵⁶ Certainly there is freedom from religious obligation as a prerequisite for salvation, but scripture becomes elevated to the same rank as *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. "They have in common, amid all other differences, a drive for political and pedagogical articulation of Christian ethics which can be regarded as one of the hall marks of the *initia reformationis*, whether we look at Zwingli or Karlstadt, Müntzer or Melancthon, Bucer or Calvin."⁵⁷

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 5ff.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁶Heiko. A. Oberman, "Headwaters of the Reformation: Initia Lutheri; Initia Reformationis", in *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 46.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 50.

So what can we conclude? In answer to our earlier questions we can state that while Luther's proposition of justification by faith had enormous impact, it was interpreted differently wherever it was received. The Christian Liberty which it conferred was understood in different ways. The dubious moral imperative explicitly expounded in *The Freedom of a Christian* found few takers and was either replaced by a call to obedience to the princes or substituted by a bolder application of Scriptures to satisfy the communal aspirations of the cities.⁵⁸ To quote Rublack: "Neglecting the second clause, in which Luther enjoined Christians to serve one another in love, the urban reformation distorted Luther's message into a new law which sanctified the traditional ideology of the bonum commune."⁵⁹ Luther's Poor Reform reacted to a social crisis already too great to ignore and was taken up by other groups who did not share the same moral imperative as he did. His view of Christian Freedom was only partially understood and greatly abused. Perhaps we ask too much of Luther. While he continued calling on his community and its leaders to care for the poor, he did not see his reformation primarily as being a social one. He had freed his people from what he saw to be slavery to a false and satanic legalism. That was sweet victory to him. Latin American evangelicals have, by and large, followed on down the same road as Luther, teaching a conservative social passivism while proclaiming individual salvation through faith alone. However, his burning desire to use the church's financial resources for Poor Relief has been ignored and the Swiss model of the godly city governed by scripture is too far from our own reality to be relevant. We have a long way to go before we become, as Luther wished, "Christ to our neighbour."

⁵⁸A number of studies on other cities conclude that Luther's doctrines of Justification by Faith and Christian Freedom were taken up and reinterpreted to free the city from ecclesiastical control, but otherwise to maintain the social and political *status quo*. See, for example Gottfried Seebass "The Reformation in Nürnberg", in Lawrence P. Buck and Jonathan W. Zophy, eds., *The Social History of the Reformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University 1972); Rublack "Martin Luther and the Urban Social Experience" (1985) on Augsburg; Robert Jütte, *Obrigkeitsliche Armenfürsorge in deutschen Reichsstädten der frühen Neuzeit. Städtisches Armenwesen in Frankfurt am Main und Köln* (Cologne-Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1984) on Protestant Frankfurt and Catholic Cologne; Natalie Zeman Davis, "Poor Relief, Humanism and Heresy: The Case of Lyon", *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 5 (1968) 217ff on Lyon; and Lee Palmer Wandel, *Always amongus: Images of the Poor in Zwingli's Zürich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University 1990) on Zurich.

⁵⁹Rublack "Martin Luther and the Urban Social Experience" 16.