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The Freedom of Formlessness: Justification by Faith Alone and the Protestant Experience
of Grace

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Abstract

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By L. Daniel Cantey, Jr.

The Great Awakening drew Protestant churches into a dispute over the necessity of a vivid experience of grace for salvation. As shaped by the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone, this experience was supposed to wed the believer effectually to God, yet it had a hand in the development of strife among believers even unto schism. How is it that the Protestant experience of grace, given by the same God who ordained the church order, should be integral to the fragmentation of that order?

In search of an answer to this question, I have undertaken an ontological examination of the experience of grace in Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. After a description in the first chapter of the events of the Great Awakening, the second chapter establishes the ontological lenses that serve as a “microscope” for analyzing the experience of grace for the three theologians. These lenses pivot on the distinction between form and formlessness, setting the stage for my investigation of the experiences of grace in Augustine, Luther, and Calvin as seen from an ontological perspective that highlights the question of form. The third chapter argues that Augustine’s experience of grace bestows form, elevating sinful nature toward the fulfillment of the law. The fourth and fifth chapters turn to justification by faith alone in Luther and Calvin, contending that for each the experience of grace implies the rendering of nature and the law into formless matter. The sixth chapter juxtaposes the meaning of the Christian narrative of salvation in Augustine as oriented toward form against that of Luther and Calvin as oriented toward formlessness.

The final chapter discerns the implications of this study of the experience of grace for the church as a law-bearing institution. Returning to the Great Awakening as an illustrative case, I argue that grace’s theoretical rendering of the law into formless matter provides an underpinning for an experience that disrupts the legislative authority of the church. This same grace liberates human nature into a powerful and dubious freedom, the freedom of ontological formlessness made manifest in the event of schism.

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ABBREVIATIONS FOR WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

<i>civ. Dei</i>	<i>De civitate Dei [City of God]</i>
<i>conf.</i>	<i>Confessiones [Confessions]</i>
<i>corr. et gr.</i>	<i>De correptione et gratia [On Rebuke and Grace]</i>
<i>ench.</i>	<i>Enchiridion [Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love]</i>
<i>Gn. adv. Man.</i>	<i>De Genesi adversus Manicheos [On Genesis Against the Manichees]</i>
<i>gr. Chr.</i>	<i>De gratia Christi [On the Grace of Christ]</i>
<i>gr. et pecc. or.</i>	<i>De gratia Christi, et de peccato originali [On the Grace of Christ, and On Original Sin]</i>
<i>imm. an.</i>	<i>De immortalitate animae [On the Immortality of the Soul]</i>
<i>lib. arb.</i>	<i>De libero arbitrio [On Free Will]</i>
<i>nat. et gr.</i>	<i>De natura et gratia [On Nature and Grace]</i>
<i>nupt. et conc.</i>	<i>De nuptiis et concupiscentia [On Marriage and Concupiscence]</i>
<i>pecc. mer.</i>	<i>De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptism parvulorum ad Marcinellum [On the Merits and Remission of Sins and On the Baptism of Infants, to Marcinellus]</i>
<i>perf. iust.</i>	<i>De perfectione iustitiae hominis [On Man's Perfection in Righteousness]</i>
<i>qu. an.</i>	<i>De quantitate animae [On the Greatness of the Soul]</i>
<i>sp. et litt.</i>	<i>De spiritu et littera [On the Spirit and the Letter]</i>

PREFACE

The breakdown of institutional life in the modern West, long lamented by prominent sociologists,¹ has taken a peculiar shape. Rather than involving a reduction in the size and scope of all institutions in favor of individual autonomy and freedom, the modern breakdown combines that autonomy with the expansion of institutions dedicated to upholding it. Forms of social order that would impose authoritative boundaries on individual prerogatives have faded, while new institutions validated by their facilitation of individual liberties have prospered. The capitalist economic system, the champion of the self-interested entrepreneur, has exploded across the globe, while liberal democracy, an order that presumes a well-educated, politically active, and independent citizenry, has continued its advance from early modern into late modern times.² The transformation of institutional arrangements from the collective standing as master over the individual to the individual standing over the collective, if not already complete, has progressed to a striking degree.

1. Those who have recognized and sometimes sought a solution for the loss of social cohesion in modernity include Robert Bellah and his contributors in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and *The Good Society* (New York: Random House, 1991). Bellah also laments the state of the modern social order in “Is There a Common American Culture?” and “Flaws in the Protestant Code” (In *The Robert Bellah Reader*, ed. Steven M. Tipton. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 319-349). Robert Putnam also observes the breakdown of common life in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). Jürgen Habermas discusses European social problems in *Legitimation Crisis* (trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975) and offers a theory of participatory democracy meant to overcome Europe’s challenges in *Between Facts and Norms* (trans. William Rehg. Boston: MIT Press, 1996). Philip Rieff studies the moral psychology of social disorder in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Wilmington: ISI, 2006) and traces the collapse of the moral order through psychology and art in *My Life Among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*, vol. 1 of *Sacred Order/Social Order* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2006). Alasdair MacIntyre addresses modern breakdown from the perspective of moral philosophy in *After Virtue* (2nd ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1986). Behind many of these works stand Max Weber’s “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions” (In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 323-359. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) and Emile Durkheim’s *The Division of Labor in Society* (trans. W.D. Halls. New York: The Free Press, 1984).

2. Charles Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) provides excellent insight into the roots and development of liberal democracy and modern capitalism.

The parallel growth in the size of the modern state and claims to individual liberties heightens the peculiarity of this picture. “In virtually all countries of the West” in the twentieth century, writes Harold Berman, “central bureaucratic authorities control the economy, communications, education, conditions of work, and other aspects of social life,” so that he concurs with Czeslaw Milosz’s assessment that “the state has swallowed society.”³ This permeation of society by the state has unfurled as the product of revolutions carried out in the name of individual freedom, justifying itself as a means by which individuals might live free and self-determined lives. In the American case, the expansion of the state as a provider of entitlements has spurred the growth of political interest groups seeking to overturn or support government policies and actions.⁴ As the government has asserted its responsibility in increasingly varied arenas of individual life, citizens have freely organized in response to its programs and decisions.

Despite political engagement through special interest groups, the individualism at the core of the American order remains troubling. Individuals find their social capital depleted as the bonds between them wither, while their interpersonal links grow loose and unstable in the fluidity of modern experience.⁵ Robert Bellah has developed two models for understanding this individualism, the utilitarian and the expressive. Utilitarian individualism describes the person as dedicated to his or her own material interest, without explicit concern for the common good. This paradigm justifies itself by reasoning that if each does what is best for himself, circumstances will work for the good of all. As an alternative to the utilitarian calculation of material interest, expressive individualism celebrates the person as intellectual and sensual, an aficionado of

3. Harold J. Berman, “The Development of the European Legal System: Causes and Consequences” (paper presented at a Workshop on Conditions of Innovations and Growth, Jena, Germany, August 7-9, 1996).

4. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 114.

5. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; Bellah, “Flaws,” 341.

diverse experiences and feelings and an explorer of the mysteries of self. Expressive individualists divinize and dwell in the depths of their humanity, an attitude seen in Walt Whitman's espousal of leisure and the pursuit of the soul.⁶

Bellah originally pitted these forms of individualism against America's biblical heritage, asserting that the former undermine social cohesion while the latter preserves it. He eventually modified his opinion in light of the ethos of dissenting Protestantism, whose emergence from the radical Reformation set a precedent for the individual's concern for the self above collective stability. In the religion of dissent exemplified by the likes of Roger Williams, Bellah discovers "something deeper than utilitarian or expressive individualism, the sacredness of the individual conscience," a sacredness that has so extended through modern society that it has overturned long-dominant beliefs and practices.⁷ Finding the source of American individualism, in Bellah's estimate, entails a profounder understanding of Protestant dissent. In this vein he surmises that "we need a searching religious criticism" of Protestant thought and practices, one that could explain its connection to the individualism that threatens the coherence and longevity of the modern order.⁸ Such connections "are so deeply embedded in our history, so unconscious and even counterintuitive" that Bellah thinks that "it is a major task of religious intellectuals to uncover them."⁹

This project takes up Bellah's call to explore the links between Protestantism and a socially disruptive claim to individual freedom. Pointing to the schism among Presbyterians during the Great Awakening as its cue, the study investigates the following conundrum: if the Christian God both authorizes the church as His institution and pours out His grace in the heart,

6. Bellah, *Habits*, 32-35.

7. Bellah, "Common American Culture," 327.

8. Bellah, "Flaws," 345-346.

9. Bellah also suggests that, after uncovering the flaws latent in Protestantism, intellectuals should seek to repair them with lessons learned from the Catholic tradition.

why has that grace been at the center of schismatic events? Why do the outer order of God and the inner experience of God disagree, pitting institutional authority against individual appeals to grace and conscience? This counterintuitive scenario holds some promise for revealing the relation of Protestant emphases on conscience to the undermining of institutional stability. I hope that it shall also shed light on the juxtaposition of an expanding legal institution, in this case a church judicatory, with graduated assertions of individual liberty.

As the doctrine determinative of the Protestant experience of grace, justification by faith alone is the theological focal point of this study. It inquires into the relationship between experience and doctrine in Martin Luther and John Calvin because they are the foundational proponents of justification by faith, while their models of the experience of grace were determinative for much of early modern Protestantism. The study also explores connections between experience and doctrine in Saint Augustine in order to provide an alternative to justification by faith alone. At times my treatment of the three figures will not appear to extend beyond explaining their views, as if this were a work of historical theology. This impression is false, for my purpose in explicating the theology of each thinker is not merely to present the most accurate representation of their theology that I can, but to develop a historically accurate “type” of their thought that I shall then critique in light of my own philosophical principles. I mean not only to exposit the theologians but to evaluate and judge them, utilizing their theologies as laboratories for research into the impact of conceptions of religious experience on institutional viability. My conclusions will reflect negatively on the doctrine of justification by faith, while they will condone the experiential example and theology of Saint Augustine.

This examination of theology bears its fruit by reference to the category of ontology. At the heart of much of my argument is the premise, established with aid from Saint Augustine in chapter two, that the ontological category of form parallels the soteriological category of righteousness, with the latter understood as a capacity or resource by which the person can add to his or her salvation. This parallel construes soteriology as both a moral and a biological category

inasmuch as having form means having a particular and God-given way of being. Righteousness consists in conformity to that way of being, whether in the form of explicitly moral choices or in merely having the human form of body and soul. This ontological understanding differs widely from that of justification by faith alone, which would employ three categories rather than two. Proponents of that doctrine would speak of ontology, soteriology, and axiology. In this case ontology refers to being *qua* being and without considerations of form, soteriology to justification by faith alone and thus apart from works or moral activity, and axiology as the moral life of holiness commanded by God. The moral life is supposed to give form without soteriological implications, so that the person can have a moral form that has no import for justification. My critique of justification by faith implies that this threefold division is untenable because the moral life of form to which it adheres finally undermines itself, while justification is the consummation of that undermining. The appropriation of justification in such a scheme implies the descent of human nature into the ontological category of formlessness.

The ontological implications of justification by faith alone consequently put Saint Augustine in one corner and Luther and Calvin in the other. I maintain this distinction between Augustine and Luther in spite of post-Vatican II rapprochements between Catholics and Lutherans such as the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (1999). Though well-intentioned, this document overlooks the deeper divergences that distinguish a Catholic soteriology grounded in Augustine’s thought from its Reformation-era alternative. While Catholics and Protestants have sought reconciliation on the issue of justification in contemporary times, I would contend that they do so in spite of hidden and significant differences that divide their founding theologians.

A brief note is further warranted regarding the relation between theological language, its ontological counterpart, and the historical events that these types of language seek to explain. Theological and ontological language are intertwined such that theological language operates on the level of the “explicit” while ontology often operates on the level of the “implicit.” The

theological story of humanity's creation, fall, and redemption can also be the ontological story of a nature formed without defect, fallen as defective in form, and then redeemed as elevated to an incorruptible form. The theological and the ontological stories here proceed harmoniously. This is not to say that one can or should reduce theology to ontology, as theology adds distinct emphases that are hard to explain by ontological categories. Understanding God as "Pure Being," for example, does little to express the motivational character of God as love or as Father.

Christians have generally addressed historical controversies in theological language. Arguments in the patristic age defining orthodoxy versus heresy used theological language to express how God became human, as in Cyril of Alexandria's *On the Unity of Christ*, but they could also contain ontological elements, as in Athanasius' explanation for why God took human form in *On the Incarnation*.¹⁰ As far as I am aware, disputes between Protestants and Catholics in modern times have stuck to theological language, for instance in battles over whether the priesthood of all believers and the papal hierarchy are valid ecclesiological doctrines. The patristic and modern arguments each bear ontological implications, but the persons involved did not usually emphasize ontological language or reasoning. The disagreement between the church of God and the experience of God that I will examine, by contrast, presents a historical crisis for which theological language has no adequate explanation. There is no theological rationale that explains the occurrence of intra-Protestant schism in its relation to the individual experience of grace. It is rather that the historical event contradicts the expectations expressed in theological language. Luther and Calvin, who each thought that grace in the heart makes one delight in the law and cleave to the church, would surely view the discontent between the experience of grace and church authority with puzzlement.

For this reason I intend to distill the implicit ontological meaning from explicit theological statements, using the ontological story to illumine the relation between theological

10. This treatise is distinguished for introducing the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, or God's bringing being out of nothingness.

language and historical event. In particular, I hope to show through ontology how the Great Awakening's language of revival and New Birth is tied to social upheaval and ecclesial separation. Indeed, what is perhaps most interesting in the study ahead concerns the gap between ontology and theology. Rather than proceeding harmoniously as in the example of creation, fall, and redemption above, justification by faith alone puts theology and ontology at odds, so that the theological promises that excite Protestant revivalists – inner grace, moral renewal, and the upbuilding of the church – are confronted with the perplexing and antagonistic social realities of division, disorder, and confusion. Theology moves in one direction and ontology another, so that the hopeful habits of well-meaning and pious Christians contribute to the disturbances that they would condemn and wish to avoid. Ontology makes the tumultuous event associated with the theological language plausible in spite of the latter's expectant tenor, connecting the inward experience of grace with the outward pattern of institutional breakdown. It helps resolve the conundrum between God's outer order and His inner grace by explaining the mechanisms underlying the doctrine of justification by faith.

The ontological concept of formless matter is critical to this resolution. Though little explored in the history of theology, in this study I will develop the idea of formlessness as a rubric for understanding the implications of justification by faith alone and the experience of grace associated with it. That experience amounts to an ontological liberation from the boundary of form and an affirmation of freedom unique to Protestantism. It is also deeply tied to the freedom of conscience that troubled Bellah, and ultimately to the individualism at the center of the modern order.

In place of Protestantism's theological emphasis on freedom I would advocate a doctrine of a soteriologically significant law robust but limited in its authority. On the political implications of this point I wish to be as clear as possible: a law that exceeds its limits in negating or inappropriately curtailing liberty is no law at all. The argument ahead contains an implicit condemnation of totalitarian law for possessing this limitlessness. I believe that modern forms of

authoritarianism do little better, often squeezing individual liberty into an oppressive corner. I would in no way defend either of these systems of government as valid. Yet the increasingly unlimited freedom of liberal democracy bears its own serious and troubling consequences. The upshot of my argument regarding this order, inasmuch as it is grounded theologically in Protestant understandings of freedom, would point out the internal relation between democratic emphases on freedom and equality and totalitarian domination. Far from being unqualified opposites, these two poles share an intrinsic and dialectical relation. An unlimited freedom cannot exist apart from an unlimited and thus totalitarian law, and the freedom ironically matures in concert with the expansion of the law. While this reasoning could explain the joint growth of individual liberty and the burgeoning bureaucratic state, it comes at the cost of implications that do not bode well for liberal democracy. For liberal freedom would seem to bear within it the seeds of the tyranny that it despises.

CHAPTER 1

THE EXPERIENCE OF GRACE AND THE EVENT OF SCHISM: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GREAT AWAKENING IN THE MIDDLE COLONIES

In the 1730's, the threat of religious decline troubled Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies. They perceived external challenges in the growing diversity of sects populating New Jersey and Pennsylvania and the emergence of Enlightenment rationalism, as well as an internal challenge in locating and training the number of pastors needed to supply frontier pulpits.¹¹ If the people should not fall away from true religion, it was thought, the clergy must be strengthened while the basic convictions of the faith were pressed home within the laity. A difference of opinion arose among Presbyterian leaders about how to accomplish these goals. The party known as the Old Side advocated doctrinal subscription to the Westminster Confession for prospective pastors.¹² Their opponents, the New Side, believed that revived religion turned not primarily on doctrinal purity but on a powerful experience of conversion. Both parties consented to the core

11. In *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening*, David Lovejoy writes on the perception of decline throughout the colonies during the eighteenth century, arguing that the colonists were inclined to look upon the seventeenth century as a more devout and better era (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), 4-7. On the diversity of sects entering the Middle Colonies the early and mid-eighteenth century, see Charles Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1920), 7-11. Maxson emphasizes the pietistic character of these sects. Patricia Bonomi notes the importance of Enlightenment rationalism to the colonial scene during this period in *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 131-132, while Dennis Barone offers an interesting comparison of attitudes toward authority evidenced by rationalists versus revivalists. Referring to revivalist Gilbert Tennent and his second cousin James Logan as illustrations of the two perspectives, Barone argues that each side had a role in the development of political ideology in the years preceding the Revolution. See "James Logan and Gilbert Tennent: Enlightened Classicist Versus Awakened Evangelist," *Early American Literature* 21 no. 2 (Fall 1986): 103-117.

12. Janet Fishburn, "Gilbert Tennent, Established 'Dissenter'," *Church History* 63 no. 1 (Mr 1994): 45. Fishburn writes of the Old Side pastor John Elder, a vocal critic of George Whitefield. "Elder belonged to a Presbytery that instructed pastors not to administer sacraments unless families seeking a pastoral relationship had joined the closest congregation. Within a month of the formation of the Presbytery in 1732, a procedure requiring membership documents for new members was established." This focus on membership documents did not suit the New Sides, who thought signed parchment a poor substitute for Holy Spirit's work on the heart.

tenets of the Presbyterian faith: original sin, predestination, and justification by faith alone. The factions also each affirmed the experience of grace in the heart as necessary for salvation, preaching the inward, regenerating work of God that turns the Christian from wickedness to the love of holiness. The argument unto schism that divided the two parties nonetheless turned on the quality of this experience. New Side preaching provoked an exuberant if not violent eruption of emotion characterized by groaning, crying, and disturbances during worship. The Old Side criticized this experience as inauthentic, seeing the work of grace in the heart as peaceful and not a threat to public decorum.¹³

The New Side emphasis on “experimental religion” posed a particularly thorny problem because of its tendency toward division. If vital and true religion required a dramatic appropriation of Christ’s grace in the heart, a public experience undergone by some members of congregations but not others, one could be tempted to divide those blessed with the experience as the saved from those without it as damned. The clergy possessed no immunity from such an examination, as in the course of the Awakening the New Side pastor Gilbert Tennent painted his opponents as bereft of the gospel because they lacked an experiential knowledge of grace.¹⁴ The experience in question consequently presents a strange conundrum: its proponents meant by it to strengthen lay religion and solidify the leadership of the clergy, thereby fortifying the Presbyterian church order, but the experience had an antithetical effect, dividing congregations and pastors until the New Side broke – or, one might say, was compelled to break – from the Philadelphia synod led by the Old Side. The experience supposed to wed believers more

13. The Great Awakening was an argument “about a matter of emphasis, a question of strategy, not of bedrock doctrines.” Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University, 2003), 98. See also Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm and the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University), 194. Lovejoy refers to the Awakeners’ preoccupation with experience as a “new means” of grace apart from theology and ecclesiastical institutions.

14. Gilbert Tennent, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” in *Sermons of the Log College: Sermons and Essays by the Tennents and their Contemporaries*. Compiled by Archibald Alexander (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 375-404. This sermon will receive detailed attention in the following pages.

effectually to God overturned the stability of the church that preached it, pitting a divinely ordained experience against the institutional order established by the same deity. The dispute over the experience itself was critical in the division, and many of the issues in the debate were clearly stated by the two parties. Yet the possibility of deeper, more subtle implications within the experience for the emergence of ecclesial conflict went unexamined.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone laid the theoretical foundation for this divisive experience, which its advocates termed the “New Birth.” Both sides regarded themselves as the “champions” of this pivotal Reformation doctrine, but the New Side claimed to possess the inward grasp of it that witnessed to true religion.¹⁵ Tennent, “the soul” of the New Side party,¹⁶ referred to justification by faith often in his sermons.¹⁷ Shaped by the pietistic and dissenting heritage of the Scotch-Irish and influenced in the New World by the Dutch pietist Theodore Frelinghuysen,¹⁸ Tennent developed a sermonic form of address known as “preaching terrors” that was meant to divest listeners of all hope in natural capacities for salvation so that they might flee unreservedly to Christ by faith.¹⁹ The necessity of this preaching and the experience it evoked undergirded Tennent’s practice of itinerancy, his excoriation of pastors who dismissed the experience and would prohibit its spread, and his exhortation that parishioners should seek guides converted by it, moving beyond the boundaries of their local churches if necessary.²⁰ By

15. Holifield, 95.

16. Maxson, 85.

17. Gilbert Tennent, “The Justice of God,” “The Grace of God,” “The Divine Mercy,” and “The Wisdom of God in Redemption,” in *Sermons of the Log College*, 9-98. Each sermon observes the importance of justification by faith alone, touching on various aspects of the doctrine.

18. Milton Coalter, *Gilbert Tennent: Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism’s Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 1-26. The impact of the Scottish tradition of dissent on Tennent also receives attention in Fishburn, “Gilbert Tennent: Established ‘Dissenter’.”

19. Holifield, 97-98; Maxson, 32; Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World*, 186.

20. Coalter, 71-76. Tennent completed an itinerant tour through southern New Jersey, Delaware, and upper Maryland in the summer of 1740, and visited New England over the winter of 1740-1741.

determining the homiletic strategy behind the New Birth, the doctrine of justification by faith alone might hold some hidden clue to that experience's provocation of tumult.

The Old Side, who stood against Tennent, emphasized right doctrine as the qualification for good pastors and good preaching. They had enforced a program of subscription to the Westminster Confession on new ministers since the late 1720s.²¹ Though they thought the Holy Spirit's work on the heart essential to the Christian life, Old Side "subscriptionists" did not think that that work could be verified. Church councils could test the doctrinal readiness of ministerial candidates with greater success. In their view, the Holy Spirit used right preaching to save souls, a conviction that made the proper education of ministers essential. Men schooled in right doctrine offered the best medicine, whereas a lax education could result in doctrinal errors and set up a stumbling block to the Spirit's saving work.²²

The Old Side emphasis on right doctrine did not satisfy the New Side ministers, who insisted that the message must pierce the believer's complacency and lay bare the destitution of human nature. New Side education, procured under Gilbert's father William at the Log College in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, therefore included with the usual training in theology, philosophy, and languages the realization that the gospel must transform the heart. The avenue for this transformation in the preaching of the younger Tennent required fear of God's wrath. Portraying that wrath in its unyielding intensity through preaching terror, Tennent hoped to alarm self-satisfied listeners by juxtaposing their sin against the holiness of God. Tennent's "preaching the terrors," Milton Coalter writes, "involved the annihilation of self-righteousness, first, by exposing

21. Maxson, 24. In order to protect the laity from immoral and unorthodox ministers, the Philadelphia synod agreed to the "Adopting Act" in 1729. This legislation required that all new ministers subscribe to the Westminster Confession, and did not pass without controversy. Jonathan Dickinson, an intellectual leader of Middle Colony Presbyterian, preached before the synod of Philadelphia that "Christ alone is the lawmaker of the church, and the church has only administrative functions. It may decide upon rules in application of the general laws found in the New Testament, but these rules are not properly designated as acts or constitutions. They do not have the authority of laws." In so doing, Dickinson warned that the synod not take on more authority than the gospel grants to it.

22. Coalter, 49.

its sources and, second, by comparing the sinner's supposed 'works' with the humanly impossible perfection demanded in the biblical law."²³ Only after bringing his hearers to the depth of despair under the law and the miseries of sin would Tennent hold out the grace of Christ as a remedy. This order of "terrors first, comforts second," Tennent argued, followed the work of the Holy Spirit, which first convicted the heart of sin before healing the wound with the gospel.²⁴ Believers received healing for this wound by faith alone, apart from the thought that works had any part in the gift of salvation. In the wake of this healing, the "New Birth" in which Christians experience the grace of Christ in the heart, they would embark on the path of good deeds, living a life worthy of the grace bestowed.²⁵

Tennent's sermon "The Justice of God" offers a striking example of preaching terror. He begins by defining justice as "right, and an agreement with right," or the right of God in issuing the law and the agreement of obedience on the part of persons.²⁶ Sinners invariably transgress this justice in their crookedness, incurring a horrifying penalty. They meet God as a consuming fire, filled with "hatred, revenge, and judgment" against sin.²⁷ The divine wrath they encounter is impartial in that it does not respect persons and "will not spare for the sake of the multitude, greatness, or nearness of the guilty"²⁸; it is universal in the sense that "not one sin can escape severe punishment"; it is inexorable, such that once God has decided upon punishment no

23. Coalter, 44.

24. Coalter, 45.

25. Milton Coalter, "The Radical Pietism of Count Nicholas Zinzendorf as a Conservative Influence on the Awakener, Gilbert Tennent," *Church History* 49 no. 1 (Mr 1980): 38, 43; Coalter, *Gilbert Tennent*, 91-112. Tennent was aghast to find that Zinzendorf's pietism did not follow the scheme of "terrors first, comfort second," dismissing the necessity of *Busskampf* or law-work as necessary for the experience of grace. Zinzendorf's ecumenism also extended too broadly for one of Tennent's confessional allegiances to tolerate. After his 1742 meeting with Zinzendorf, Tennent turned away from more radical forms of pietism, publishing *The Necessity of Holding Fast the Truth* against the Moravians and backing away from the more progressive elements of the Awakening.

26. Tennent, "The Justice of God," 12-13.

27. Tennent, "The Justice of God," 11, 17.

28. Tennent, "The Justice of God," 21.

pleadings will change His course; and it is seen most clearly in the fury of God upon sin at the cross and in the torments of the damned, whom God punishes “with everlasting destruction” as they burn “in a lake of fire,” knowing “no intermission and end” to their anguish.²⁹

“This subject,” Tennent concludes, “speaks to terror,” for when the individual looks upon his or her sins, there appears “a prodigious multitude” of infractions.³⁰ “Your iniquities,” Tennent proclaims to his audience, “rival the stars, and for aggravation, are as red as crimson.” The chasm between the demand of God’s law and the wrath attendant to it on one side, and the abundance of sin despoiling human nature on the other, struck Tennent’s hearers as the certainty of doom. “And do you think that that just God,” Tennent asks, “who spared not his own beloved Son, when he but stood in sinners’ place, but smote him dead by the sword of his justice, and made all the waves of his almighty vengeance beat upon him, and roll over him, will spare you who are covered all over with real and scarlet guilt?”³¹ The answer, Tennent, immediately adds, is no. The sinner deserves incomprehensible and intolerable wrath as the just due for transgression, cowering without hope before an implacable justice. Though the link might not appear immediately and on the surface, this emphasis on the law could suggest a subtle connection between the experience of grace in the New Birth and the event of schism. One could reasonably investigate the characteristics of a law so emphasized with an eye toward the implications of justification by faith for ecclesial authority.

Having raised the congregation to a horrifying pitch – one imagines a despair voiced in lamentations, groaning, and exasperated cries from the congregation³² – Tennent transitions from terror to comfort by pointing his listeners to Christ. Jesus provides safe haven against the wrath

29. Tennent, “The Justice of God,” 21-23.

30. Tennent, “The Justice of God,” 26.

31. Tennent, “The Justice of God,” 28.

32. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening*, 18. Tennent defended such outbursts by claiming that the Scripture records faintings and groanings as the work of the Holy Spirit in apostolic times.

of God and respite for the wearied conscience. “Let us hasten to Christ,” Tennent exhorts, “and receive him by faith, as the gospel offers him, so that we may be justified by faith,” finding solace in the Christ who fulfilled the law on behalf of sinners.³³ In this turning Christians must take care not to place any trust in their works as if these conferred glory upon their doers.³⁴ As Tennent points out in other sermons, Christians can hope neither in the will nor natural reason as aids to salvation, but must look completely to Christ for a justification that is “wholly gracious,” founded solely on the mercy of God rather than the merit of nature.³⁵

The believer’s earnest appropriation of Christ’s grace by faith constitutes the “New Birth,” a conversion in which Christ removes the believer’s heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh.³⁶ In various sermons Tennent goads his hearers to sustain this conversion in their moral lives. The realization of grace received does not provide an excuse for laxity, but ought to excite Christians to a stricter attention to duty.³⁷ Having renewed the guilty with a power that breaks the rule of sin in their hearts, the love of Christ should enliven Christians to manifest His charity, following the principle laid down in their hearts by their Lord.³⁸ In “The Justice of God,” Tennent encourages believers to “fervently and frequently cry to God” that He might “infuse into our souls, by regeneration, the habits or principles of righteousness.”³⁹ The liberation of the

33. Tennent, “The Justice of God,” 31. In “The Justice of God,” “The Grace of God,” and “The Wisdom of God,” Tennent ascribes to specific aspects of justification by faith alone, notably imputation, and includes the Reformed notion of Christ as the mediator between God and humanity in “The Wisdom of God in Redemption.”

34. Tennent, “The Justice of God,” 16.

35. On the lack of contribution from the will, see “The Grace of God,” 55-56, a sermon in which Tennent denies the soteriological efficacy of nature in multiple places (51, 58, 62-63). For Tennent’s treatment of the uselessness of reason, see “The Wisdom of God in Redemption,” 90-92.

36. “The Grace of God,” 55-56. Tennent adds that “we contribute nothing to the change wrought upon us” by this conversion, 61.

37. Tennent, “The Grace of God,” 55-56.

38. Tennent, “The Divine Mercy,” 36; “The Wisdom of God,” 90.

39. Tennent, “The Divine Mercy,” 33.

conscience from the curse of sin does not occur, in Tennent's view, without a parallel liberation of the will from sin as its master. To feel the grace of God inwardly is to carry out the habit of grace outwardly.

Old Side clergy did not differ in principle from the New Side emphasis on preaching the law, but thought that the New Side exploited it to excess. Both parties agreed that sinners must be made aware of their iniquity before turning to Christ by faith, but this awareness, in the Old Side view, did not require sinking into the pit of despair.⁴⁰ Nor did it require that congregants be "terrified out of their wits and sense" or "made to cry out and fall down like Persons dead or in Convulsions."⁴¹ These public disruptions witnessed more to spiritual chaos than to the power of God in the view of the Old Side, who scorned its divisive effects in their congregations. At the breaking point between the factions in 1741, the Old Side listed the preaching of terrors among the reasons for their protest against the New.⁴²

The experience of the New Birth undergirded other contentious New Side practices as well. Tennent brought it to congregations through the volatile habit of itinerant preaching, embarking beyond the bounds of his New Brunswick presbytery and drawing condemnation from Old Side ministers upon whose territory he impinged. The problem did not concern the practice of itinerant preaching *per se*, because both the Old Side and the New encouraged it as a means for filling empty pulpits.⁴³ The controversy flared around an itinerant's moving into well-staffed areas and teaching an experience that led to division, occasionally entering a region without seeking the approval of its presbytery. In 1737, for example, Tennent preached in Maidenhead,

40. Holifield, 98.

41. John Thomson, *The Government of the Church of Christ*, in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*. Edited by Alan Heimert and Perry Miller. The American Heritage Series (New York: Bobbs-Merrill), 125.

42. Guy S. Klett, ed. *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706-1788* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), 189.

43. Wilfred E. Tabb, *The Presbyterian Clergy of the Great Awakening*. Doctoral dissertation (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1992), 52.

New Jersey without seeking the presbytery's permission and in spite of the two ministers assigned to the local church. The Philadelphia presbytery did not look kindly on Tennent's uninvited presence, and sought aid from the synod to prohibit incursions from unregulated itinerants.⁴⁴

The itinerancy act of 1738 is one of two rules approved by the Philadelphia synod that would exacerbate divisions between the Old and New Sides in the years leading up to schism, the other being a regulation regarding the licensing of candidates. The new itinerancy rule required that pastors gain permission from both their own and the receiving presbytery before venturing beyond their usual territory. This reasonable rule had a notable defect, however, in that a single pastor from the receiving presbytery could bar an itinerant from entering based on fears that his preaching would cause "divisions and disorders."⁴⁵ The second regulation mandated that candidates for the ministry not trained at recognized universities (e.g., Yale, Harvard, and European colleges) should submit to examination by the synod. This legislation permitted the synodical leadership, a group inclined toward the Old Side, to effectively screen and, if they decided, reject candidates from the Log College. In the same year, the New Brunswick presbytery showed their disdain for the examining act by approving the Log College graduate John Rowland for the ministry without presenting him to the synod. The presbytery's leaders averred that the licensing of candidates had always belonged to presbyteries and that the synod had no right to usurp it.⁴⁶

With the establishment of these two rules, a debate over freedom and authority congealed between the two parties. The Old Side defended synodical authority and the rule of its laws,

44. Coalter, 47. Maxson disputes that there is sufficient evidence to prove the "incursions" with which the Old Sides charged the New Side itinerants (70-71), but Coalter cites specific examples of unwanted itinerancy by Tennent. Tabb also records problems involving itinerants in 1745, after the Awakening had peaked. (223)

45. Klett, 153-154, quoted in Coalter, 48.

46. Coalter, 50-51.

while the New Side challenged that authority in favor of the freedom to spread the New Birth. The experience of grace in the heart came in this way to foment division, distilling the New Brunswick presbytery from the Philadelphia synod as a party of objectors. As we survey the arguments that led to and surrounded the schism of 1741, particularly those of the New Birth's New Side proponents, it is worth asking how the dynamics of that experience might correspond, in some undiscovered way, to their reasoning.

The New Side issued a statement of grievances against the synod in the "Apology of the Presbytery of New Brunswick" (1739), which included numerous counterarguments to the recent regulations. The "Apology" rebutted the itinerancy act by arguing that it allowed one man to suspend the ministry of another "not for any real fault committed, or so much as alleged; but upon suspicion that some bad consequences will follow upon his preaching."⁴⁷ Such a rule, besides allowing one man to lord it over others, the New Sides supposed as "contrary to the Law of Nature, of Nations, and of God" because it would "condemn men...before they be heard in their own defense" and punish them "without the least pretense of fault committed."⁴⁸ Regarding the examining act, the New Side responded that if the synod can strip a presbytery's power of licensure, what limit is there to other powers that it might claim for itself? "For, if the synod can take away, at its pleasure, one privilege and proper business of presbyteries, what hinders but by the same power they may take away another, and another, 'til they take away the whole, by the same rule that this act is made?" Such a trend would result in "the end of presbyteries altogether," leaving the name but not the substance of the thing.⁴⁹

47. Gilbert Tennent, *Remarks Upon a Protestation presented to the synod of Philadelphia, June 1, 1741*. By Gilbert Tennent, A.M. and Minister of the Gospel in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Philadelphia, 1741. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale. (Emory University Robert W. Woodruff Library), 41. The *Remarks* cited here contains a copy of the New Brunswick "Apology," published together in 1741 by Benjamin Franklin. <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&contentset=ECCOArticles&type=multipage&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&docId=CB3331574447&source=gale&userGroupName=emory&version=1.0&docLevel=FACSIMILE>> (accessed September 15, 2011).

48. Tennent, *Remarks*, 41-42; cf. Coalter, 52-53.

49. Tennent, *Remarks*, 51-52.

“The aforesaid Acts,” the “Apology” adds, are based upon the false premise that the majority within synods or other ruling church bodies “have a power committed to them from Christ to make new Rules... which shall be binding on those that conscientiously differ from them.”⁵⁰ The New Side rejected this power, responding that Christ is the church’s only lawgiver and that nowhere in Scripture does He delegate to the church the crafting and implementation of laws that would overturn the right of conscientious objection. By imposing such laws, the church threatens Christian liberty and, inasmuch as “the Legislative Power aforesaid, by coining new religious Laws, makes a new Term of Communion by every one of them,” it provides a ground for schism between authorities and their opponents.⁵¹ The right of conscience supersedes these laws, which presume “an exorbitant and awful Claim of Power,” introduce “an intolerable Bondage under human Yokes,” and oppose the principles of the Protestant break from Rome.⁵² The “Apology” closes by radically diminishing the synod’s and any judicatory’s powers, leaving these bodies to advise their constituents in the name of Christ rather than command them.⁵³

In this increasingly acrimonious context Tennent stepped to the pulpit in Nottingham, Pennsylvania to deliver “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry.”⁵⁴ The March 1740 sermon contained Tennent’s most virulent attack on his Old Side opponents, whom he denounces in all but name as unconverted Pharisee-teachers and hypocrites. Such preachers “violently oppress” vital religion and persecute it as the flesh persecutes the spirit, hating the saving work of God.⁵⁵ Though they have “a very fair and strict outside,” they are “ignorant of the New Birth” that is

50. Tennent, *Remarks*, 53.

51. Tennent, *Remarks*, 58.

52. Tennent, *Remarks*, 62.

53. Tennent, *Remarks*, 67; cf. Coalter, 53.

54. Tabb, 286. Tennent published the sermon “when the debate had not been settled and as relations between the Old and New Side were becoming tense.”

55. Tennent, “Unconverted Ministry,” 377, 381, 386.

God's mark upon the soul, remaining in a state of nature rather than grace.⁵⁶ Pharisee-teachers consequently do not know how to lead parishioners toward the New Birth, possessing neither "courage or honesty to thrust the nail of terror" into the spiritually somnolent.⁵⁷ The critical doctrines of "original sin, justification by faith alone, and the other points of Calvinism" do not sit well with such pastors, nor can these men be used to bring others into a state that excels their own.⁵⁸ "Every skin of them has an evil eye," Tennent warns, "for no cause can produce effects above its own power. Are not wicked men forbidden to meddle in things sacred?"⁵⁹ Tennent insists that the laity beneath unsaved ministers have cause for concern, especially when church leaders will not allow them to seek a converted pastor. "To blind men to a particular minister... when they are deified elsewhere," he exclaims, "is carnal with witness, a cruel oppression of tender consciences, a compelling of men to sin."⁶⁰ Tennent calls this oppression a yoke worse than the papacy, likening it to the Israelite slaves commanded to make bricks without straw.⁶¹

To the laity Tennent thus announces that "it is both lawful and expedient" for them to seek a godly minister beyond the boundaries of their home church.⁶² Provided that it is done respectfully, "after regular application to the pastor where [they] live for his consent," parishioners may take advantage of their Christian liberty to find effective preaching, travelling a few more miles to get good medicine for the soul.⁶³ Denying this right of movement infringes

56. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 377.

57. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 382.

58. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 385.

59. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 379.

60. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 393.

61. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 394.

62. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 391.

63. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 391.

upon Christian freedom, especially because that freedom seeks the necessity of saving grace in the New Birth. Itinerants, implied in Tennent's call for "faithful laborers" to be sent into the Lord's harvest, trained at private colleges and familiar with experimental religion, serve to bring the gospel to those otherwise fenced in from it, and the latter, having the right to go where they must in order to ascertain God's grace preached, possess as much liberty to hear travelling preachers as those stationed close to home.⁶⁴ Tennent further enjoins his listeners to turn away from preachers who "have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof," adding near the end of the sermon that those who leave the unconverted only do their duty.⁶⁵ The spiritual rewards for the trials that Christians might incur for leaving, according to Tennent, "infinitely overbalance all temporal difficulties."

Tennent was not unaware of the risk of schism in his message, laying out his defense in anticipation of objections. He first argues that his doctrine presents not the cause of divisions, which rest with the selfish lust of those opposed to the gospel, but only their occasion. "Pray, must we leave off every duty that is the occasion of contention or division?" Tennent inquires. If so, "then we must quit powerful religion altogether."⁶⁶ He adds that maintaining unity with the wicked is not worthwhile, implying that the pious should pursue a meaningful unity among the pious. The number of the pious, however, will be small in Tennent's estimate, and not large enough to disturb most congregations. For "spiritual blindness and death so generally prevails" that the majority will remain comfortable with lifeless pastors and their preaching, leaving their congregations in relative peace.⁶⁷

"The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry" did not, however, leave Tennent's Old Side adversaries in peace. They did not dismiss its affront to their qualifications as ministers nor

64. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 388-389.

65. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 395, 403.

66. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 397.

67. Tennent, "Unconverted Ministry," 400.

forgive its challenges to synodical authority and congregational harmony. The freedom that Tennent advocated, it seemed, would destroy the order that the Old Side cherished. Confrontations at synodical meetings in 1740 followed the sermon, with pro- and anti-revival factions hardening their positions. John Thomson, a leader of the Old Side, published *The Government of the Church of Christ* in that year as an answer to the claims of the revivalists. The differences between the two parties, he pointed out, first involved the very low opinion that Tennent and his New Side associates held of their counterparts, as if the Old Sides were “designed Enemies to the Life of Religion...any who reads Mr. Gilbert Tennent’s Sermon concerning unconverted Ministers” could not but think that Old Side clergy were “quite void of Grace.”⁶⁸ The second difference concerned the opposing views of church authority maintained by the two groups. Whereas the Old Side would uphold the rule of the synod over the presbyteries, the New Side would overthrow the church order by proclaiming the minority as not beholden to the majority, ignoring the regional prerogatives of the church through unwanted itinerancy, and by claiming to exercise liberties that they had turned over to the synod’s rulership as a requirement for membership.⁶⁹

The accusation that the Old Side ministers were without grace struck Thomson as strange and unjustified. Anti-revivalists, he argued, did not believe in justification through works, and they taught that salvation does not come apart from “divine, renewing, regenerating Grace.”⁷⁰ After noting New Side pastor Samuel Blair’s assessment that Old Side orations were not “adapted to...the great End of preaching, viz. the Conversion of Sinners to God, and the carrying on of the Work of Sanctification,” Thomson responded with confused disbelief. “I confess I am at a loss to know what Mr. Blair means by this Accusation: Is it not a Minister’s Duty and Work to press

68. Thomson, 112.

69. Thomson, 113-114.

70. Thomson, 116.

these Things upon unconverted Hearers?”⁷¹ Like the New Side, Old Side pastors taught that God saves Christians by grace alone, by which believers gain the blessing that they could not earn “by any natural abilities” that they might have possessed. In Thomson’s estimate, this grace works “on the Soul and rational Parts and Powers,” applauding its appearance in tears and expressions of countenance. Though they might not preach with the vivacity of their New Side brethren, Thomson insisted that the Old Side was not the adversary of “vital Religion and the necessity of Regeneration” that the New Side would make it out to be.⁷²

The emotional outpourings attendant to New Side preaching, on the other hand, appeared to Thomson as an enthusiastic distortion of religion. Of “many Persons crying aloud in the midst of Congregations in Time of public Worship, and others falling down half dead, or working like Persons in Convulsion-Fits,” Thomson judges that their actions are not the gracious “Work of the Spirit of God” nor a sure evidence of that work. Noting how dreadful fears and terrors, visions of Christ or the devil, and impressions of the Day of Judgment afflict New Side audiences, he concludes that “none of these things can be truly called the Work of God’s Spirit or Power of his Grace.”⁷³ In them he saw a fractious manifestation of enthusiasm and delusion and a threat to congregational stability.

At the synod meeting of June 1741, a group of Old Side ministers sought to crush that threat by presenting a protestation against their New Side brethren. Listing “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” and the preaching of terrors among its causes, this document elevated adversarial feelings into the reality of schism, making five points that precipitated the immediate withdrawal of the New Side from the synod. The protestation asserted, first, that the synod must maintain the standards “of Doctrine, Worship and Government of the Church of Christ, as the same are summed up in the Confession of faith, Catechisms and Directory composed by the

71. Thomson, 124.

72. Thomson, 117-118.

73. Thomson, 123-124.

Westminster assembly,” to include acts approved by the Philadelphia synod. Second, no person should have permission to sit and vote in the synod who does not hold to any doctrine of the Confession, or who breaks the rules contained in the directory, or who disregards the orders made by the synod, unless he confess and renounce his sin. Third, the New Side had no right to sit in the synod for various reasons, including their denial of authority to the synod and presbyteries versus dissenting members, their disobedience of the synod’s examining act, their disruption of congregations, their condemning of their adversaries as illustrated in Tennent’s sermon, and the preaching of terrors. Fourth, whatever ordinances the New Side might establish in the synod have no binding force upon their opponents. Fifth, if the Awakeners keep up their divisive practices they shall be guilty of schism, whereas the Old Side would stand as “the true Presbyterian church in this province.”⁷⁴

The protestation amounted to an unmitigated assertion of synodical authority over the New Side, if not the annihilation of the dissenters’ freedom to differ from synodical decrees. Its reading before the synod provoked an uproar, with supporters rushing forward to sign it while the New Side and their allies in the gallery cried out in objection. Exactly how the meeting proceeded from this point is hard to determine, given the conflicting accounts of its conclusion.⁷⁵ One can at least know with certainty that the majority of voting attendees signed the protestation. One can also see that the protestation violated the standards of Presbyterian order, with the authors proclaiming that they represented the synod before a vote validating their claims. Their protestation further amounted to an ultimatum without room for formal charges or a defense on behalf of the accused. In the words of Coalter, the gathered presbyters “could either accept the proposed document and eject the revivalists from their fellowship or they would be rejected as a

74. Klett, 187-189; Coalter, 82-83.

75. Maxson, 74-75; Coalter, 83-84.

bogus synod.”⁷⁶ One might therefore accuse the New Side of breaking away from the synod, but it is arguably no less correct to say that the Old Side forced them out.⁷⁷ In either case, the New Side left with the understanding that they no longer had membership in the synod, and soon organized their own independent presbyteries.

Not long after the eruption of schism, Tennent published his *Remarks Upon a Protestation* in defense of the New Side and providing their version of events. Tennent countered the protestation by agreeing that the Westminster Confession, catechisms, and directory must form the rule of Presbyterian faith and practice, but he denied that every rule in the directory, including those passed by the synod, possessed such authority that to depart from it disenfranchised members from sitting and voting. Such a regulation, in which every rule in the directory as well as all the laws formed by the synod majority become terms of communion, “may be multiplied yearly into an immense volume. And if one did adopt the directory, in the strictest sense, it is no sufficient security against exclusion, unless he can swallow all the after canons, which shall be contrived by the majority.”⁷⁸ Tennent complained that this term of communion “allows no mercy for scrupulous consciences, and renders synodical communion as precarious as the variable humours and fancies of men.” Moreover, those who had presented the protestation and supposed themselves to act in line with the directory and the synod did not follow all of its particular rules. Their imposition of perfect obedience on the New Side therefore amounted to hypocrisy and an unfulfillable expectation.

Extending his argument against making synodical decrees into terms of communion and reiterating themes from the “Apology,” Tennent insisted on the right of conscience against church authority. The majority, he reasoned, have no right to oppress the minority, and must always

76. Coalter, 84.

77. Coalter, 84. Tennent had recently convinced another pastor, George Gillespie, that he and the New Sides had no designs for schism, and wanted the church only to find better means to sustain its purity.

78. Tennent, *Remarks*, 14-15.

make room for the scrupulous. The dictates of conscience stand above oppressive laws as “sacred and inviolable. We know of no authority on earth,” Tennent continues, “that can bind us to the Word of God, and it is our own and not another’s judgment of that Word, which we are to follow.”⁷⁹ When acts of an authoritative body contradict the will of God, therefore, the individual must obey the will of God as perceived by the conscience, which Tennent argues that the revivalists did in disobeying the examining act. To obey authority over the will of God, Tennent contends in quotation of the Westminster Confession, “is to betray true Liberty of Conscience” and to require “an implicit Faith, and an absolute blind obedience” that “is to destroy Liberty of Conscience, and Reason also.”⁸⁰ With this argument against the Old Side’s legislative power as his foundation, Tennent went on to address specific divergences of practice between the New and Old Sides, supplying justifications for New Side activities.

The experience of grace meant to strengthen both lay piety and church authority, then, ultimately had a hand in the event of schism. As the individual’s personal contact with God ascended to new prominence, the structural coherence of the church that fostered it suffered. How unfortunate this turn of events must have appeared to Tennent and his New Side allies, who maintained a clear division between clergy and laity and wanted to see the church order fortified.⁸¹ It is critical to remember that Tennent did not advocate wanton rule-breaking or dismantling institutional structures, but judged church regulations in light of whether they aided or opposed God’s work. In certain circumstances church polity could stand in the way of grace, and at these moments Christians had a duty to ignore improper rules in order to better serve God. To Tennent, the Awakening posed such a situation, an exceptional scenario in which dissenters

79. Tennent, *Remarks*, 17.

80. Tennent, *Remarks*, 18.

81. Tabb, 83-92. See also Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 180. Butler is correct to argue that the New Sides were not antiauthoritarian, but his brief summary of the schism as centered around “church discipline,” such that the New Sides broke away because the Old Sides did not enforce a sufficient level of discipline, is confusing if not inaccurate.

could disregard laws that would inhibit the revival.⁸² Despite these convictions, the schism sowed doubts in Tennent's mind, especially as he encountered the more radical elements among the Awakeners.⁸³ Later in his career, Tennent would drop his divisive habits including the preaching of terror needed for the New Birth, opting for a more formal style in the pulpit.

The schism of 1741 raises the questions that we shall seek to answer in this study: why did the New Birth, an experience of grace supposed to wed the believer to God and the church, prove so disruptive to the institution that facilitated it? Is there something in the mechanics of the experience, some deeper theological meaning implied in the doctrine of justification by faith alone, that makes this experience intrinsically volatile to institutional order? Does the inward appropriation of grace bear the theological paradigm for a rationale of dissent unto fragmentation, awaiting only the right historical circumstances to spring to life in the event of schism? Does that paradigm, in other words, shed theoretical light on how these events occur, and how Christians should understand them in light of the basic doctrine of Protestant theology?

These questions are not meant to dismiss the explicit reasons for division expressed by historical actors, particularly those voiced by Tennent on behalf of the New Side, but to illumine their theological foundations in relation to the experience of grace. Just as a sociologist or a psychologist can present plausible reasons for assuming that historical actors need not be fully conscious of the reasons for their actions, so other forms of argument can uncover implicit assumptions operative in intellectual and religious controversy. Turning to ontology as a methodological starting point, the task of this study is to try to move to the level of the implicit. Its goal is to unearth the tendencies to institutional disruption buried within the doctrine of

82. Coalter, 70-71.

83. See Tennent's 1749 sermon "Irenicum Ecclesiasticum," in which he stressed the importance of church unity, as well as his letter to New York pastor Jonathan Dickinson, written between 1741 and 1742, bemoaning the enthusiasm and division that plagued the Presbyterian churches. Heimert and Miller, 365-374; Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening*, 107-109.

justification by faith alone, showing how the Protestant experience of grace provides a rationale for the event of schism.

CHAPTER 2

FORM AND ITS ABSENCE

One cannot decipher the unique significance of justification by faith alone with a superficial analysis of the religious experience affiliated with it. Even a mind as keen as Max Weber's did not differentiate an experience defined by faith alone from its Christian alternatives, lumping the experience of grace recorded by Martin Luther with its Catholic forebears.⁸⁴ The ontological question of form, which asks whether the elements involved in the experience are construed as possessed at all of form or totally lacking in definition, reveals these differences. To get at the distinctive ontological meaning of religious experience one must therefore develop tools that allow the observer to behold its constitutive theological elements – human nature, the law, and grace – in an ontological light. Let us take certain ontological presuppositions in hand as a microscope, with religious experience laid out on the slide. Viewed through the lenses, one sees that experience broken down according to its elements, each colored by its ontological status. Human nature and the law appear as either formed or formless, while grace appears as a power that either adds to form or removes it.⁸⁵ The meaning of the experience of grace becomes visible in the interaction of the elements as an event tending toward the regeneration or dissolution of form for nature and the law. That one can see the experience of grace prescribed by justification by faith alone in its orientation to formlessness is the basic theoretical conclusion drawn from this study. It is the foundation for our understanding of grace's role in the fragmentation of the Protestant church.

84. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2004), 58-59.

85. The dichotomy of formed versus formless matter is not intended to obscure further divisions within the category of formed matter, e.g., well-formed or deformed matter. Both of these latter alternatives retain form, and I group them together as possessing form against matter that has no form at all.

The ontological lenses through which I shall scrutinize religious experience are two, each involving the concept of formless matter. The first lens establishes the connection between righteousness and form: if a thing possesses righteousness, to that extent it possesses form, and vice versa. If a thing has no righteousness at all, it consequently has no form at all, existing as formless matter. This first lens guides the analysis of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin at the center of the dissertation. The second lens looks more deeply into the ontological structure of formless matter, observing two possibilities for that structure based on whether formlessness appears in the movement upward toward form, as at the creation, or in the movement downward from form toward nothingness. Though I regard formless matter within the latter movement as a theoretical construct (i.e., I am not assuming the actual existence of matter as devolved into formlessness), the explanatory template of this construct is important for my argument. For I will argue that formless matter couched within the upward movement of creation is good with respect to both its being as created by God and its progression toward righteousness, whereas I will argue that formless matter as it appears within the downward movement, though good with respect to the goodness inherent in being, is best considered evil due to the annulment of the righteousness – that is, the form – that it once possessed. Having laid out my argument for these lenses, I will conclude this chapter by examining on the surface the models of religious experience they are meant to examine.

My analysis of religious experience is thus typological, depicting the theological material contained on each slide as a coherent blueprint for the experience of grace. In the process of the analysis, we shall find that these slides divulge their meaning as much because of the magnifying power of the lens as because of their objective content. Selecting features critical to the experience of grace in the thought of Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin and piecing them together in a unity for each theologian, I shall proceed to uncover the ontological significance that unity for each thinker with special attention to the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. The resultant interweaving of theology and ontology does not merely

exegete or reiterate what the theologians have to say on their own terms, but being true to their texts, it extrapolates the meaning of those texts in light of my own ontological view. While I will not misrepresent the experience of grace theorized in the texts as one who tampers with the material on the slide, it is the lens that illumines the ontological meaning that the texts convey. My argument is normative, designed to propose a specific theological judgment in conversation with aspects of the texts of these three theologians. In this manner I will provide a view of justification by faith alone that I hope will clarify its relation to the strife that has ailed the churches that adhere to it.

The theology of Saint Augustine grounds the ontological lenses that compose the microscope, though I hasten to add that its lenses represent my elaboration upon themes in his work. One might nonetheless ask how Augustine can provide material for both the construction of the ontological lenses and one of the portraits of religious experience they would examine. In return, I ask if it is not possible to critique Augustine's theory of religious experience from the perspective of his ontology. Just as there is no contradiction or confusion in juxtaposing various strands of Augustine's thought to test their consistency, so there is no contradiction in placing his understanding of religious experience under interrogation from themes drawn from his ontological thought.

Saint Augustine's theology of religious experience is a necessary part of our undertaking as an example of religious experience not associated with schism. It is also vital to show that the quandary of a religious experience disposed toward formlessness troubles only Protestantism and not Western Christianity as such. The latter two types, which portray religious experience in the life and work of Martin Luther and John Calvin, reveal the problems latent within justification by faith alone in their clarity. Luther recalls the "tower experience" in which the grace of God flooded over him, whereas Calvin has left no record of such an experience. Yet both thinkers propounded theologies of grace and its overwhelming of the heart shaped by Luther's doctrine of

faith alone.⁸⁶ On this foundation I shall argue that both unintentionally designate the law and nature in theory as formless matter and grace as a power that deprives them of form.⁸⁷ Luther and Calvin would vehemently deny that their doctrines of faith alone bear such implications, but this does not mean that those implications are not present.

Can anyone say what, in any case, formless matter is? Saint Augustine grapples with the undefinability of formlessness in book 12 of his *Confessions*, where he considers the primal matter mentioned in the opening verses of Genesis. The complete lack of structure or shape made formless matter a mystery, as Augustine could not imagine it as a simple disfiguration of form but, pressing the concept to its true meaning, attempted to imagine a thing with no form at all. “Lord, have you not taught me,” the Bishop asks, “that before you imparted form and distinction to that formless matter there was nothing – no color, no shape, no body, no spirit? Yet not nothing at all, no, not that either, for there was some kind of formlessness with no differentiation.”⁸⁸ Though formlessness had no discernible shape, being “invisible and unorganized,”⁸⁹ and only capable of receiving form rather than being formed in any way,⁹⁰ it was certainly a thing, even the matter from which the world was created. Augustine goes on to call

86. In recent decades, Lutherans and Roman Catholics have expressed their agreement on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This *rapprochement* does not narrow the theological gap distancing Saint Augustine from Luther and Calvin that I will discuss, but unfortunately overlooks the important differences emphasized in this research. Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/EN/JDDJ_99-jd97e.pdf (accessed November 7, 2011).

87. By saying that Luther and Calvin designate the law and nature “in theory” as formless matter, I mean that their theologies imply an understanding of these as lacking form despite the overt acknowledgment of them as formed. No person would say that human nature has ever been formless in fact; it is a peculiarity of justification by faith alone that it designates that which clearly possesses some form in reality as formless in theory.

88. *conf.*, 12.3, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1997), 63-64.

89. *conf.*, 12.4.

90. *conf.*, 12.6.

this matter “a something-nothing” or “an-is-that-is-not,”⁹¹ clearly struggling to define that which resists all definition. He says with confidence that, inasmuch as this matter has being as created by God, it is good,⁹² but its goodness lies only in its potential for form rather than form received, in the mutability that might take shape rather than a definition assumed.⁹³

Formless matter maintains logical priority over the addition of form as the substance that must be present in order for form to be added to it. Acknowledging this priority, Augustine stresses both that this matter had no power to shape itself and that logical priority does not entail temporal priority. The relation of formless matter to the giving of form parallels the relation of sound to song. “The song,” Augustine writes, “happens in its sound, and this sound is the matter of the song...the matter, sound, has priority over the form that is sung, but not a priority in the sense of having power to create...neither has the sound any temporal priority, for it is uttered simultaneously with the song.”⁹⁴ Formless matter appeared in the act of creation as an instant of indefiniteness, a unilaterally passive substance awaiting God’s impression of form and a moment that one can hardly isolate from that form’s appearance. “In terms of value,” Augustine goes on, “it is of the lowest rank, things endowed with form being unquestionably better than what is unformed,” though the reception of form requires passing through that lowest state.⁹⁵ Formless matter thus sits at the bottom of the ladder of being, providing the ground beneath the upper, formed rungs. As without form, I shall soon argue, it is also without righteousness, the single instance of a being good as created but without the righteousness intrinsic to formed natures.

91. *conf.*, 12.6.

92. *conf.*, 12.31. After embracing Manicheism in his youth, Augustine rejected it for Catholicism and repudiated its philosophy in various writings. In *De Genesi adversus Manicheos*, I.4.7 and I.7.11-12, Augustine argues against Manichean philosophy both that evil is not a positive reality and that the formless matter from which God formed the heavens and the earth was good as the “seed” from which they were created. The Manicheans believed the contrary of both these assertions, namely that evil is a positive reality and that the formless matter from which God created the earth was an evil thing.

93. *conf.*, 12.4.

94. *conf.*, 12.40.

95. *Ibid.*

I would like to add two characteristics of formless matter from my own reasoning, and which shall receive argumentative support primarily in the chapters on Luther and Calvin. First, formless matter may indicate being on the way to form and hardly distinguishable from the appearance of form, as implied the discussion of Augustine above, but I shall argue that formlessness may also denote the annulment of a previously given form. In the latter case, formless matter is best understood as matter whose form has subverted itself. It consists finally in the equality of form posited and annulled, but the positing must precede the annulment logically if not temporally. Viewed from the perspective of the positing, formless matter “is” as something possessed of at least some form, whereas viewed from its finality in annulment formless matter “is not,” or is nothing in particular and totally divested of form. Yet formless matter is both of these at the same time, “an is-that-is-not” which claims form only as integrated into a final formlessness. When I later say that justification by faith alone unintentionally designates the law and nature as formless matter, I have this kind of formlessness in mind. This matter has a form that subverts or annuls itself and is formless in this sense.

Second, the form of a finite or limited thing is annulled as that thing approaches the infinite, whether the infinitely large or the infinitely small. In the case of the experience of grace by faith alone, we shall see that an originally bounded law expands to infinity for both Luther and Calvin. The emergence of “the infinite law” signals both the ontological loss of form and the law’s practical transformation into a tyrant. Oppressed by the weight of the infinite law, human nature shrinks to the infinitesimal, relinquishing its form in a reduction inversely proportionate to the law’s expansion. In each case, the movement to infinity eradicates the boundary of the thing formed in its finitude. In this way that movement is critical to the transition from form into formlessness.⁹⁶

96. The idea of a law that subverts itself by its movement to infinity bears a certain resemblance to Georges Bataille’s notion of expenditure. Bataille writes that “life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by reasonable conceptions.” Interpreting Bataille in my own language, he is stating that finite social conditions cannot contain human existence, which has something essentially

Ontological Lenses

By positing a connection between form and righteousness, the first lens makes a connection between ontology and soteriology. “Ontology” refers to the theory of being with particular attention to the question of form. If a being possesses a particular definition, shape, or way of being to any extent, it possesses form, whereas the total lack of this particularity defines being as formless. By “soteriology” I mean the theory of how persons are saved from sin and made right before God. “Righteousness” here means the possession of resources that aid in salvation, or the capacity to add to one’s justification before God. One possesses righteousness to the degree that one holds these resources or exercises this capacity as a weapon in one’s struggle against sin. To possess intrinsic helps to one’s salvation or justification is to have righteousness, and to lack these helps is to lack righteousness.

Righteousness as “the possession of resources that aid in salvation” can be distinguished from its definition as “the capacity to add to one’s justification before God,” though I do not intend to divide the two too sharply. Nature’s righteousness as a resource is the law that gives it form, or what some theologians have traditionally called natural law. This law is intrinsic to human nature as a direction for the particular way in which that nature ought to exist as God’s creature. It lies more or less dormant within the design of human nature as opposed to being a power for action.⁹⁷ One can thus think of the law as a resource for salvation distinguished from

unbounded about it. He goes on to say that what those closed systems “allow in the way of order and reserve has meaning only from the moment when the ordered and reserved forces liberate and lose themselves for ends that cannot be subordinated to anything that one can account for.” I believe that Bataille’s expeditory moment of liberation resonates closely with justification by faith alone’s moment of grace as liberation from the law. In each case, the experience of what is divine or sacred entails an exuberant and uncontrolled release from boundaries. “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1985), 128.

97. Divine law is similar to natural law in this regard, as it is also more or less inert in comparison to grace as a power for obedience. The concept of law that I employ in the first ontological lens refers primarily to natural law but does not exclude divine law as a path to a higher, incorruptible form. In my exposition of the theologians I will stick to their own conceptions of the law: Augustine views divine law as an enhancement upon natural law and essentially connected to it, while Luther and Calvin see no

nature's capacity to obey the law's commands, which can be bolstered by grace. The distinction is valid but it should not obscure the law's tangible help to salvation. If fallen nature did not possess this law, it would face the soteriological lacunae of having no intrinsic reminder of its sin and of lacking an intrinsic knowledge of the way of being to which it should conform. Nature would have no inbred sense of the form it has lost in sin, which the law provides as a necessary first step toward salvation as the recovery of form.

A detractor will likely think that I have already stacked the cards in my favor inasmuch as the connection of righteousness and form implies that justification by faith alone, as a doctrine that refuses all righteousness to the law and nature, entails their existence as formless. I will soon address this issue, but I ask now for the reader's patience and objectivity as I elaborate the foundations of my reasoning in Augustine's thought.⁹⁸

The parallel between ontology and soteriology – between form and righteousness – occurs as an aspect of the larger connection between value, ontology, and soteriology in Augustine's theology. Augustine sees value, whether good or evil, as a moral ultimate that implies a soteriological form and an ontological content. This juxtaposition of good versus evil does not mean that evil exists as a free-standing principle independent of the good, as if Augustine had failed to shake off Manichean beliefs with his conversion to Christianity. Evil always presupposes the good and is its corruption. It is a privation of the good and nothing on its own. That qualification noted, the following pattern stands: on the positive side, Good is the moral ultimate (in this case an ultimate reality) synonymous with God. The Good has righteousness for its soteriological way of being or form and being or life for its ontological

substantive difference between the two, viewing divine law as a restatement of the natural law for minds blinded by sin. The nuances regarding the definitions of divine versus natural law between Augustine and the Reformers do not come significantly into play in the critique that I shall lodge against justification by faith alone.

98. These foundations, to repeat, are drawn from my interpretation of currents in Augustine's theology as much as from his explicit statements, and while I make use of his theology as an anchor for my own purposes, I do not pretend that he would always recognize my construal of his thought as an undisturbed reflection of his meaning.

content. On the negative side, Evil is the ultimate value, with sin as its form and death or nothingness as its content, or better put, the utter absence of content. Form and content exist, for particular beings, in parallel. For a particular rational being, participation in form implies a change in content, as righteousness gives life and sin leads to death. An increase or decrease in content likewise implies participation in the form, as a greater share in life, especially the higher life with God, entails some increase in righteousness, while the loss of life entails either subjection to another's sin or one's active participation in sin.

Augustine calls God “the highest and best good, since it is a sound and unshakeable truth that the non-decaying is higher than the decaying.”⁹⁹ God is the highest good because He supremely is, suffering no perversion and not being liable to injury. “For God is existence in a supreme degree – he supremely *is* – and he is therefore immutable.”¹⁰⁰ Beyond not being able to decay, immutability means that the divine nature does not change nor contain the possibility of change. God is who He is without the chance that He might alter His nature, and one cannot say that He was once one way and is now another. This assertion implies God's impassibility, since resistance to change includes resistance to being changed. God does not move as one who is acted upon but always acts. He changes created things while remaining unchangeable and does not respond to His creation as if it, and not He, played the dominant part. There further exists no possibility of increase or decrease in God. If increase, then He did not exist as the highest perfection before it; if decrease, then He bore the imperfection of the possibility of lessening. God's nature resists such fluctuations, being wholly and eternally perfect.¹⁰¹ God is pure, incorruptible Being, even Being itself, and as such His way of being is an incorruptible Form.

99. *conf.*, 7.6.6-7.

100. *civ. Dei*, 12.2.

101. Roland J. Teske, S.J. *To Know God and the Soul*, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 133-135.

God's form consists in His activity as subsistence and His content refers to the divine attributes. The form receives logical precedence in the divine Being inasmuch as the attributes derive from God's way of being, or the fact that God "supremely *is*."¹⁰² Though scholars have noted the divine attributes that Augustine emphasizes as resonant with Platonism, pagan philosophical influences do not compose the core of his thinking about God. Augustine stands first and foremost upon Exodus 3:14, where God reveals His name as "I am who I am."¹⁰³ He begins not with a series of attributes drawn from Platonic philosophy but with the God of being-in-act as affirmed in the Pentateuch, approaching God first as He who Is and immutable or self-identical because of the eternal and impervious manner in which He is. The attributes arise from the activity, a point missed in conceptualizing God's essence as a substrate to which one can ascribe certain qualities, even qualities in the highest degree.¹⁰⁴ Just as the Latin language derives *essentia* from *esse*, so the essence of God is His activity in subsisting or the 'to be,' and the qualities persons use to describe God follow this foundation.¹⁰⁵ The dichotomy of being versus not being, with one understood as activity or subsistence and the other as a lack of subsistence,¹⁰⁶ logically precedes dichotomies between attributes such as immutability versus mutability. His highlighting of being-in-act as prior to attribute reveals that for Augustine form precedes content

102. James Anderson, *Saint Augustine and Being*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), 15.

103. Anderson, 16, 27-29. For Augustine's understanding of Exodus 3:14, see also Teske, 120-123.

104. Anderson 19-21, 30. He writes that "God is not properly called a 'substance' conceived of as a substrate of accidents, for He has none; in this sense of 'substance,' God is 'abusively' or improperly so designated. In other words, God is not a 'substance' in so far as this term is taken to imply that He is a subject of inhering perfections which He is not. He is, however, properly called a 'substance' in the sense of *subsisting* being."

105. *civ. Dei*, 12.2.

106. To completely lack subsistence is to not be, since a thing cannot be without subsisting and to not subsist is to lack that activity by which a thing is.

as the believer attempts to think about God.¹⁰⁷ It also reveals that the content of the diving Being, specifically the attributes it possesses in the highest degree, parallel God's form as subsistence in the highest degree. That God in His form always was, is, and will be in the same manner means that He is the highest life, purity, and omnipotence, in addition to the other attributes that pertain to His nature.

The reliance of divine attributes upon the Deity's way of being has a match in human nature, which grows or diminishes in its life to the extent that it participates in a particular soteriological activity or form. Speaking of the mind in *On the Immortality of the Soul*, Augustine argues that it "has more being when turned toward reason and inhering in it, thus adhering to the unchangeable thing which is truth, both greatest and first; so when turned away from reason it has less being, which constitutes a defection."¹⁰⁸ The mind's activity has an impact on its share in being according to Augustine at this early stage in his writing. The more it focuses on the eternal, the greater share in that eternal it acquires, while the more it turns away from eternal truth, the more it diminishes in being.¹⁰⁹ The mind's activity influences its content, with the latter understood as its share in higher forms of reality. The same motif occurs later in *City of God*, where Augustine reasons that "no man is happy, unless he is righteous." A perfectly righteous person would live like those before the fall, "wholly exempt from death, deception and distress," and with "the assurance that he will be forever exempt."¹¹⁰ Augustine also affirms the intrinsic connection of righteousness with life in *On Nature and Grace*, where he teaches that

107. As I will shortly acknowledge, giving God's form in subsisting logical precedence before the divine attributes, as well as epistemic precedence in human thinking about God, should not overshadow the fact that in the divine Being form and content are completely unified.

108. VII.12. Augustine wrote this work around 387.

109. *De quantitate animae*, 16.28-17.30, 33.70-34.79. Augustine here explains the growth of the soul as metaphorical. It grows in knowledge, not in physical size or measure. The height of this growth, attained after progress through several stages, consists in contemplation of God.

110. *civ. Dei*, 14.25. Augustine wrote *De civitate Dei* between 410 and 420. He did not consider the perfection of which he here speaks, one should note, as a legitimate expectation for persons in this world. The righteous person lives the life that he or she wishes only when "wholly exempt from death."

“the eternal life of righteousness” must assist believers if they are to perform good works, and that “the life of the righteous only shines with greater lustre” when they undergo temptation.¹¹¹ The former passage connects righteousness to good works in that it helps the believer to perform them, implying righteousness as a category for works that tend toward the good contrasted not against evil but sin as the activity that tends toward evil. “Righteousness is [the soul’s] movement toward integration, sin its movement towards disintegration.”¹¹² Augustine’s mention of the “the life of the righteous,” on the other hand, entails that the righteous possess life as attendant to their activity in advancing toward God.¹¹³

Just as the earlier Augustine saw the mind’s activity with regard to truth determining its share in being, so the greater or lesser share of the soul in being depends, in his mature thought in *City of God*, “on righteousness or union of the soul with God.”¹¹⁴ A creature whose will perfectly conforms to God’s command, as humans before the fall and good angels, enjoys the divine presence and lives without hints of decay or disease. The observance of the commandments yields tranquility of body and soul and an uninterrupted share in being according to one’s nature.¹¹⁵ In this manner the creature achieves the perfection for which God created it, implying for rational creatures the fellowship with God fitting for the soul. Understood soteriologically,

111. 29.51, 25.40.

112. John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), 37.

113. See also *De peccatorum meritis et remissione, et de baptism parvulorum*, I.6.34-43. Augustine’s connection of righteousness and life echoes Paul’s point that death reigned through the sin of Adam while through Christ persons receive righteousness unto life, an argument Augustine makes in multiple anti-Pelagian writings. “For if by one man’s offence death reigned by one, much more they which receive abundance of grace and righteousness shall reign in life by One, Jesus Christ. Therefore, by the offence of one upon all men to condemnation; so by the righteousness of one upon all men unto justification.” Romans 5:17-18, quoted in *nupt. et conc.*, II.46.56-62.

114. Burnaby, 150.

115. *civ. Dei*, 14.26.

fellowship with God is the soul's perfection in righteousness, as "the 'higher life' of the soul...is a fuller participation in the Life of God."

Fallen persons strive in righteousness toward God in the hope of participation in the higher life because in Him "Being and Righteousness are identical."¹¹⁶ One could take the identity between being and righteousness in God in two ways, the first equating being and righteousness in act such that 'to be' means immediately 'to be righteous,' the latter merely describing the act of being from the viewpoint of soteriology. The second way of positing the identity of being and righteousness returns to the juxtaposition of form and content made earlier. In this case righteousness as being-in-act constitutes the logically preceding activity or form, and being as life constitutes the state attendant to it, substantively identical and simultaneous with but logically resultant from the form.

One does well to remember the dominance of the moral question for Augustine at this point.¹¹⁷ God might be Being itself, but ontology has meaning because it answers the question of value, of good and evil. In pursuing God as their highest good, creatures engage in the activity of righteousness in which they conform to the commands that guide them into fellowship with Him. This activity results in life as a content, the reward for obedience that denotes a state of communion with the Creator. One can therefore sketch a relation between value, soteriology, and ontology that applies to both the creature striving to know God and the God to be known. God is the ultimate Good, and is so with a form and a content. The form is righteousness or the activity of being while the content is life or being as an essence. In God these are perfectly unified if not identical.¹¹⁸ The creature aspires to fellowship with God by obeying the righteousness

116. Burnaby, 149.

117. Gilson, 45.

118. One should not confuse this point with the priority of being in God outlined earlier. God's being-in-act is always epistemically prior, as the basis from which persons begin to know God. In God Himself, however, being-in-act and attributes are totally unified.

commanded of it, imitating the divine activity according to its creaturely nature. It receives life as a reward for this activity, construed as deeper contact with God and a greater share in the being for which its nature was designed. In the case of God the Good is given, with righteousness as its form and life as its content, with both fully achieved. In the case of the creature the Good is pursued, again with righteousness as the form and life as the content, and in the hope of encountering and participating in that Good according to the creature's nature.

Evil opposes Good as a corruption of being toward non-being.¹¹⁹ “The evil I was trying to explain,” Augustine notes in the *Confessions*, “was not itself a positive existent, which would as such be good, not evil.”¹²⁰ There is no evil in God or in any creation of His inasmuch as it has being. Creatures cannot be created evil because the bestowal of being implies goodness, and as they remain untainted by evil they maintain their original wholeness. Evil strikes them as a defect upon their original innocence, depriving them of the level of being in which God created them. It lessens their being and thereby their value, depriving the creature of goodness in depriving it of being.¹²¹ This lessening occurs in rational creatures either by breaking God's law or by suffering another's bad conduct. Both possibilities endure the defect, whether in the will of the perpetrator or the pain of the victim.¹²² They share the disruption in the divine order caused by the offense, which steals away the goodness that those involved had enjoyed. Thus in creatures endowed with a rational will “evil is the absence of the perfection or fullness of

119. Robert O'Connell, *Saint Augustine's Early Theory of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1968), 195-196. O'Connell summarizes Augustine's view of the fall as one from “the realm of ‘Being’...into the realm of non-being.”

120. 7.18.16.

121. *ench.*, 4.12.

122. Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine*. Abingdon Pillars of Theology. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 22. “The so-called privation theory,” comments TeSelle, “says that evil, whether it is done or evil suffered, is always a corruption or lack of something good.”

goodness and reality which the nature itself and the divine order demand,” whether this absence comes by one’s own will or is inflicted by another.¹²³

Sin consists in the turning of rational creatures away from the Good toward which God had oriented them, namely fellowship with Him. It occurs, Augustine asserts, because God created them *ex nihilo*, whereby they retained the possibility of falling back into the nothing from which they were created.¹²⁴ As the contrary to righteousness, sin pulls rational creatures away from the higher life in God and toward death. By it a creature abdicates its natural orientation, disobeying the universal order and rejecting God as its highest good in order to put lower goods, especially the creature itself, in God’s place. In this way sin overturns the hierarchy of being established in creation, lifting transient goods to the level of the eternal.¹²⁵ The believer experiences this inversion internally as disordered love. Desire for the good is natural, especially when turned toward God. Desire for lower goods is also natural and approved when the creature loves these in their place, but to turn to lower things as if they were higher inverts love by its attraction to the wrong object. The problem, however, lies not in the object that God created good but in desire’s inverted turning. In this way the creature deprives itself of the ultimate good and disturbs the divine order, as if the whole should tend to corruption rather than being.¹²⁶

Sin’s pull toward corruption and its termination in death inverts the movement of righteousness toward life as descent against ascent. The sinful act entails privation and results in

123. J. Patout Burns, “Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil,” in *The Ethics of Saint Augustine*, ed. William Babcock. JRE Studies in Religious Ethics, No. 3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 70.

124. *civ. Dei*, 14.13.

125. William Babcock writes that sin “is, in effect, an inversion of what Augustine believed to be the objective order or scale of value, setting it on its head by taking lower and transient goods as if they were the higher and enduring goods that, in fact, have ultimate worth.” (“Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency,” in *The Ethics of Saint Augustine*, ed. William Babcock. JRE Studies in Religious Ethics, No. 3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 93.

126. Joseph N. Torchia, “The Significance of *Ordo* in Augustine’s Moral Theory,” in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., Earl C. Muller, S.J., and Roland Teske, S.J. *Collectanea Augustiniana* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 270.

a state of loss, in physical natures causing the cessation of life. The human body dies as the penalty for sin, which has struck such a deep wound that the body has become definitively mortal. The soul that God created unable to perish suffers sin as a diminishment but does not relinquish its immortality. Augustine understands the soul's death in view of his assertion that God is its life, its higher purpose consisting in union with Him, and its death occurring when God leaves it. Whereas the body dies as inanimate when the soul departs, the soul dies as tortured by its distance from its Maker, cut off from the source of its life. Augustine refers to God's leaving the soul as the first death, which persons may experience on earth to a greater or lesser extent after the fall. The departure of the soul from the body and the consequent cessation of bodily life, when coupled with the death of soul, constitute the second death.¹²⁷ Only the damned suffer the second death, permanent alienation from God.

The death toward which sin would turn the creature involves the disintegration of its natural definition and solidity into disorder and formlessness. That sin never actually lowers formed being to this level of incoherence does not alter the fact that it pulls the creature in this direction. Sin's activity here also reveals the deeper assessment that, for Augustine, a thing "is to whatever extent it is" by virtue of its form; to possess form means not simply to be, but to be in the particular way in which God designed the creature *at creation*. That is, "being in the way

127. *civ. Dei*, 13.15. It appears that Augustine's thought on death and hell posits a middle period between physical death and the last punishment in which the soul exists apart from the body. This dualism, one could argue, is more Greek than biblical. One could argue that it both raises the soul as immortal above the mortal body in a way foreign to the Scripture and does not adequately represent the unification of body and soul supposed to be present in the New Testament. I would defend Augustine by raising two points. First, if the soul and body always exist as a psychosomatic unity, and this such that the body's death necessitates the death of the soul, then the body has power over the soul in a crucial way. Though one might claim they are equal partners, the body's being doomed to death controls the soul's fate. Equality between soul and body at the point of death is a misnomer: either the soul is higher, and the body's death does not impose the same fate, or the body is higher, and its death requires the same punishment for the soul. Claims to psychosomatic unity do not eradicate the order of soul over body condoned by Augustine, but invert it.

Second, Augustine separates the soul from the body temporarily, while they are together both on earth and in eternity (the last blessing or condemnation). Sin's punishment requires that they be apart for a time, but their separation is less important than their unity. A similar point could be made regarding law and grace, as I am trying to show in this chapter. Their distinction is less definitive of their relationship than the complementarity to which it points.

God designed the creature” does not immediately refer to the life of holiness or good works, but at a fundamental level underlying those works it denotes being formed in the shape of a human being, body and soul, as the law of human nature. This point highlights the ontological meaning of the possession of righteousness, which one can hardly distinguish as a thing’s particular way of being from its being as such. A thing is in the way it is, or put another way, a thing is in accordance with the law of its being. For Augustine, the creature perishes not by losing the matter from which God formed it but by the dissolution of the form by which the matter became recognizable as the particular thing it was, that is, by losing its righteousness.¹²⁸ In the case of persons, the body ceases to be the body not by the annihilation of physical matter but by the loss of discernible difference from its physical environment,¹²⁹ while the soul “lessens” its being by turning its activity from the immutable Good.¹³⁰ This turning does not cause the soul to cease to exist but deprives it of the divine presence by which one can understand it to live truly.

The parallel between ontology and soteriology recurs, but with a lower limit. Augustine remains pre-eminently concerned with evil as a moral value, and that evil has a form in sin and a content in death or nothingness. Sin uses its powers to draw a particular thing toward existence as nothing in particular, wanting to reduce a formed nature with a particular content into near nothingness, an undifferentiated and therefore contentless content. The formless matter into which sin works to transform the creature is the paradox that Augustine could not comprehend, the “something-nothing” or “is-that-is-not” noted above, the lowest rank of being now construed as a state of death. This matter no longer possesses the form by which it is in the way that God created it to be, having relinquished the righteousness intrinsic to its way of being. Formless matter retains some good to the extent that it exists, but it has hit the soteriological floor.

128. *imm an.*, VII.14.

129. *imm. an.*, VIII.12.

130. Gilson, 52.

Augustine regards formless matter as good on account of its creation by God, its position as a stage in the movement upward from nothing to being. Despite this, it is consonant with his thought to argue that circumstances exist in which one can refer to formless matter as evil. In an extension of Augustine's thought that he himself did not draw out, I contend that the formless matter that appears in the movement downward from form toward nothingness has a different ontological structure from that of the movement upward. The words "formlessness" or "formless matter," I argue, hide the possibility of two different realities. The lens that distinguishes the two kinds of formlessness shall substantially magnify our ontological view.

A preliminary note regarding the relationship of good and evil is necessary. Augustine regards goodness as the basic category in comparison to evil, with the latter presupposing the former as the more fundamental reality. "Good may exist on its own, but evil cannot," Augustine asserts, adding that "if there is no good at all, there is nothing for perversion to destroy."¹³¹ Good stands prior and superior to evil in the sense that it must exist for evil to act upon it, and the defect that evil would cause in fact reveals the goodness of the nature by trying to pervert it, proving "how great and honorable is the nature in itself."¹³² As fallen, created reality and the natures that compose it thus have two aspects that reflect the greater value of being over nothing and good over evil. Inasmuch as a created nature is, it is good, and this is its positive and greater aspect; inasmuch as a nature is inverted or defective, it is evil, and this is its secondary and lesser aspect.¹³³

Formless matter as a moment of creation in which being ascends toward form implies a version of both of these aspects, an actual good and a potential evil that each imply an ontological content and a soteriological form. The first aspect of formless matter is the being God has created, which possesses ontological good by virtue of its existence and soteriological good by

131. *civ. Dei*, 12.3; cf. *ench.*, 4.14.

132. *civ. Dei*, 12.1.

133. *ench.*, 4.13-14.

virtue of its vector. That is, though this being has yet to take form, it progresses toward it, God having purposed this matter to rise from formlessness into form. The matter's soteriological good parallels its ontological good, so that it possesses unqualified good despite its lack of form. On the other side, this being as finite and created out of nothing bears the possibility of falling back toward the nothingness from which God called it (as opposed to the actuality of fallenness in sinful creatures). God has not created this possibility in an active sense, nor does it identify a concrete reality, but it attends to creaturely being as a negative potentiality. It is the possible perversion of the wholly good being that God has brought into existence, a space from which formed being might fall into deformation that, prior to the fall, is not yet evil in fact. This potential for evil nonetheless implies a latent soteriological form and an ontological content. Its would-be form is sin, the deprivation of the creature's original (and corruptible) perfection as created by God, while death or the lack of being accompanies the soteriological form of sin as its ontological anti-content.

In the moment of creation and before the fall, the potentiality of evil lacks the power to cause a defect in the being God has created (or at least it has not yet caused such a defect). The potential for evil as a soteriological movement, therefore, denotes neither sin nor righteousness. It is a neutral capacity for movement, a pure mutability or changeableness. It produces transformations in form that do not imply a loss of form. The instant as formless matter through which being passes on the way to form occurs as a moment of equality between the real good and potential evil in the movement from nothingness to formed being. The equality does not involve ontological content, since being never equals nothing. It involves the soteriological movements, as the good aspect's movement toward righteousness or form has yet to give it shape beyond the pure mutability that could turn its being toward sin if it had the power.

The second kind of formlessness, developed from my own extension of the connection between ontology and soteriology, occurs in the movement from being into nothing. It is not an immediate result of the fall, as if Adam lost all form as a result of sin, but is a hypothetical state

in which sin works so profoundly upon formed matter that it loses all form. One can consider this overall trajectory again in terms of the good and potential evil attendant to being, although the evil has here progressed from mere potentiality into actual sin. The ontological facet of each of the good and evil aspects does not change, as evil's ontology remains the anti-content of non-being or death, while the good still has being as its ontological content. It is the soteriological movement of each that changes, transforming the structure of formless matter on the whole. In the first kind of formlessness, righteousness as the movement of the good possessed the power to draw being up into form, accomplishing this over a neutral principle of mutability associated with the possible movement toward nothingness. In the second kind of formlessness, the power of formation intrinsic to righteousness transfers to the evil movement. Righteousness gives up its power to form, diminishing into a neutral power akin to the mutability originally aligned with the potential evil, itself becoming a pure potentiality. This reduction of power constitutes a defect, making righteousness something sinful. The good aspect of formless matter, as a result, becomes a sinful good. The soteriological movement of evil receives the power of righteousness, enlarging from a pure potentiality to something like actuality, a power without content. It uses this power to invert being's goodness, inflicting a defect upon formed being strong enough to drive it back into formlessness. As an empowered sin, it uses the strength meant to give form in order to dissolve that form. The evil movement assumes the power though not the direction of the good, and in this sense becomes a righteous evil. It then exerts this power until the good and evil movements return to the soteriological equality that they passed through on the way to form. At this point formed being has come undone, reverting again to formlessness.

Internally inconsistent elements – a sinful good and a righteous evil – each inverted by the transfer of soteriological power, compose the second kind of formlessness. It is a contradiction made up of contradictions, an inversion wavering upon inversions. It may share the name, but it does not share the constitution of the first kind of formless matter. One might ask, then, whether formless matter in itself is good, evil, or somewhere in between, even neutral. The

answer is that in itself, extracted and isolated from the movement upward from nothing toward form or downward from form back toward nothing, formless matter is nothing at all. One can hardly begin to think it. Formless matter is good or evil only with respect to the movement in which it is couched. Located in the in the ascent toward form, it is a good growing in goodness; situated in the descent toward nothingness, it is totally inverted. “Every being, even if it is corrupt,” Augustine writes, “insofar as it is a being is good, and insofar as it is corrupt, is evil.”¹³⁴ The formlessness of descent has become totally corrupt, deprived of all righteousness and form. In this way it is an evil swimming in wickedness, defined by the inversion of being rather than the being that it is.

Those skeptical of the ontological lenses that I have developed are likely to question the issue of neutrality. Proponents of justification by faith alone who believe that the law adds nothing to salvation might say: “You have connected a law of form with righteousness, but is there not also a soteriologically indifferent or neutral law? Why do you not allow for this possibility?” Put another way, why should one assume my categories of ontology and soteriology without adding a third, axiology? Here ontology would refer to the theory of being or form, soteriology to justification before God by faith alone and apart from the law, and axiology to a way of holiness in obedience to law prescribed by God but neutral with respect to justification. Objectors might also ask a different question: “You have said that formless matter is either good or evil. But why could one not accept matter as good insofar as formed, neutral as unformed, and evil as deformed?” The first pair of questions wants to make room for a neutral law, the last question for a neutral kind of being.

My reply to these objections first addresses the freedom or neutrality of the will that

134. *ench.*, 4.13.

receives the law.¹³⁵ I agree with the later Augustine that God created human nature as sinless and completely upright prior to the fall, outfitted with a will inclined to the good.¹³⁶ Augustine recognizes that humanity nonetheless endured the limitations of finitude and mutability summed up by Eugene TeSelle as indeterminacy, incapacity, and instability.¹³⁷ The creature in Eden suffered a gap between the potential good that it might accomplish and the good that it is by nature, or between potential and actual beatitude. Persons faced practical decisions amid changing circumstances, taking responsibility for their actions in an existence that, though not decaying, experienced transience and risked succumbing to it by preferring it to the eternal. In order to aid the original couple in obedience, supporting them toward continued righteousness in the face of their environment, God added grace to nature. Through grace the creaturely will better adheres to the good, achieving the stability needed to persevere in conformity to God's will.¹³⁸ Prior to the fall, then, the creature receives two gifts. The first is an uncorrupted nature oriented to the good but capable of dying and subject to finitude and change. The second gift provides grace to overcome the mutability of creaturely existence and stand fast in the righteousness that would lead, barring sin, to permanent incorruptibility.¹³⁹

135. By "will" I understand human nature taken as a whole and viewed from its moral aspect. The will is the person's moral nature.

136. Augustine affirms the will's neutrality in *De Libero Arbitrio* (3.24.71-25.74), written in 388, but drops it in Book 12 of *De civitate Dei*, written in 417 (Babcock, 99). TeSelle sums up the view of *De Libero Arbitrio* on this point by saying that for Augustine "man was created in a middle state which is neither the one nor the other, that he could become either wise or foolish through his own free enactment." "Nature and Grace in Augustine's Expositions of Genesis I, 1-5" *Recherches augustiniennes* 5: 126.

137. TeSelle, "Augustine's Expositions," 109.

138. TeSelle, "Augustine's Expositions," 115. TeSelle writes that, prior to the sin, grace "counteracts the threat of loss which necessarily accompanies the life of a changeable being."

139. TeSelle, "The Problem of Nature and Grace," *The Journal of Religion* 45, No. 3 (Jul 1965): 238-249. The doctrine of the two gifts became known in Catholic theology as "double gratuity." According to this doctrine, grace provides for a communion with God beyond the capabilities of an unstained nature, and was given by God so that persons could attain an otherwise impossible state of communion with the divine.

Given these two gifts, humanity's condition prior to the fall allowed for two options. Persons could either sin (*posse peccare*) or not sin (*posse non peccare*). After the fall, Augustine believes that persons have an inability to not sin (*non posse non peccare*).

God inclined humans toward the good by the gifts of nature and grace, but He did not seal them in it. Their wills possessed two qualities, the tendency to the good (*libertas*) and the freedom to confirm or defy this tendency (*liberum arbitrium*). In this freedom persons maintained a certain neutrality, a portion of the will sufficiently distanced from their inclinations to evaluate them and give or withhold consent. The freedom of the will is this possibility, a neutral capacity for choice. The will exercised its neutrality or freedom in affirming or contradicting the inclinations intrinsic to it as a will, in Eden the inclination toward a righteous obedience.

I contend that if one plucks the free or neutral portion of the will away from the inclinations upon which it acts, extracting and isolating the possibility away from the concrete choice to obey or disobey that confronts it and defining the will by this freedom in its isolation, that will recedes into a vacuum. A will that is utterly neutral and utterly free, a pure possibility unconnected to inclinations, is no will at all. It inclines in no substantive moral direction and thus lacks the foundation necessary for the choices constitutive of its subsistence as a will. So isolated, it becomes an “amoral will,” a contradiction of its existence as will. One thus cannot make sense of the freedom of the will without the context of inclinations in which it is situated. In this sense the will’s freedom, though it judges inclinations with the power of consent, depends upon them. Freedom makes sense only within a contextual vector of concrete inclinations toward or away from righteousness. If it encounters good inclinations, the will’s neutrality can support the movement upward in holiness or contradict it. If it encounters evil inclinations, the neutrality can join forces with the movement downward or refute it. In each case the possibility presumes the vector of concrete inclination. Without this concrete circumstance the neutrality fades into nothingness, hardly definable as a will.

The inclination likewise requires the moment of freedom in order to complement it. If the will tends toward holiness, its tendency needs the approval of the neutral capacity in order to continue the climb. If the will feels the fall into baseness, the neutral component must bless the

descent. The will that lacks this moment of freedom again hardly seems to be a will. Its inclination moves unbridled and unchecked, without substantive control by the agent. The heart would seem to have a mind of its own, which the mind follows “freely” because the will is once again amoral rather than immoral. Whereas the will’s neutrality divorced from concrete inclinations is amoral because it ceases to make the judgment of consent definitive of the will, the inclinations extracted and isolated from the neutrality are amoral inasmuch as they no longer submit to that judgment.¹⁴⁰ Alienate the two aspects of the will from one another and in their isolation neither appears a will. The inclination must look to the freedom to confirm it while the freedom presupposes the inclination for its judgments, with the will’s definition as a will lodged in their interaction.

That interaction involves a particular relation between the will’s inclinations and its freedom or neutrality that subordinates the latter to the former. The will is only neutral or free as a moment wrapped up in a vector toward good or evil. The will is good as it confirms the movement toward righteousness and evil as it condones sin, and it exercises its freedom in the decision between these options, but the will is not neutral or free *qua* will. This would invert the relation between the vector to which freedom contributes and the freedom itself, identifying the will fundamentally with an incoherent abstraction rather than a concrete movement. Freedom exists, in other words, for the sake of achieving a substantive righteousness and risks a substantive possibility of sin. That righteousness and potential sin, though they guard freedom as essential to their existences, do not exist for the sake of freedom.¹⁴¹

140. Cf. *Inst.*, II.iii.5. This is, I think, Calvin’s understanding of the will. Calvin thinks that the will is free because its inclinations do as they please, with this lack of restraint behind his affirmation of the harmony between the will’s freedom and its necessity, but he has removed those inclinations from a morally relevant context by divorcing them from the capacity for judgment in which they find moral confirmation.

141. I will return to the relation between free will and law in my defense of Augustine’s understanding of free will. The problem there concerns how to understand the juxtaposition of free will and an insuperable predestinating grace.

The relationship of the will's inclinations to its freedom or neutrality sets the pattern for understanding both ontological and nomological neutrality. In the ontological case, if one extracts and isolates the moment of freedom or neutrality – that is, of formlessness – from the vector in which it is situated and attempts to assign it a moral meaning, that attempt dissolves into contradiction. Affirming a neutral law, on the other hand, would amount to plucking the law as freedom out from the law as law; this neutrality is so thoroughly a contradiction that one can hardly begin to conceive of it.

Let us take the ontological example of matter that is good as formed, evil as deformed, and neutral as unformed. If one isolates the concept of unformed or formless matter and presses it as Augustine did, its being fades into a mist or a near-nothingness. To make formless matter comprehensible one must locate it within being's movement upward from nothingness into formed being or its movement downward from form into nothingness. Isolate formless matter from these vectors as if it were a free-standing state of being and it continually slips through one's fingers; concentrate on the idea of formless matter in abstraction and the matter will be progressively sacrificed to the lack of form. This dynamic mirrors concentration on the will's neutrality as abstracted from its inclinations, a concentration that sacrifices the will's definition as a will to its freedom from those inclinations. Isolate the will from its tendencies (i.e., its vectors) as if it were a free standing possibility, neutrality, or freedom, and the will loses its substance *qua* will. The moment of the will's freedom of decision thus parallels the moment of formlessness in the movement of being. Remove either from its contextual vectors and it becomes indecipherable.¹⁴²

142. See Carol Harrison's insight with regard to "natural providence" and "voluntary providence" in Augustine's thought: God's "providence or grace...acts not only to create, form, and order temporal reality, but also to reform, redeem, and convert fallen wills...it is found not only in the 'natural providence' of the Creator, who creates matter from nothing by giving it 'form,' or measure, number, and weight, thereby revealing himself and inspiring love...[but] it is also forcefully described by Augustine as dramatically intervening in the course of human history, in what he later terms 'voluntary providence': in the revelation of God in salvation history, Scripture, prophecy and teaching, the incarnation, and the Church and its sacraments." That Harrison sketches the notion of voluntary providence to better

Like the necessity of freedom for confirming the will's inclinations, the ascent of being from nothing to form and its descent from form into nothingness entail its passage through formlessness. Unformed being is pure possibility or freedom, a matter that could become anything or nothing. Being created *ex nihilo* must emerge from this possibility on its way to definite shape, just as formed being headed toward nothingness must relinquish its boundedness in its disintegration into non-existence. Formless matter of course does not exercise choice as the will's freedom does, but its existence is no less necessary to the vectors in which it is couched. Thus both the will and being nestle their freedom or neutrality within the vectors, good or evil, that determine that freedom's moral status. The freedom takes its moral label from the vector, so that formless matter on the way toward form is good, and that moving toward nothingness is evil. Positing an unformed matter that is neutral, like the attempt to define the will *qua* will by its freedom, abstracts that which resists definition and then attempts to define it. That positing desires the contradiction of a free-standing moral meaning given to a reality that cannot stand on its own.

Turning from the concept of a neutral being to that of a neutral or soteriologically indifferent law, an obvious question arises: if the law is soteriologically indifferent, why should one obey it? If salvation is assured, why then the law? It is worth noting here Luther's doctrine that the law is good but does not justify. Luther's doctrine of justification, the center of his theology, asserts that the law makes no contribution to one's righteousness before God. Received through faith in Christ's grace, justification grants the believer an indifference to the law's threats of eternal punishment. One should take care to remember here that Luther does not strongly differentiate natural law from divine law, but views divine law as a renewal of the natural law that

understand the action of divine grace on the will elicits the question: if there is a single motif of creation in which God gives form to inert matter and intervenes to form human nature unto salvation, is there not also a parallel moment of formlessness between the creation of physical form and that of its spiritual counterpart? What better way to understand that spiritual moment than the freedom of the will in which the possibility of gaining greater form hangs suspended? *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 242.

had become obscure to sinful minds.¹⁴³ In what matters most in Luther's thought, the question of salvation as one's justification before God, the answer to the problem of sin engenders a certain disregard for the law considered as natural and divine. With this in mind one must discern why the law should be obeyed.

Luther answers by insisting that the law preserves the social order, punishing criminals and curbing the threat that persons pose to one another. Yet, one might answer, if the law is soteriologically indifferent, are these things not also soteriologically indifferent? God has given the law to preserve order and this preservation is surely in the individual's interest, but why *must* the individual obey this law? Is the soul not saved by grace through faith and eternal blessedness not already assured for those so justified? Can those who have yet to enjoy grace move any closer to it by their obedience? For Luther the answer to this last question is no, as his theology stands on the impotence of the law for justification. Having relinquished the power to compel that defines the law as law, a power originally bound up in its contribution to justification as righteous, it is unclear at this point from where the law – whether divine, natural, and by extension political¹⁴⁴ – should rediscover that power. Searching for another reason why one should obey, Luther could reply that God has given the law out of love and as a means for greater communion between believers and their Lord (here Luther begins to sound like Calvin), but this does not solve the underlying problem. The law still lacks a compelling authority, and one cannot make sense of a law that persons can ultimately approach with indifference inasmuch as coercive authority is intrinsic to law's definition as law.¹⁴⁵ Just as one's grasp of formless matter's

143. Gerhard Ebeling, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 133-135.

144. *Commentary on Galatians*, LW 26.122. "Therefore take 'works of the Law' generally, to mean whatever is opposed to grace: Whatever is not grace is Law, whether it be the Civil Law, the Ceremonial Law, or the Decalog. Therefore even if you were to do the work of the Law, according to the commandment 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, etc.' (Matt. 22:37), you still would not be justified in the sight of God; for a man is not justified by the works of the Law."

145. An objector would likely accuse me of conflating different kinds of legal authority (e.g., soteriological versus political). The arguments in the following chapters mean to rebut that objection. I

materiality grows opaque as one presses its formlessness, so one's grasp of the law as law falters as one presses on a supposed indifference to it. In place of a law one finds a more or less arbitrary choice, something in the direction of a lifestyle rather than a law.

The relationship between the law and the decision to obey conforms to the pattern between inclination and freedom or neutrality within the will. The law is like the will's inclination insofar as it seeks confirmation in the act of obedience. Already confronting the believer as an authority, the law finds its authority enhanced by the individual's free submission to it. When the moment of indifferent consideration of the law's command becomes concrete in obedience, it harmonizes individual freedom with the law in a vector toward righteousness. At the same time the freedom to obey or not, if it is to make sense as a moral capacity, presumes a concrete encounter with an authoritative law. To press the law's indifference is the flip side of extracting and isolating the freedom to obey or disobey from the context of encounter with the law in which that freedom possesses moral substance. If one is free not in the face of the law's command but in the erasure of the law's authority, the presupposition of that freedom so withers that the freedom becomes amoral. One's freedom knows no true choices between good and evil, only equally indifferent options.

If these arguments should cause Luther to step back and rethink his position, Calvin jumps in to fill the void. Calvin's law is indifferent as a means to salvation as a result of his acceptance of justification by faith alone, but obedience has certainly not become indifferent for Calvin a result. The embedding of the law within grace, a point of Calvin's theology that goads the believer on to an unceasing obedience, appears as a sufficient solution to the possibility of a soteriologically indifferent but viable law.¹⁴⁶

shall argue that for the Reformers there is ultimately one law, whether considered as divine, natural, or political, and that their unwitting redesignation of that law as formless affects it in all of the above senses.

146. See page 193ff. for Calvin's understanding of the law as embedded in grace.

Yet where is the substantive freedom to obey or disobey for Calvin? He prescribes an all-governing and irresistible grace that wraps within it both the believer's heart and the law's command. When this grace seizes the soul, one will obey because one has no choice but to obey. There is no moment of genuine neutrality, no opportunity for confirmation or refutation of the law ensconced in grace. Like the will's inclination isolated from its capacity for neutral judgment and called free because unrestrained, the law isolated from the person's decision of obedience overpowers the individual as the hammer behind a free and irresistible grace. But like the inclination unbridled, unchecked, and amoral, the law does not know its boundaries and runs headlong into limitlessness, thereby losing its character as law. For the boundless law, when imposed without restraint upon finite creatures, is at once a tyrant and an oppressor, a law that has become lawless.¹⁴⁷

Luther extracts and isolates the moment of neutrality, the freedom to obey or disobey, from the command that it presupposes. Joining salvation with indifference to the law, he undermines the coercive power that defines the law as law. Press his law and it proves flabby and indistinct, as much a lifestyle as a law. Calvin extracts and isolates the law from the individual's freedom of decision so strongly that he wipes out a genuine possibility of obedience. His resultant law is soteriologically neutral, but it lacks the boundary of encounter with a free agent by which one can understand it as a law (and this in spite of his intent to uphold the law and make it a viable part of the Christian life).¹⁴⁸ Luther thus deprives the law of the authority that gives it definition while Calvin expands that authority in an irresistibility that swallows the moment of freedom, the limit in which the law assumes a discernible shape. For both, the soteriologically

147. That one cannot lay an infinite law upon a bounded creature is seen theologically in the patristic doctrine of the person of Christ, whose divinity engaged in a "self-emptying" in order to take on flesh. If the fullness of the divine had embodied the man Jesus, it would have overwhelmed if not annihilated his humanity, and for this reason a restriction was necessary. See, for example, Saint Cyril of Alexandria's *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John Anthony McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 1995.

148. The Calvin chapter will show how his theory of the law vis-à-vis grace undermines the role that he often insists for it.

neutral law is hardly a law at all, and one who wants to posit such a law must argue away its resistance to definition as a law.

To assume a viable moral meaning, not to mention internal coherence as both authoritative and limited, the law must bear a positive or negative soteriological vector; its power must pull toward righteousness or sin. Defining the law as neutral, as though one could extract it from a movement toward or away from righteousness, annuls the law's definition as law. The law must participate somehow in righteousness as the bestowal of form and draw its authoritative power from that righteousness, or it must detract from righteousness by directing form toward nothingness via an inversion of that power. The first possibility has a history in theological conceptions of a natural law that implies the creature's intrinsic righteousness, though that righteousness was usually and rightly seen as too faulty to save without grace. Though the second kind of law has barely crossed the Christian mind, it stands near the heart of the examination of religious experience that I shall undertake.

Skeptics might charge that I have caricatured Luther and Calvin in my foregoing arguments regarding the law. Luther was no antinomian and reserved a respectable place for the law among earthly things. He would not tolerate a law undermined in the way I have described. But his gospel of faith alone repudiates the law's power to compel, so that believers obey a law stripped of coercive authority.¹⁴⁹ This stipulation casts the law into serious doubt *qua* law, forcing it to seek new foundations for its claims to relevance. Friends of Calvin will perhaps not approve of my description of his grace as one running roughshod over a neutral freedom, but they must agree that the denial of free will in the sense of a neutral capacity for judgment (as opposed to freedom as the necessity of inclination¹⁵⁰) is critical to Calvin's theology.

149. *LW* 26.90-92, 118-119.

150. Cf. *Inst.*, II.iv.7 and page 179 below. Calvin's "freedom as the necessity of inclination" refers to his idea that the will might be bound to a particular course by necessity (it is bound by necessity to sin, for instance). But the will remains free because in following this necessity it always acts as it desires and is never coerced. It is thus free at the same time that its choices are necessary. Freedom is only taken

The skeptic says, “What of a neutral, unformed being?” I reply, “Show me this being, if you can, before it fades toward nothing.” Another skeptic says, “What of a soteriologically neutral or indifferent law?” I say in return, “How is this a law? It lacks either the authority to compel or the limit by which it is a law.” A third inquires regarding the existence of a will free as neutral and defined by its freedom. I respond that a will without the inclinations that delimit it, or determined by a freedom that wants to stand over these inclinations, is an inverted will. Press the idea of neutrality in each case as though it were a free-standing principle and the neutral thing that one wants to affirm comes to nothing. To affirm neutrality in these cases means affirming that which cannot affirm itself on its own. The will, unformed being, and the law must exist in connection with a vector of good or evil, righteousness or sin, and are comprehensible only in the context of these vectors. The neutrality of both the will before the law on one hand and unformed being on the other is a subordinate moment of possibility within an overriding movement embodied in the concept of law as forming or deforming. Abstracted from that movement the will, unformed being, and the law each become indiscernible, a something that is not what it is or is nothing at all.

Three Types of Religious Experience

The following introductory snapshots of religious experience as gleaned from the personal lives and theologies of Augustine and Luther, and from the theology alone of Calvin, presents them as “types” in which each theologian speaks on his own terms. The analysis that trades this superficial glance at our slides for their examination under the ontological microscope will adhere to this typological method; whereas the lenses will color the portrayals of their thought that emerge in later chapters, for the moment I will try not to venture too far from straightforward exposition. In the cases of Augustine and Luther, I will provide an account of

away when one is compelled, which concerns not the interiority of the will, which always wills as it likes, but the outward coercion for the individual to perform or not perform certain actions.

their personal experiences of grace, moving from there to note the trajectory of that experience with respect to the law. This trajectory consists in a crisis under the law, the experience of grace as a resolution, and the subsequent return to an obedience unburdened by threats of perdition. Augustine later summarizes this trajectory as grace's shedding the love of God upon the believer's heart so that he or she delights in the law, while Luther subsequently theorized the experience of grace as its putting the law's curse to death. The portrait of Calvin's type will adhere to the same trajectory with the exception that he has left no record of a personal religious experience. The theoretical element will stand more in the foreground as a result.

1. Augustine

Reflecting on his spiritual development in the *Confessions*, Augustine spends significant energy recounting his life apart from God's law. He dismissed the Christian faith as a young adult, seeking the approval of crowds in rhetorical competitions while indulging sensual lusts. He writes of the latter pleasures that "I went with the flood-tide of my nature and abandoned [God]. I swept across your laws," turning himself over to cravings at odds with obedience."¹⁵¹ Looking back on this time, Augustine sees how God's wrath hung over him though he was unaware of it.

Augustine realized the emptiness of worldly accomplishment and pleasure while living in Milan. Here he met Ambrose, a pivotal figure in the church whose preaching and acquaintance awakened Augustine to the Christian gospel in earnest, directing his mind and heart to the slavery to lust that distanced him from God. Seeing the futility of worldly ways of life, it became clear to Augustine "how miserable I was," and how God brought him to see his pitiable state.¹⁵² Augustine began, in short, to feel guilt. For this guilt to result in conversion, it had to surpass the annoyance of a nagging conscience on its way to "a still more dangerous condition – a crisis" that

151. *conf.*, II.ii.4.

152. *conf.*, VI.vi.9.

demanded a change of habit.¹⁵³ Venturing into a Milanese garden after hearing a story of men converted to Christianity, Augustine faced the full force of his sin. “As this deep meditation dredged up all my wretchedness from the secret profundity of my being and heaped it all together before the eyes of my heart,” he writes, “a storm blew up within me and brought on a heavy rain of tears.” He then exclaimed: “O Lord, how long? How long? Will you be angry forever?” Augustine succumbed to desperation, facing the intransigence of his sin and knowing his will divided and prone to a fell persuasion, his nature an acknowledged prisoner to disobedience and subject to the law’s curse. He concludes the description of his agony in the garden with a passage from Scripture read with a friend. After hearing a voice directing him to take up and read, he grabbed the Bible, opened it, and read: “Not in dissipation and drunkenness, nor in debauchery and lewdness, nor in arguing and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires.”¹⁵⁴

With this statement Augustine’s heart turns, leaving behind the fear of wrath under the law in order to be subsumed in the grace of Christ. “No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away.” After this experience, Augustine submitted to the “grace of baptism,”¹⁵⁵ placing himself securely under the authority of the Catholic Church. He left his former ways in order to be filled with God, who was sweeter to him than the pleasures of flesh or blood.¹⁵⁶ At this point Augustine could look upon his sins as forgiven and the law as no longer a threat, recounting his former ways in the knowledge that, despite his disobedience, Christ has taken the punishment for sin and put him on a new path. Augustine learns not to be angry at his sin, offering up his memories as sacrifices of

153. *conf.*, VI.i.1.

154. *conf.*, VIII.xii.28-29.

155. *conf.*, IX.ix.22.

156. *conf.*, IX.i.1.

thanksgiving and testimonies to God's grace along the path of spiritual perfection, where he battled his remaining faults.¹⁵⁷ In Augustine's theory at least, the spirit of God can so conquer this sin that it is completely vanquished for the individual in this life.

Three aspects stand out from Augustine's religious experience as recorded in the *Confessions*. First, his increasing consideration of Christianity leads him to a guilty confrontation with the law in which his gnawing conscience achieves a crisis point. At this moment, when Augustine's sin and God's wrath at it have become unavoidable, Christ pours out His grace as the confidence of pardon for Augustine's disobedience and as a blessing through which he can approach the law with delight rather than apprehension. This dispensation of grace is the second aspect of Augustine's religious experience. It brings him to the third, the renewed life of obedience that Augustine understands as a progress toward perfection. This life advances under the institutional authority of the church as confirmed by the baptism that immediately follows Augustine's grace-event.

Years later, Augustine would theorize the meaning of grace as the love of God shed abroad on the heart, an infusion of power that elevates and assists the believer to obedience. The law and natural capacities alone cannot bring the believer to salvation. Though good, the law lacks sufficient power to save, so that the one who trusts in it to do so discovers it as "the letter that killeth."¹⁵⁸ The crisis to which the law brings the believer amounts to the realization that it makes stringent demands but does not enable their fulfillment, and in this way the law guides the believer to grace as the power by which human nature can accomplish its demands more fully. God's transformation of the believer's "inmost affections,"¹⁵⁹ persuades him or her toward a greater pleasure in God's law than in the disobedience that contradicts it. God empowers persons

157. The possibility of this perfection is the theoretical setting of *On the Spirit and the Letter*, in which Augustine describes the relation of law and grace in more detail.

158. *sp. et litt.*, 7.3-10.

159. *sp. et litt.*, 46.19.

to take joy in His commands, so that they will rightly as a consequence of grace's renewal of their inner lives.¹⁶⁰ This inward renewal draws the Christian nearer to the perfection of eternal life, a beatific vision in which the person achieves a progressively maturing holiness here on earth.¹⁶¹

This grace relates to human nature, the law, and church authority in a positive way. Grace regenerates or repairs nature by healing sin's wound, enhancing nature toward an obedience unattainable by its own powers;¹⁶² this reparation complements the law by providing individuals with the capacity, resident neither in natural abilities nor the law as commanding, for an obedience sufficient for salvation; this complementary action confirms the church's authority by sealing the believer's inward will in obedience to the law as mediated through the church. Grace gives the power that nature lacks for obedience just as it complements the law that requires one to obey, solidifying the necessity of church authority as dispenser of the command.

2. Luther

In Augustine's account of his religious development, the experience of grace immediately precedes his acceptance of church authority in baptism. No such immediacy between experience and church authority, it seems, applies for Luther. While scholars do not agree on the subject, Luther appears to have undergone his most important experiential and theological discovery, that of "the righteousness of God," years before his conflict with the Roman church.¹⁶³ The illumination that Luther recalls as having occurred in the Wittenberg monastery contributes to the

160. *corr. et gr.*, 30.20-27.

161. *sp. et litt.*, 41.5, 37.36.

162. E.g., *sp. et litt.*, 47.18.

163. After a review of the scholarly arguments for and against an earlier date (roughly 1512-1515) rather than a later one (closer to 1519) for Luther's theological breakthrough or "tower experience," Gordon Rupp concludes with Vogelsang that it probably occurred sometime during Luther's lectures on the Psalms in 1514. He acknowledges that this conclusion does not rest on sufficient evidence, and that current judgments on the matter do not escape uncertainty. It is enough for the portrait of Luther I am providing here and the case for understanding his relation of experience to church authority that I shall build upon it that I do not claim that his experience directly precipitated his conflicts with Rome but lies in its background. *The Righteousness of God* (London: Houghton and Stodder, 1953), 129-137.

personal development in the background of his dispute with papal authority, not acting as a direct cause. His challenges to Rome did concern the nature of church authority as expressed in canon law and councils,¹⁶⁴ but it began with Luther's attack on indulgences rather than appeals to religious experience.¹⁶⁵ I do not, then, intend to overstate the significance of Luther's religious experience for his subsequent battles with the papacy. Yet it remains the case that this experience involved a repudiation of the law that Luther would later describe as grace executing "the death of death" upon its accusations, simultaneously freeing nature from the law's commands under grace as "the law of liberty." These motifs parallel Luther's struggles for freedom against a Catholic authority that imposed the law upon believers, as well as his proclamations of the Christian's liberty of conscience.

When Luther joined the Augustinian order of monks as a young man, he threw himself into the life prescribed by his rule. Trusting in his religious practice as the way to salvation, Luther was careful in his obedience to his superiors, diligent in praying, fasting, and study, earnest in preaching, and austere in controlling his body, so that Thomas McDonough aptly describes him as "a zealous and exemplary Augustinian."¹⁶⁶ But Luther's rigid obedience did not issue in a humble confidence in grace received, as his submission to one law paled before the others he had not kept, with these others endlessly multiplying the harder Luther strove to obey.¹⁶⁷ His unusually strict adherence to his rule and his confidence in it for comfort gave way

164. Gordon Rupp, *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 69, 90.

165. On the stir caused by Luther's posting of the 95 Theses, see *Luther's Progress*, 50-55. Rupp observes there that "It might seem as though the operative text of the Reformation was not 'The just shall live by faith,' but 'Concerning the collection'. Yet, although the ninety-five Theses on 'Power and efficacy of Indulgences' do not mention 'Faith' or 'Justification', to read them is to be reminded again and again of the road along which Luther's thought had moved."

166. *The Law and the Gospel in Luther: A Study of Martin Luther's Confessional Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 37.

167. Cf. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, vol. 26-27 of the American edition of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hanson (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955-86), 26.406. Those who pursue salvation via the law "only pile laws

to distress as the command that he be perfect grew progressively burdensome. “The divine imperative,” Gordon Rupp notes of Luther, “became something which withered all joy, and brought him a torment of doubt and uncertainty and guilt, an inner skepticism which ate corrosively through all the offices of consolation which were offered to him.”¹⁶⁸ Luther’s view of himself as oppressed by the wrath of God and doomed to perdition for the slightest imperfections came to taint his obedience, worship, and prayer with a shrill fear occasionally given a voice in later sermons.¹⁶⁹ The crisis point that Augustine describes in the garden, in which all his sins were laid out for him, has a cousin in the internal wrangling of Luther. The latter’s crisis, however, lasted not one night but many. His internal tortures became a way of life, and the grace poured out upon Augustine was long in coming.

Looking upon this early period from later in life, Luther recalls that his troubles revolved around one phrase, “the righteousness of God” (Rom. 1:17). His professors understood it as the righteousness by which God is holy and just and punishes those who break His law. Knowing himself as a perpetual lawbreaker, Luther considered himself destined for that punishment. His inability to overcome the chasm between God’s absolute righteousness and his unflagging sin nourished his hatred of “the righteousness of God,” provoking Luther to mumble against such an unforgiving deity in his heart and think even Christ’s gospel a message of wrath.¹⁷⁰

In the course of his meditations over “the righteousness of God,” Luther began to see that God’s righteousness does not denote wrath against those who do not meet the law’s requirement. It refers instead to the gift of God given through Jesus Christ by faith, a righteousness passively received by the believer that covers all of one’s sin with grace freely given. The righteousness

upon laws, by which they torture themselves and others and make their consciences so miserable...for one law always produces ten more, until they grow into infinity.”

168. Rupp, 27.

169. Rupp, 29-31.

170. Rupp, 33. Luther recalls his early life, the period between 1510 and 1520, in the 1545 preface to his *Works*.

that demands satisfaction via obedience, at one with the law that had vexed Luther's conscience so profoundly, succumbs before another righteousness that both repudiates the righteousness supposedly attained by the law and meets the law's requirements through grace. Realizing this, Luther felt himself "to be born anew, and to enter through open gates into paradise itself."¹⁷¹ Just as Augustine's experience of grace swept through him with a powerful sense of God's presence, Luther experiences that grace as the pivot on which his religious consciousness turned from dolor to joy.

Luther would subsequently theorize the Christian life according to two steps that resemble his own religious breakthrough.¹⁷² The first step entails recognition of oneself as a sinner, acknowledging the inability to measure up to the law. One perceives the absence of the inner love of God in attempts at obedience that reveal that everything the believer does, speaks, and thinks opposes the Deity, so that the Christian sees him or herself as totally under God's judgment and worthy of damnation. Believers see that they possess not a single spark of the love of God, and that all human resources, wisdom, knowledge, and strength are nothing, so that one is "truly humbled and reduced to nothing in his own eyes, [finding] in himself nothing whereby he may be justified and saved."¹⁷³ The law presses the believer down with the futility of human effort so thoroughly that one has no choice but to flee to Christ alone. This constitutes the second step, the individual's right honoring of God by receiving His mercy without trying to share in His glory by works. Rather than striving to establish one's own merit through obedience, one accepts that merit as the external righteousness of Christ given to a believer who has done nothing to deserve it. One receives this righteousness and the justification it conveys completely apart from works and by faith alone, a doctrine whose early and definitive elaboration appears in *The*

171. From the Latin preface to Luther's *Works*, quoted in Rupp, 33.

172. *LW* 26.126-127.

173. Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*, *LW* 31.348; cf. *LW* 26.66, 114, 126.

Freedom of a Christian (1520). The personal appropriation of grace through faith so that one knows it for him or herself – a grace everywhere and always antithetical to the law with respect to justification – is an important facet of this doctrine.¹⁷⁴ So received, grace frees the believer from the law's curse just as it unites the heart with Christ.

The heart's unity with Christ renews the inner person away from evil and toward good, directing the believer back to the law in an obedience joyful because not burdened with task of justification. As the good tree brings forth good fruit, so believers liberated inwardly by grace abjure the evil works that they once relished in order to bring forth good deeds.¹⁷⁵ The experience of grace through faith in the inner person becomes concrete in the work, manifesting itself in obedience to the law. The same faith that frees the conscience from the curse of the law by grace issues in works that love both the neighbor and God as accomplished in that freedom.

The dynamic of Luther's religious experience possesses notable parallels with Augustine's. Both come under the law in a powerful acknowledgment of disobedience, with Luther feeling a guilt much like that which troubled the church Father, if not heavier. Luther then experienced a transformation of heart and thought centered upon his discovery of the righteousness of God, an experience that opened the gates of heaven to Luther in a realization similar in power and significance to the light that flooded Augustine in the garden. Like Augustine, Luther also teaches that good works result from the heart so moved, which Christ has freed for an obedience to the law not plagued by guilt. The three moments of Augustine's experience – guilt under the law, grace as its remedy, and a new life of adherence to God's will – recur in Luther.

This pattern of religious experience, however, concurs with Luther's rupture from church authority rather than his assimilation into it. He wrote *The Freedom of a Christian* in the summer of 1520, the same months in which he penned *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*

174. Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, LW 26.179; *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31.357.

175. LW 31.361.

and *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Rupp characterizes these works together as a “revolutionary manifesto” representative of “a turning point” in Luther’s assessment of the Catholic Church.¹⁷⁶ They signal his break with it more decidedly than his previous writings, as in them he overtly rejects the Catholic hierarchy and the pope. With respect to *The Freedom of a Christian*, it appears that the justifying faith that gives liberty from the law has, for Luther, a partner in his liberty from the authorities ruling the Catholic religion.

In his *Commentary on Galatians* (1531) Luther would portray the grace that justifies through faith as a power that puts the law’s death-dealing accusations to death. Because Christ assumed humanity’s sin and thereby the curse of the law upon sinners, the law advances upon Him as an antagonist that seeks to kill Him.¹⁷⁷ But the grace of Christ overcomes the sin of the world that He bears and the law’s assaults, silencing the law so that it can no longer terrify the individual with perdition. In this way grace binds the law that would bind and condemns the law that would condemn, reducing it from a source of anguish to a matter of indifference. At the same time that Christ’s grace performs “the death of death” upon the law, nullifying it as a plague to the conscience, He establishes the believer in “the law of liberty,” a law against the law that safeguards the individual’s newfound freedom.¹⁷⁸

This portrayal of grace dovetails with Luther’s rejection of the authority of the Catholic Church. Just as Christ executes the death of death upon the law and secures the liberty of the believer’s conscience, so Luther battled the church’s hierarchy in his activity as a Reformer while marking out a space for the freedom of the individual. The inward grace that overcomes the law in order to liberate the conscience from its accusation finds an institutional parallel in the grace that overcomes the church as law-bearer in order to release the believer from its tyranny.

176. Rupp, 82.

177. *LW* 26.281.

178. *LW* 26.161, 163.

3. Calvin

In contrast to Augustine and Luther, Calvin left no written record of the experiences that shaped his early religious development.¹⁷⁹ When combined with his reluctance throughout his tenure in Geneva to speak of his personal life, this lacuna leaves the contemporary scholar with little more than speculations, or perhaps arguments drawn from Calvin's ideas and theological controversies that are supposed to hint at the events that shaped Calvin himself.¹⁸⁰ I will therefore not speculate about Calvin's personal experiences but turn to religious experience as he describes it in the *Institutes*. The dynamic of experience contained there conforms to the pattern of crisis under the law, grace as remedy, and return to obedience that I have outlined for Luther and Augustine. Taking after Luther, Calvin adopts this dynamic under the aegis of justification by faith alone. In distinction from Luther, however, Calvin links grace inseparably with obedience to the law, arguing that the grace of justification does not occur apart from its activity in sanctification. Calvin's assertiveness on this point strengthens the law in a way more reminiscent of Augustine than Luther, with Calvin going so far as to embed the law within grace. As a consequence, Calvin authorizes the church as a law-bearing institution at the same time that he advocates its message of grace, confirming the church's authority in a prominent way.

Calvin excoriates the believer's ascription of righteousness to human nature as the obstacle that hinders one's encounter with grace, a habit born of a misguided focus on one's worth relative to earthly things, especially other persons, rather than one's standing before the majesty and wrath of God. When persons look upon themselves, they notice the benefits with

179. The lack of written evidence owes in part to Calvin's hasty exit from Paris as a student (1533). In the wake of provocative events with which he was thought to be involved, Calvin fled in fear of the French authorities. Hours after escaping the city, the police sacked his apartment and confiscated his papers. For more on this episode as well as a comparison of Luther's autobiographical remarks against Calvin's lack thereof, see Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 14-17.

180. John T. McNeill makes such an argument, suggesting that Calvin's depiction of a pair of hypothetical figures in his *Reply to Cardinal Sadoleto* (1539) represents voices in his own mind during his earlier struggle over whether to leave the Catholic faith. Calvin gives no direct indication that he has drawn these figures from his personal experience. *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 116-117.

which God has imbued nature, and are quick to indulge in claims of a natural righteousness that has value before the Creator and Judge.¹⁸¹ Individuals entertain the same confidence by comparing themselves with others, as one pits his or her good works against those of one's associates, inevitably concluding that nature possesses something of genuine worth.¹⁸² Indeed, "Nothing pleases man more," Calvin writes, "than the sort of alluring talk that tickles the pride that itches in [nature's] very marrow," later castigating "that pestilent self-indulgence" of flattery and self-love that "inheres in all of us by nature."¹⁸³ The experience of grace presumes the abolition of this self-indulgence that would grant nature goodness and righteousness before God as before others. The humility entailed in that grace requires the acknowledgment that before God's brilliance nature's good is but darkness, while His judgment compels individuals to acknowledge their nothingness.¹⁸⁴ The movement from confidence in natural powers to despair of them before God matters so deeply to Calvin that it occupies the opening pages of the *Institutes*, setting the tone for the struggle between sin and grace that animates his presentation of the gospel.

The abandonment of hope in natural capacities occurs in the believer's confrontation with God's glory as manifest through the law, a dynamic that Calvin calls the "descent into the self."¹⁸⁵ Calvin's words on the believer's meeting with God are intense, as he writes that those who earnestly consider God's glory "are so shaken and struck dumb as to be laid low by the dread of death." God's glory "overwhelms" these persons such that they are "almost annihilated... man

181. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. F. Lewis Battles and trans. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.i.1-2.

182. *Inst.*, III.xii.2.

183. *Inst.*, II.i.2, III.xii.5.

184. *Inst.*, III.xii.1.

185. *Inst.*, II.viii.3. Despite Calvin's failure to address religious experience as a topic *per se*, the theme of the contrast between God as glorious and wrathful and the individual as nothing and despoiled by sin, as well as grace as the sole remedy of this contrast, permeates the *Institutes*.

is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state,” Calvin says, “until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.”¹⁸⁶ In bringing believers before God’s glory, Calvin at once brings them before God’s law and judgment seat, revealing the depth of the individual’s misery. By comparing the righteousness of God’s law with one’s conduct and learning that human powers cannot fulfill its demands, Calvin’s believer learns his or her depravity and that works and nature’s powers add nothing toward its remedy, contributing nothing to one’s justification. “From this necessarily follows,” Calvin asserts, “mistrust of our own virtue, then anxiety and trepidation.” Calvin then writes that “Both these emotions engender humility and self-abasement. Thus it finally comes to pass that man [is] thoroughly frightened by the fear of eternal death.” The descending movement ideally should take the believer through sensations so powerful that they amount to perdition itself, as if a knife were held to one’s neck and eternal punishment would follow its stroke.¹⁸⁷

When the believer comes to the point of utter despair, leaving off all claims to natural righteousness and turning unreservedly to the grace of Christ for salvation, the anxiety of the descent into the self transforms into the liberation of the justified conscience. Calvin describes this upheaval in vivid and elegant language, as the individual learns that the one who “was estranged from God through sin, is an heir of wrath, subject to the curse of eternal death...the slave of Satan, captive under the yoke of sin, destined finally for a dreadful destruction and already involved in it,” is also the one for whom Christ makes intercession, having borne “the punishment that, from God’s righteous judgment, threatened all sinners,” washing away by His blood the wickedness that had aroused God’s vengeance, making satisfaction before the Father, and quenching God’s wrath.¹⁸⁸ Dangling over the pit of hell and looking solely to Christ, the

186. *Inst.*, I.ii.3.

187. Cf. *Inst.*, II.vii.3, where Calvin refers to the law as “the most immediate death.”

188. *Inst.*, II.xvi.2.

believer finds that judgment has been handed over to the Redeemer, who cares for the consciences of Christians rather than seeking their condemnation.¹⁸⁹ The believer appropriates Christ's blessing through faith alone, experiencing a profound "feeling of delight" that is the embrace of the Redeemer's grace, a feeling through which God forms the will to endure in the good.¹⁹⁰

By reference to Ezekiel, Calvin describes this transformation from fear to delight as the replacement of the believer's heart of stone with one of flesh.¹⁹¹ By His action God converts the heart to righteousness, "[beginning] his good work in us by arousing love and desire and zeal for righteousness in our hearts, or, to speak more correctly, by bending, forming, and directing our hearts to righteousness."¹⁹² God moves the affections so strongly that obedience comes from the heart in earnest. A transformation of feeling issues in a transformation of will, with grace energizing the tireless obedience required by God via the assurance of blessing. Calvin exhorts his readers: "Let us not cease to so act that we may make some unceasing progress in the way of the Lord," striving through the power of grace in a "continuous effort" to advance in righteousness.¹⁹³ God thus converts the believer to desire the law by "the creation of a new heart and a new spirit," an action that implies the remaking of the will so that it loves the ceaseless obedience demanded of it, while inclining the person toward the good and confirming perseverance in it.¹⁹⁴

The immediacy linking the heart's transformation by grace as inner delight and the renewed desire for obedience parallels Calvin's theology of grace as abstracted from personal

189. *Inst.*, II.xiv.18.

190. *Inst.*, II.iii.14.

191. *Inst.*, II.iii.8.

192. *Inst.*, II.iii.6.

193. *Inst.*, III.vi.5.

194. *Inst.*, II.iii.8.

experience. There Calvin joins justification and sanctification as two inseparable aspects of the one grace of Christ. The sun's heat is not light and its light is not heat, but people always experience the two as inextricably bound. In the same way, one cannot comprehend the grace that justifies by faith alone, pardoning believers from sin and clothing them with Christ's righteousness, without simultaneous consideration of grace's sanctifying work in remaking the believer into a new creation reflective of God's image.¹⁹⁵ Calvin thus holds that one can distinguish justification and sanctification conceptually, but the Christian must always understand them to occur together. The form of their inseparability, as I will elaborate in the chapter on Calvin, consists in his wrapping up of the law within grace, or what Wilhelm Niesel calls Calvin's "embedding" of the former within the latter.¹⁹⁶ This embedding means that the law both looks back to grace as its foundation and forward to it as fulfillment, while that grace is also present, though muted, in the law itself.

Calvin's understanding of religious experience, then, contains the three elements found in Augustine and Luther. The believer first sheds deceptive claims to self-righteousness and enters into a crisis before God's majesty, an encounter with the law that Calvin describes as the "descent into the self." The grace of God then counters this veritable movement into death with confidence and joy at Christ's mercy, blotting out the heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh. The believer undergoes a moment of elation, a raising that reflects in a positive manner the negative emotions of the descent.¹⁹⁷ This moment renews the will so that it obeys with joy,

195. *Inst.*, III.xi.6.

196. *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 93.

197. Cf. *Inst.*, III.xiv.10. I do not mean to overstate the importance of isolated experiences of grace for Calvin. He believes that the grace of God does not come into the believer's heart once and for all in a particular moment, but that God counters the individual's sin by a "continual forgiveness" that repeatedly validates the believer's innocence. Grace very much entails a process of sanctification for Calvin, and thus a life lived under the confidence of mercy. The more profound moments of God's grace undergird and catalyze this process.

leading the person to the third element, a life of adherence to the divine will that Calvin depicts as ceaseless obedience.

Due to Calvin's doctrine of the inseparability of justification and sanctification, the law remains intrinsic to his version of the experience of grace, grounding his exhortation of believers to ceaseless obedience and, by extension, his affirmation of the church's authority in overseeing that obedience. This doctrine also yields an interesting amalgam of Augustine and Luther with respect to the relation of law and grace. Calvin accepts the doctrine of justification by faith alone aligned with Luther's rejection of Catholic church authority, extracting the law from grace as the sole source of justification, but he then preaches the necessity of the law – and the church as a disciplinarian – submitting the believer to the church's authority in a way reminiscent of Augustine. Though Calvin does not list the church's discipline and the uprightness of its members among its official marks, which include the Word preached rightly and the sacraments, the church “can hardly be preserved apart from the exercise of discipline” in his thought.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, “As the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church,” Calvin claims, “so does discipline serve as its sinews,”¹⁹⁹ the latter ensuring the church's honoring of God lest the holy name bear disgrace because of the shame of its members. Where Luther breaks from the church's law-bearing authority by his doctrine of justification, Calvin reconstitutes the church's authority on the other side of that break. This tension, born out of Calvin's joining of law and grace, stands at the center of Calvin's variation on Luther's understanding of justification by faith alone, a divergence that distances two otherwise concordant thinkers while appearing to diminish the distance between Calvin and Augustine.

The similarities in dynamic between the three theologians perceivable at first glance recede, as I shall soon argue, before underlying and not inconsequential ontological differences. Saint Augustine's experience lines up on one side as an outpouring of grace laid like mortar

198. Niesel, 99.

199. *Inst.*, IV.xii.1.

between the bricks of obedience, with the construction overseen by a church whose law adds to salvation, while Luther and even Calvin inhabit the opposite corner under a grace oriented to the devolution of the church's law-bearing function. Placing our slides under the lenses introduces not only an inner view of the interrelation of nature, the law, and grace at the core of Western Christian religious experience, but a series of twists in which the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone is shown to undermine the viability of the church that espouses it. The gospel that promised life abundant appears, in the wake of investigations into the grace that brands that gospel upon the heart, to lead the believer away from incorruptible form and the church toward indefiniteness. The patterns of religious experience under justification by faith alone that deprive nature and the law of form are indeed already visible, I shall argue, in the Awakening that so disturbed the Protestant church order in the colonies. There the observer can discern a fit between the experience inclined to formlessness and particular circumstances of schism, the Protestant openness to its undoing made good in the derailing of the authority that joins believers as a coherent body.

CHAPTER 3

SAINT AUGUSTINE AND THE LOVE OF GOD SHED ABROAD ON THE HEART

His failure to break free from fleshly desires and ascend to faith by his own power pervades Saint Augustine's soteriology. Shorn of an august confidence in the law as a means to salvation²⁰⁰ and exasperated over nature's inability to comply with its demands, the cry of faith for Augustine is hardly distinguishable from the cry of despair. From the depths his theology exclaims with Paul, "Who shall save me from the body of this death?"²⁰¹ a companion to his pleading in the Milanese garden, "How long, O Lord, how long? Will you be angry forever?" In each case Augustine appeals to God to deliver the power for obedience that exceeds natural capacities and enables where the law only commands. God furnishes this power as His love shed abroad on the heart, a supernatural grace that elevates and assists the believer away from sin, healing the wound sin had inflicted upon nature and bringing the individual into harmony with the law. Augustine experienced this power for himself in the garden when the words of Scripture calmed his inner storm, driving away his double-minded weakness of will and seizing him with desire for a life in harmony with God's directives.

Though his helplessness defined Saint Augustine's experience of grace far more deeply than his confidence in nature, his despair over the insufficiency of natural righteousness to subdue his sin did not issue in a theology that denied that righteousness altogether. Augustine affirms a

200. The law denotes both natural and divine law throughout this chapter unless otherwise noted.

201. Rom 7:24. See C.B. Armstrong, "St. Augustine and Pelagius as Religious Types," *Church Quarterly Review* 162 (1961): 158-159. For Armstrong, whereas Pelagius "argued for the real freedom of our wills to make right choices," involving a moral responsibility that stridently asserts the ability to do right or wrong, Augustine saw freedom through the lens of the desperate cry in Romans. Augustine saw grace, as I shall later show, as the power that enables obedience in response to a nature that recognizes its helplessness for salvation apart from God's aid.

"The body of this death" does not refer to the physical body in Augustine's theology but to the sin adhering to it, and liberation from that body means not one's physical demise but the appropriation of grace. *perf. iust.*, 8.13-17.

minimal and occasionally elusive righteousness for nature but a righteousness nonetheless. In view of the ontological premise connecting form and righteousness, then, nature possesses some righteousness and therefore some form, however blighted by sin. Augustine sees nature as deeply wounded but not formless or bereft of ontological definition.

That nature's powers are insufficient for salvation but not without righteousness closely resembles Augustine's view of the law, whose role in salvation he summed up as "the letter that killeth" when considered as a means to redemption apart from grace. Isolated from the love of God shed abroad on the heart, the law only leads persons to a deeper acknowledgment of sin's wound while not applying the healing balm. This insufficiency to save on its own does not, however, divest the law of righteousness. Augustine regards the law as wholly righteous, without defect, and therefore possessed of ontological form, and its insufficiency for salvation only points out the limits of a law holy and good in itself. The law calls out for grace as the cure that heals nature of sin and by that healing complements the law's righteousness, in itself insufficient to save, toward nature's acquisition of salvation. Placed under the ontological microscope, Augustine's religious experience is visible as the interaction of a nature possessed of form but marred and constrained by sin, a law formed as wholly righteous but limited in its ability to save, and a grace that God pours out on the heart as love, a forming power that restores lost form to nature and fulfills the form of the law.

Sinful Nature: Wounded, but Not Without Form

Augustine's theology balances the claim that nature is not itself evil with the denial that it has no evil, settling on a nature intrinsically good but almost pervaded by wickedness. "Now if this nature were an evil, it ought not to have been born; if it had not evil, it would not have to be regenerated." Augustine then adds that the denial of good and evil produces the same soteriological result, though the reader must adduce his reasons. "If human nature were an evil thing, it would not have to be saved," and this because it should not be saved, as no evil thing

ought to be preserved. “If it had not any evil” it would also not have to be saved, this time from lack of necessity, as a thing without sin does not require grace as a remedy. If one considers nature as either wholly good or wholly evil, one nullifies salvation in Christ. What is more, the “one who contends that nature is not good, says that the Maker of the creature is not good; whilst he who will have it, that nature has no evil in it, deprives it in its corrupted condition of a merciful savior.”²⁰² We are concerned not only with whether nature is good, but whether it is righteous; for the goodness of nature attends to its being *per se*, but righteousness pertains to the question of form. Does the sin that vitiates nature so corrupt it that this good has lost all righteousness and therefore its definition *qua* nature?

The idea of sin perplexed Augustine because he could not explain its origins, remarking in *City of God* that sin has no efficient cause but only a deficient one. Deriving in no way from the nature created good by God, sin taints that nature in the wrong choice for which “one should not try to find an efficient cause...the evil will itself is not effective but defective.”²⁰³ The attempt to discover a positive causal power for sin resembles trying to hear silence or see darkness, which persons perceive not by the apprehension of a positive thing but by “absence of perception.”²⁰⁴ Augustine relates the appearance of evil to the creature’s having been created from nothing, but this is as close to explaining its presence as he will come.²⁰⁵

202. *nupt. et conc.*, II.36.45-56.

203. *civ. Dei*, 12.7.

204. *civ. Dei*, 12.7. Cf. Babcock, “Augustine on Sin,” 105. Babcock here contends that Augustine’s concept of deficient cause is no cause at all, rendering the fallen without clear moral agency in sinning. “If silence is the absence of sound and darkness the absence of light, deficient causality, it would seem, must be the absence of cause...the notion of a “deficient cause,” then, turns out to be too thin, too attenuated, to hold [the fallen] within the arena of moral agency. It cannot be delineated sharply or firmly enough to distinguish the first evil exercise of will from a random outcome, an event of pure happenstance rather than the agent’s own act.”

205. *civitas Dei*, 12.6, 12.8.

Augustine's lack of specificity on the reasons for sin's appearance does not extend to its initial location, which he affirms as the will or *voluntas*.²⁰⁶ One would err to consider *voluntas* as a faculty somehow distinct from other elements within the person, as it connotes for Augustine the whole of the person in his or her activity as a moral agent, roughly equivalent to one's "moral self." *Voluntas* describes the core of the individual, containing the inclination toward good or evil by which one is defined.²⁰⁷ Sin's perversion of *voluntas* away from the higher good to the lower, redirecting the creature's good nature toward an evil end,²⁰⁸ occurs first in the inner life rather than bodily action. Before Adam and Eve ate the apple, their wills had already turned away from God and put themselves in His place;²⁰⁹ the tree that had turned to evil inwardly produced the fruit of disobedience. "This then is the original evil: man regards himself as his own light, and turns away from the light which would make man himself a light if he would set his heart on it," Augustine assesses.²¹⁰ The will forsakes the good prescribed for it by God, elevating itself in secret pride as a precursor to the outward fall in which it abdicates a not inconsiderable share if not all of the righteousness that it once enjoyed.

The connection between nature and sin established at the fall does not start in nor stop at externality, as if sin had grasped nature from the outside in order to harm it. Sin does not merely

206. *civ. Dei*, 12.6; *nat. et gr.*, 25.22.

207. John Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 20: 421-422. I agree with Rist's exposition of Augustine on this point, but will challenge his denial that Augustine possesses a viable conception of free will near the conclusion of this section.

208. Carol Harrison. *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27, 33. The contention that evil came through a turning of will, without strong reference to physical realities, shows Augustine's break with Platonic and Manichaean theories of moral evil that he considered prior to his conversion. Both systems assign evil to physical reality, placing the body below the soul as an evil element under the good. Augustine's Christian philosophy resists this notion.

209. *civ. Dei*, 14.13.

210. *civ. Dei*, 14.13.

put the good of nature to evil use,²¹¹ but injects itself into nature's internal constitution and dwells there. Nature relies on the presence of God for sustenance in the same way that the body relies on bread. When the body does not receive proper nourishment, its strength falters and the liability to sickness increases. The person's disobedience in sin, separating nature from God and incurring divine punishment, is like a decision to abstain from the food that nature requires to remain strong.²¹² The continued decision to abstain results in a habitual deprivation of the presence of God, with the consequence that persons cannot will the good though they might see it clearly and wish to do it. Carnal habit can, "in a certain sense, become engrafted" onto nature, such that nature continually capitulates to its influence.²¹³ As persons routinely deny their natural propensity for good,²¹⁴ turning instead to evil, the more difficult it becomes for them to do the good when they might will it. Sin strangles nature's capacity for good by establishing a habitual hold upon it, corrupting nature so deeply that the good intrinsic to its being progressively succumbs to evil. Augustine's thought implies a point of habitual hunger at which nature becomes addicted to its yearnings and no longer wants to be fed.²¹⁵

211. *pecc. mer.*, I.57.19-31. Augustine outlines four possibilities between things and their uses: a good thing used for a good or an evil purpose, and an evil thing used for a good or an evil purpose.

212. *nat. et gr.*, 22.24-42. Cf. TeSelle, "Augustine's Expositions," 128-129. He writes that "The understanding of finite beings here expressed is intensely relational, for while the distinction between substance and accident is acknowledged to be meaningful in all discourse about finite things, it is not interpreted as setting up a barrier between an unchanging 'thing in itself' and merely external relations with other things. Through accidents, substance is related to substance. Substance is itself dependent upon other beings for sustenance and growth; and the relatedness is all the more intense in finite spirits, whose being is open to the entire field of reality and whose perfect fulfillment is to be found only in the knowledge and love of God."

213. *nat. et gr.*, 81.38.

214. By this natural propensity I refer to the desire for good weakened if not defeated by sin. Compare Augustine's interpretation of his struggle in the Milanese garden, where he wanted to will the good: "My body was more ready to obey the slightest whim of my soul in the matter of moving my limbs, than the soul was to obey its own command in carrying out this major volition, which was to be accomplished within the will alone" (*conf.*, 8.20.14-17). Augustine's sinful way of life here holds him back from willing the good that he wanted to will, so that he finds his will divided and unable to act.

215. That is, nature no longer wishes to be fed by its true and proper food, a condition comparable in Augustine to not being fed at all. For example, the soul receives its "nourishment" as it is turned toward

Indwelling sin deprives nature of righteousness by pitting the flesh in a struggle against the spirit, stoking the separation whose end is bodily death. Whereas Augustine understands the rule of the soul over the body as the righteous order meant for nature, at the fall the body “lost the grace whereby it used in every part to be obedient to the soul” as bestial affections were unleashed and Adam and Eve grew ashamed at their nakedness. At the same time that the body relinquished the will to obey, the soul lost the will to command, giving up its control over bodily members freed to move according to their whims. The body follows a contrary law, with the soul reduced to responding to affections and bodily movements in the attempt to bridle a revolt that it cannot eradicate.²¹⁶ The flesh moves one way and the spirit another as persons struggle to retain dignity in the face of their passions. Saint Augustine understands this conflict as sin given in punishment for sin, a just retribution for creatures who disrupted the divine order by turning from God.²¹⁷

The punishment for sin also affects desires not immediately affiliated with the body. Emotions rightly ordered under obedience to God reject their limits as concupiscence, a “disease of desire” akin to an emotional disorder, transforms the love of self commendable under God’s rule into a “morbid self-love” that masters the whole person.²¹⁸ The soul combats vindictive anger, avarice, aggression, and boasting, among others. “There are many and various lusts,” Augustine writes, “of which some have names of their own, while others have not,”²¹⁹ but all express the soul’s captivity to twisted desire. The body and the soul thus each possess tendencies

and obedient to God, and the abandonment of this nourishment impoverishes the soul. It can receive carnal food and starve at the same time.

216. *civ. Dei*, 14.19. Augustine has in mind particularly sexually-oriented movements that appear apart from the will and often in contradiction to it.

217. *pecc. mer.*, II.36.

218. George Arkell Riggan, *Original Sin in the Thought of Saint Augustine*. Doctoral dissertation (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services 1970), 254.

219. *civ. Dei*, 14.15.

that contradict a will lacking control even over itself.²²⁰ The whole person as *voluntas* is stricken with a chronic inability to do right and a pervasive tendency to evil.

Humanity's capacity to pull itself out of this situation also fails, as sin blinds persons to the good and deludes them into following evil. The ignorance of the good involved here has two characteristics. First, it entails a loss of knowledge with regard not only to God's existence and the particulars of the moral law, but also concerning objects in the temporal world and their appropriate relationships. Second, it includes a deeper absence of the wisdom by which the individual perceives the disparity between one's conduct and the requirements of the law as well as the inability of the person, though he or she admit the existence of God, to recognize Him as Lord. Persons can diminish the first kind of ignorance through experience and instruction, while God remedies the second by faith and love poured into the heart.²²¹ The ignorance incurred by the fall does not entail that humanity has completely lost the knowledge of God or had His memory utterly erased, but this memory has become so darkened that the soul "has no adequate recollection of its own identity" in Him and lives without an inkling of what existence was like in Eden.²²² Persons embroiled in this ignorance bear the further malady that, in their inability to perceive the good, they inevitably sin more. The ignorance born in the wake of the fall compounds the desires to which persons are subject, magnifying the creature's depravity.

Augustine's overriding metaphor to describe the reach of sin into nature is sickness. He often speaks of nature as wounded or disabled, and his numerous references to the Physician needed to heal the person's illness blunt the harsher terms he occasionally employs to describe

220. *conf.*, 8.9.21.

221. Riggan, 258.

222. Riggan, 260. For a comparison of Augustine's understanding of memory with Plato's, see 261-262.

fallen humanity.²²³ Augustine achieves special clarity on how Christians should understand the relation between nature and sin when using the metaphor of lameness. He begins by making the point that sin has no substance, but one could rightly consider it to be an act. From this he concludes that sin is a property, and though dependent on the thing to which it adheres, is not the thing itself:

“But likewise in the body, lameness for the same reason is an act, not a thing, since it is the foot itself, or the body, or the man who walks lame because of an injured foot, that is the thing...the defect itself which causes the lameness of the man is neither the foot, nor the body, nor the man, nor the lameness itself; for there is of course no lameness where there is no walking, although there is nevertheless the defect which causes the lameness whenever there is the attempt to walk. Let him therefore ask, what name must be given to this defect – would he have it called a thing, or an act, or rather a bad property in the thing, by which the deformed act comes into existence? So in the inward man the soul is the thing, theft is an act, and avarice is the defect, that is, the property by which the soul is evil, even when it does nothing in gratification of its avarice.”²²⁴

The property of sin does not change the substance of the thing, which remains good, but has nonetheless become incidental to it. It accompanies human nature as a non-essential attribute, something not intrinsic to the nature as created by God but contrary to it, found everywhere with nature, touching body, soul, and will as a deficiency but not constitutive of nature *qua* nature. In one sense God created nature without fault, but in another sense fallen persons experience that nature as carnally minded and under condemnation. The first sense refers to the substance, the second to a malignant property.²²⁵ Though “the entire mass of our nature was ruined beyond doubt,”²²⁶ this ruin does not render the good of being unrecognizable, but is more like a sickness that infects the whole person. Sin consequently requires not the immediate presence of a mortician but the Savior who comes to heal.

223. *nat. et gr.*, 29.20, 50.9, 57.43, 81.80; *gratia Chr.*, I.20.20, I.55.16-21. Augustine’s harsher statements, for example that the believer is dead rather than simply wounded, still require Christ as a Physician, for example in *nat. et gr.*, 25.14-26.

224. *perf. iust.*, 2.IV.11-33.

225. *nat. et gr.*, 81.91-96. Augustine here quotes himself from *De libero arbitrio*.

226. *nat. et gr.*, 34.21.

The emphasis on sin as a malignant quality corrupting a good nature recurs in Augustine's analysis of the flesh versus the spirit, where he argues that the contradiction occurs by the defect of sin attendant to nature after the fall rather than its creation by God. God's making of both the flesh and the spirit guarantees that both are good because of their origin in Him,²²⁷ so that their contradiction does not arise from differences in substance.²²⁸ Augustine goes on to argue that flesh and spirit do not conflict with regard to their created qualities, which juxtapose the two as complements rather than adversaries. Augustine argues by analogy with heat and cold, which despite their contrariety are not "reciprocally opposed to one another, but rather by mutual action...temper health and render it good," and this "just as, in our body, dryness and moisture, cold and heat" contribute positively to bodily health.²²⁹ Given the goodness of the substance as God's creation and the good qualities ascribed to it, these cannot be the source of the contradiction between the spirit and the flesh. One should attribute their animosity to the defect incurred through sin, a quality distinct from nature as created. Nature has inflicted damage on its own flesh through sin, and this damage lends the body to carnal disobedience, resulting in the conflict that plagues nature. This conflict is such that the evil resides in the defect of nature, while the nature itself is not accused.²³⁰

Thus Augustine contrasts the nature created good by God, including the substance of the body, the soul, the will, and all the qualities naturally attendant to them, against the sin that he compares to a lameness that disables the body and that presupposes nature in order to vitiate it.

227. *nat. et gr.*, 60.36. "The flesh and the spirit alike are the work of one and the same Creator, and are therefore undoubtedly both of them good, because He is good."

228. Although he acknowledges times where biblical writers referred to the sinful nature as "flesh," Augustine does not draw a distinction between the "flesh" and the "body" such that one refers to the nature as vitiated by sin and the other to substance or body as created by God. See *nat. et gr.*, 18; 62.15; 60.36.

229. *nat. et gr.*, 63.42-47.

230. *nat. et gr.*, 63.6. In Saint Augustine's estimation, baptism does not eradicate the conflict but gives nature better strength to face its sin.

The match, however, is not between equals, as Augustine affirms that God has blessed human nature with an abundant bounty, and that sin, despite its power to maim and ruin nature, has not eliminated it.²³¹ This would occur only if persons no longer gave birth and humanity eradicated itself,²³² with the created nature remaining good in itself despite how wickedly persons might act.²³³ A pure dedication to evil, such as that found in evil angels, does not allow them to destroy themselves, and the good attendant to being remains in the face of the inversion of will. Nature's tendencies to good and evil correspond to two causes, with good originating in God's creation of persons with an "angelic" nature and evil originating from "human nature," referring to the person's inverted will. "The stronger nature," Augustine concludes, "that is, the angelic one, keeps the lower, or human, nature in subjection."²³⁴ Of nature's two tendencies, the positive is stronger, primary, and more definitive of nature, while the negative is weaker, secondary, and less definitive. This is the case, first, because the good nature originates from the Creator while sin originates with the creature; second, because sin presupposes the good nature that it attempts to corrupt; and third, because sin cannot bring this corruption to completion, having failed to wipe out humanity or destroy the soul. Though Augustine regards sin as a pervasive and robust threat to nature that leads individuals to perdition if not cured by the Savior, that threat does not ruin all of nature's righteousness. Indeed, natural righteousness is a needed contributor to salvation in the deliberations of reason, the discipline of the body, and the consent of the will.

Sin hampers reason in the powerlessness of arguments for God's existence to lead to faith, reason's confrontations with skepticism, and its proclivity for entanglement in intellectual confusion. His own philosophical struggles taught the Bishop that the formidable capacities of

231. *gr. et pecc. or.*, II.46.4-10, 13.

232. *gr. et pecc. or.*, II.46.19.

233. *gr. et pecc. org.*, II.46.22-23; TeSelle, "Augustine's Expositions," 129-130.

234. *gr. et pecc. org.*, II.46.50-55.

reason could not scale the peak of salvation,²³⁵ but he nonetheless saw that reason exercises an important role in preparing persons for faith. Reason puts its righteousness into practice through the study of Scripture and philosophy – categories that Augustine does not sharply divide – as a path leading persons to truths along the road to beatitude, providing an able instrument for nature to acquire “some understanding” of saving wisdom.²³⁶ Reason can pose the problem of the knowledge of God and ask God’s help so that it might come to that knowledge, just as it can also come to know certain eternal realities, such as wisdom and justice, by its own light.²³⁷ Though it cannot save, reason has the power to guide nature toward the faith that does save without compelling its presence.

The failure of reason to save means that faith assumes the primary role in the healing of nature, but the relationship of reason to faith is not thereby one of contrast but mutual dependence. Faith transcends reason by lifting nature to the knowledge of God unattainable without it, restoring reason from its deficiencies, but it simultaneously looks to reason for the assistance by which it better comprehends what it believes. Faith requires reason for a deeper understanding of the salvation it brings, an understanding achieved through reason as liberated from its insufficiencies by faith.²³⁸ Reason therefore adds to salvation both by making the path straight for faith and by unlocking the gift of belief that it bears, exemplifying the natural righteousness that makes a secondary but sure contribution to the attainment of eternal life.

Bodily discipline prepares for inner renewal in a way much like reason’s preparation for faith, chastising the wayward believer for his or her wickedness in the hope of the inward reform of desire. “A useful pain should be caused,” Augustine asserts, so that the sinner should seek the

235. Gilson, 27; Eduardo Echeverria, “Augustine on Faith and Reason,” in Lienhard, Muller, and Teske, 279.

236. Gilson, 33.

237. Gilson, 35.

238. Gilson, 31-32.

Physician,²³⁹ and in an admonition harsh to modern ears, he hopes that “by the noise of the rebuke sounding and lashing from without, God may by His hidden inspiration” repair the will that wants to fall away.²⁴⁰ Yet the administration of the law upon the body in rebuke can only slay unless God acts upon the heart, lacking the power on its own to guarantee the reform for which it hopes. That the outward action does not compel the inner fulfillment does not, however, deny its contribution as righteousness but qualifies that contribution as wanting the ability to save. Augustine thus urges Christians not to neglect rebuke with reference to the Pauline metaphor of the plant tended and watered by persons so that God should give growth.²⁴¹ So bodily discipline looks toward an inner dispensation of grace, a secret increase bestowed by an uncoerced divine will that then returns the believer to outer discipline as a practical component in the life directed by love.²⁴²

Establishing the contribution to salvation of reason and the body is straightforward in comparison to finding the contribution of the will, where Augustine’s combination of an insuperable grace and a will that retains the freedom to cooperate with it has generated vigorous

239. *corr. et gr.*, 7.8.

240. *corr. et gr.*, 9.42.

241. Cf. *corr. et gr.*, 8.27-47. Augustine encourages his readers toward both outer rebuke and prayer for the wayward believer’s inner state, holding these two means for reform together. In this, he acknowledges that God can form people toward repentance in the absence of both rebuke and prayer, though these means are incumbent upon believers in their hopes that those who waver will return to faith.

242. *corr. et gr.*, 3.26. TeSelle also invokes Augustine’s use of the image of planting and watering to describe the latter’s view of outer and inner, emphasizing the contrast between them. The complementarity of the two is missed with greater force by Vanlalhlana in his treatment of nature and grace. In addition to putting grace against nature rather than seeing their harmony, he reduces grace exclusively to the inner realm, implying a mainly negative relation, if any relation at all, with externals. The complementarity of an often externally-focused law and inner grace is forgotten). Carol Harrison is closer to Augustine’s position when she distinguishes the “voluntary providence” constituted by Scripture, prophecy, the Incarnation, and the Church from the “natural providence” that gives form to matter, with the latter providence itself a kind of grace. Voluntary providence, which includes law and grace under one category, may work by inward means as well as outward, holding the two means together rather than focusing on their differences. TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 334; Vanlalhlana, “Anthropocentric Individualistic De-Naturing Grace: An Exploration of Augustine’s Theology of Grace,” in *The God of All Grace: Essays in Honor of Origen Vasantha Jathanna*, ed. Joseph George (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corp. and United Theological College, 2005), 268-289; Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology*, 242.

theological debate. Opponents charge that such a grace does not allow for real freedom but, in the language of John Rist, diminishes nature into a “puppet” of the divine will. This question has vital importance for an ontological investigation of nature because the will is central to Augustine’s understanding of the person. The denial of the will’s freedom amounts ultimately to a denial of nature’s contribution to salvation, therefore its righteousness and by extension its form, and this in spite of the supposed roles of reason and the body. Adding to the importance as well as the difficulty of the question is my earlier claim that the will’s freedom parallels the moment of formlessness in the act of creation. If the will’s freedom is a moment of formlessness, how can one square this freedom with the will’s possession of a righteousness that implies the presence of form?

The fallen will might be deceived about what goods will make it happy, pursuing lower goods as if they were higher, but for Augustine the will always continues the search for happiness intrinsic to it as will.²⁴³ In this search the will exercises an inalienable autonomy that renders the notion of ‘forced willing,’ in which an external stimulus compels the will in one direction or another, into an impossibility. When freedom leaves the will, it ceases to be what it is; so Augustine does not understand the will apart from its freedom.²⁴⁴ This freedom refers more specifically to *liberum arbitrium*, the ability freely to choose for or against a particular good, as distinguished from *libertas*, the willing of the good as given by God’s grace so that one’s choices conform to divine prerogatives.²⁴⁵ While Augustine believes that *liberum arbitrium* is inalienable from the will, he denies that persons possess it with respect to God unless He gives grace. As a result of the fall they both cannot choose for God and necessarily sin (*non posse non peccare*), choosing against Him. Grace assists persons by making it possible if not inevitable for them to

243. TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 291.

244. Gilson, 146-147, 157; Burnaby, 227; James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 204.

245. On *libertas* and *liberum arbitrium*, see Gilson 163; Vanlalhlana, 273; and Burnaby, 227-228.

choose God, overcoming an otherwise necessary sin and giving them power to advance toward beatitude.

Augustine affirms the will's free choice throughout his writings, arguing at the same time that persons bear responsibility for sin after the fall. If persons had no free choice, he writes, the precepts of God would be of no use to them. God has given commands so that persons cannot plead ignorance of the divine will, and His address implies freedom of will to respond to it.²⁴⁶ "Now wherever it is said, "Do not do this," and "Do not do that," and wherever there is any requirement in the divine admonitions for the work of the will to do anything, or to refrain from doing anything, there is at once a sufficient proof of free will." The commands imply that persons can freely consent or turn away, and this such that they bear the responsibility for their choices. "No man," Augustine continues, "therefore, when he sins, can in his heart blame God for it, but every man must impute the fault to himself."²⁴⁷ Augustine held to human responsibility for sin as early as *On Free Will*, written between 387 and 391, where he affirms that souls pay due penalty for their transgressions, "for which their own wills are alone responsible."²⁴⁸ The

246. *gr. et lib. arb.*, 2.9.

247. *gr. et lib. arb.*, 4.61-69.

248. III.22.4-7. Unlike Augustine's consistent affirmations of the responsibility of the sinner, many scholars have concluded that his doctrine of grace changes significantly from his early writings to his mature theology. Following Peter Brown's chapter on Augustine's "Lost Future" in *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 146-157, the scholarly majority posits a transformation in Augustine's doctrine of grace in 397, seen especially in his wrestling with Paul in *Ad Simplicianum*. Prior to this work, and in *De Libero Arbitrio*, Augustine reserves a greater place for free will in its interaction with grace than he does afterwards, when the gracious providence of God becomes the dominant note in his theology. Looking back in his *Retractiones* on his state of mind in 397, he comments that "I, indeed, labored in defense of the free choice of the human will; but the grace of God conquered, and finally I was able to understand, with full clarity, the meaning of the Apostle: '...what has thou that thou hast not received?' (Quoted by Joseph Lienhard in "Augustine on Grace: The Early Years," in *Saint Augustine the Bishop: A Book of Essays*, ed. Fannie LeMoine and Christopher Kleinhenz, Garland Medieval Casebooks (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 190). Scholars agreeing that Augustine's thought regarding grace shifted from his earlier to his later years include James Wetzel, "The Recovery of Free Agency in the Theology of St. Augustine," *Harvard Theological Review* 80 No. 1 (1987), 112; William Babcock, "Augustine's Interpretation of Romans (AD 394-396)," *Augustinian Studies* 10 (1979): 55-74; and Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 164-165. A notable counterargument to the transformation thesis comes from Carol Harrison, who wrote *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology* in the attempt to refute it.

inability to avoid sin after the fall, a claim to which we shall return, does not lessen one's responsibility for the sins he or she inevitably commits. According to the Bishop, God remains just in punishing the person for sins necessarily, but no less freely, chosen.

Not only could one ask Augustine how those who sin necessarily remain responsible for it, but one could inquire how those who are saved contribute to it by free choice. Augustine confidently asserts divine predestination, confirming that the work of grace upon the will necessarily accomplishes the saving purpose for which God applies it.²⁴⁹ The inevitably efficacious work of grace and the necessity of the person's consent to it throw the claim for a substantive conception of free choice in doubt. "By faith," Augustine writes, "the acquisition of grace against sin, by grace the healing of the soul from the disease of sin, by health of the soul freedom of will (*libertas arbitrii*), by free will (*liberum arbitrium*) the love of righteousness, by love of righteousness the accomplishment of the law."²⁵⁰ Behind faith, however, stands the ineluctable grace that none receive due to merit, so that one cannot construe faith as a work or a reward for other works.²⁵¹ Faith is God's free gift, lest grace no longer be grace. Augustine affirms that free will (*liberum arbitrium*) "is not made void through grace, but is established, since grace cures the will whereby righteousness is freely loved," yet one wonders how this freedom has the space to exercise its choices.²⁵²

Saint Augustine answers this question by distinguishing volition from ability, placing this distinction in the context of God's action (or lack thereof) upon believers. Volition denotes the willingness to perform an action, while ability refers to the power to carry out what is willed. A person may therefore will actions that he or she is unable to effect, but the contrary is not true as

249. *corr. et gr.*, 14.11-15, 45-53, 23.45.

250. *sp. et litt.*, 52.6-12. I will return to this quote at the conclusion of the dissertation as central for understanding Augustine's juxtaposition of insuperable grace and free will.

251. *gr. et lib. arb.*, 10.29-43, 11.30, 30.25-30, 43.20-23; *sp. et litt.*, 45.5-8. These references could be multiplied.

252. *sp. et litt.*, 52.16.

one cannot carry out actions that are not willed. In actions deemed forced or compulsory, the person still wills freely inasmuch as he or she makes an autonomous choice regarding whether or not to comply with the options offered. Augustine bids his reader not to mind that in non-compulsory situations the person would likely will otherwise, affirming that the power of weighing alternatives and freely choosing what seems best, including compliance or refusal of the threat inherent in the compulsory situation, remains intrinsic to the will.²⁵³ The will is a “midway power” (*media vis*), able to choose one way or another in the context of circumstantial pressures, which for Augustine include both external exhortation and internal thoughts. Regarding faith, then, the will can either incline toward it or away from it.²⁵⁴ When the grace of God is lacking, the fallen will is embedded in circumstances in which sin inevitably appears as the best course of action, and yet it sins freely because it chooses what it desires. In this case sin suppresses the capacity for righteous choice intrinsic to nature. When grace is given, however, the will apprehends obedience as the best course of action and its highest good. It again freely chooses what it perceives as best within the circumstances in which it is embedded, but its capacity for righteous choice has been liberated by grace freely bestowed. Obedience is necessary to the redeemed will for Augustine because circumstances, whether external or internal, dictate its revelation as the highest good, but the will nonetheless chooses righteously and freely by conforming to what seems best to it. In this manner the will is “elevated and assisted” by grace to the obedience it would otherwise reject.²⁵⁵

253. *sp. et litt.*, 53.

254. *sp. et litt.*, 58.3-6.

255. Cf. Eugene Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, trans. Ralph J. Bastian, S.J. (London: Burns and Oates, 1960), 190-204. A Catholic supporter of Augustine, Portalié summarizes this theology as the doctrine of suitable calling. God can invite the soul to accept Him in a number of ways, and He knows which combination of external and internal incitements will prove efficacious for a particular individual. When He calls a person suitably, he executes this combination with certainty of his or her acceptance. On the other hand, God has so prepared the will to receive this invitation that “this preparation leaves the soul as master of determination, at the same time assuring its consent.” The will, in Portalié’s reading, can refuse God’s offer, but it won’t because God has shaped it toward a proposal perfectly suited to the person’s acceptance.

“Consider now whether anybody believes,” says Augustine, “if he be unwilling; or whether he believes not, if he shall have willed it. Such a position, indeed, is absurd (for what is believing but consenting to the truth of what is said? And this consent is certainly voluntary): faith, therefore, is in our own power.”²⁵⁶ On the other hand, “God acts upon us by the incentives of our perceptions, to will and to believe, either externally by evangelical exhortations, where even the commands of the law also do something, if they so far admonish a man of his infirmity that he betakes himself to the grace that justifies by believing; or internally, where no man has in his own control what shall enter his thoughts, although it appertains to his own will to consent or dissent.”²⁵⁷ While God might arrange circumstances so that the will shall inevitably seek Him in faith, Augustine does not believe that this inevitability impinges upon the free choice constitutive of its integrity. For him, the gift of faith comes from God so that all the glory redounds to Him, but the receiving and possession belong to the one who receives and possesses.²⁵⁸ He asks with Paul, “What has thou which thou didst not receive?,” to both honor the Giver and reserve a place for the recipient.

John Rist rejects Augustine’s reconciliation of ineluctable grace and the freedom of the will, arguing that one cannot harmonize free will and necessity and that the attempt to do so reduces the human agent to a puppet under divine whims. An acceptable doctrine of grace must allow a substantive notion of human autonomy in order not to forfeit responsibility for individual sins. Inherent in Rist’s critique are the assumptions that free will includes a clear power of resistibility and that no line separates external and internal compulsions.²⁵⁹ If grace is irresistible in any sense, the person is not free; Rist dismisses the notion of irresistibility without constraint

256. *sp. et litt.*, 54.25-31.

257. *sp. et litt.*, 60.15-24.

258. *sp. et litt.*, 60.40-43.

259. Cf. Rist, “Augustine,” 422.

as a mirage.²⁶⁰ If God has prepared the will to receive grace, manipulating circumstances so that it will inevitably receive the offer, resistibility is denied and free will is abolished. Persons need God's help to choose Him, "but even the acceptance or rejection of help is dictated to them."²⁶¹ The grace given *indeclinabiliter* and *insuperabiliter*, in Augustine's words, thus negates a free human contribution.²⁶² Rist's concern in lodging this critique is practical as well as theological, as the closing pages of his argument express concern over Augustine's approval of persecution to compel outsiders to join the church. If God can compel persons by grace, Rist implies, the church can compel outsiders by force.²⁶³

Rist appears to have backed Augustine into a corner to the extent that the Bishop himself cannot explain exactly how grace and free will interact. James Wetzel, a supporter of Augustine, finds his position obfuscating inasmuch as the connection of willing with consent fails to illuminate the will's role vis-à-vis God's grace. If consent is always an expression of the will,²⁶⁴ Augustine's affirmation that the will consents to grace amounts to saying that the will wills. Such tautologies bring the reader no closer to understanding how free will and grace work together. Augustine concedes his lack of clarity on this point: "Some men try hard to discover in our will

260. Rist, "Augustine," 429. Rist here associates this view with Etienne Gilson's reading of Augustine.

261. Rist, "Augustine," 435.

262. *corr. et gr.*, 12.38, quoted in Rist, 435.

263. Rist, 442-447. James Wetzel counters Rist by acknowledging that God's action is irresistible but claiming that the will is nonetheless free. Shifting the terms of the argument from resistibility to the distinction between external and internal compulsions, Wetzel contends that resistibility is a "nonstarter" inasmuch as internal circumstances (e.g., motives and desires) always determine the will's free choice. "What, after all," he asks, "is so terrible about being "determined" by one's own beliefs and desires? I should think that any reasonable understanding of human agency would have in some fashion to advance that kind of determinism as a requirement for freedom" ("The Recovery of Free Agency in the Theology of St. Augustine," 111). The real issue for Wetzel is compulsory action, the external application of force that confronts he will with unhappy alternatives. Prohibiting the link between the internal necessity of grace and external compulsions, in Wetzel's estimation, preserves what is worthy in Augustine's thought while discarding its defects. *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 197-206.

264. *sp. et litt.*, 54.25-31, quoted in Wetzel, *Augustine*, 206.

what good is particularly due to ourselves, that owes nothing to God: how they can find this out, I just do not know.”²⁶⁵

The mystery of the cooperation of free will and grace resembles the Incarnation for Augustine. In Christ, the Word assumes a human nature so that it will never will evil, overpowering the nature that in every other case infallibly sins so that it refrains from disobedience. Despite the irresistibility of the divine action the nature remains intact, lest salvation be jeopardized by the Son not being fully God and fully human. How the nature remains fully human Augustine cannot say, stating only that in some “ineffable manner” the Word and the humanity are together in “unity of person.”²⁶⁶ This Christological mystery sets the tone for the application of grace to free will in all other instances. Just as one cannot grasp the togetherness of Word and nature in the Incarnation, so the cooperation of grace and will in the believer’s consent to faith is beyond explication. As Eugene TeSelle notes, “Augustine quite systematically makes the incarnation the prime instance” of grace. “If men are drawn out of their sin” by this grace, “it is by the *very same* prevenient grace that Jesus was drawn into unity with God and safeguarded from sin.”²⁶⁷ The precise interaction of grace and free will exceeds human comprehension, and it remains for the person simply to honor God for the gift received.

This appeal to mystery doubtless will not satisfy those who agree with Rist because it does not resolve the apparent contradiction between grace and free will. I will not quibble with Rist and his cohort that ineluctable grace cannot coexist with a will that possesses a power of resistance equal to its impulsion, but given this I do not agree that all freedom is lost. Though the following analogy in defense of Augustine’s understanding grace and free will does not support the robust freedom required by those who define the will principally as *liberum arbitrium*, it will

265. *pecc. mer.*, II.28.28, quoted in Brown, 374.

266. *corr. et gr.*, 30.53.

267. TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 336. TeSelle continues: “The same grace, the same Spirit, is given, first to the Head and then to the others. Jesus is thus the forerunner and the first fruits of redeemed humanity, and what is said of others is applicable supremely to him.”

indicate a space for freedom as circumscribed within an insuperable grace. On the other hand, the analogy will offer an interpretation of *liberum arbitrium* that, when posited as the dominant element in the will, undermines its capacity to assert itself as will.

Imagine a concert pianist in the throes of an arduous and captivating piece. The spirit of the music seizes him, his hands stroke the keys without conscious thought, the rhythm guiding his movements, his heart at one with the melody. It is as if he were predestined to complete the piece, and let us say that a god has predestined it. The player moves because the god drives him, a divine spirit pulling him ineluctably forward, blending the player into the performance. Yet in this piece, as in virtually all musical pieces, the player encounters rests the length of eighth, quarter, and half-notes. The melody requires the occasional lull, the momentary silence fitted into the tempo and adding, in an inverted way, to the beauty of the whole. Though the god pushes the player irresistibly through the rendition, at these moments he withdraws from his playing. The activity of the hands slackens, a brief cognition of the self rather than the music awakens, and the accent shifts in a subtle way from the performance to the performer. The player experiences what it means to not play, and it is nearly impossible for him to receive this knowledge without another, the possibility of its duration, that he might indeed stop playing by extending the rest beyond its allotted moment. It is this possibility that is impossible for him; the piece *will* resume on the other side of the rest as the god has foreordained, there being no liberty in this regard. Yet at the rest the player falls into a vertiginous indifference as garnered through the annulment intrinsic to the music itself. The god compels that the piece resume not from continued playing but from a moment of suspension, as in the rest the player is free as distinguished from the thing played, segregated from the music in the neutrality of a momentary silence. Made aware of the possibility of alternatives, how can the player resume playing without willing it? The player *feels* his freedom, sensing that there are divergent options, that he is able to not play because he is not playing, though he cannot *execute* that freedom in the choice to indulge or linger in the rest, and in this way resist the spirit that drives him to begin again. Freedom

glimmers before the player in a way that it does not before puppets or automatons inasmuch as he is already free in his distance from the piece. He is neutral but not empowered to endorse his neutrality, distanced but not allowed to languish in the distance. He is free but constrained from defining himself by his freedom.

The notes played stand for the will's inclinations and desires, while the rests stand for the neutrality of the will or its freedom. That the will in this case does not possess sufficient freedom to resist completing the piece, goaded on by an indeclinable divinity, does not mean that it has sacrificed all freedom, distance, or indifference. The incorporation of rests into the melody ensures a certain distance from the ineluctability even while it remains fundamentally unchallenged, and it is because of the rests that the ineluctability maintains a merciful character.²⁶⁸ In the same way the desire for obedience propelled by grace does not overwhelm all freedom of will, reserving room for it within a melody attuned to harmony with God. This analogy admittedly shifts the emphasis a bit from Augustine, who often concentrates on grace as a power that liberates nature from its weakness rather than grace's allowance of room for freedom to cooperate with it, but the joint activity between a dominant grace and a conforming will fits his perspective.

It is likely that those who, like Rist, define the will by a substantive *liberum arbitrium*, would say that the will in the analogy so far is not really free. The will, they might say, must be able to execute its freedom, a demand that necessitates modifications in the analogy. If we discard the notion of divine compulsion and equalize the priority of the will's neutrality or freedom with its desires and inclinations, a sequence results in which a number of rests (execution of the will's freedom in distance or neutrality) alternates with an equal number of notes (engagements in a particular inclination or choice). This solution should especially please those who suspect the freedom of the player in the analogy above because it is felt but not executed, as

268. Consider, by contrast, an arduous and captivating piece without any rests – a rarity, to be sure – and one gets the impression of a score that uses its music, especially as bolstered by divine impulsion, as a tyranny that denies even a circumscribed freedom.

here the freedom lingers in equality with the inclination. There are 2 notes, say, followed by 2 rests, with this pattern of 2 and 2 repeating. So long as one keeps the number of notes and following rests low, the musician can develop a pleasing melody. But those who define the will as a robust capacity for choice no doubt do so in order that the will should affirm itself in its maturity, producing not a simple and dull melody but one intricate, mellifluous, even divine. The advocate of the will as *liberum arbitrium* thus desires a greater number of notes as a greater mark of the will's definition and power. This desire yields an ironic pattern, for if the number of rests must at least equal the number of notes, then the addition of notes necessitates a parallel addition of rests. The more energetically and thoroughly one wants to form the inclinations or notes according to a certain melody, the longer the pause that annuls the form after its portion of notes has concluded. Ten notes followed by ten rests in a cycle is not a single melody but a collection of disconnected patterns, with the continuity between the groups of notes nullified by the 10 beats of silence in between. The more the piece wants to take shape, the less it can do so. In the same way, the preoccupation with protecting the will's freedom to assert itself undermines that assertion. When lifted up as the basis of the will's definition as will, the neutral platform from which a genuine because freely formed will would take shape actually undermines the realization of that form.

Rist would probably say at this point that I have contrasted two extremes, on one side depicting a will with insufficient freedom circumscribed within an ineluctable grace, and thus not truly free, whereas on the other I paint a will so free that it undermines its maturation in particular choices. Is there not a middle path, my opponents will inquire, where the will is fundamentally free in its ability to stop playing when it likes, while it does not execute that ability so as to sabotage the melody? Though this middle path appears logically possible, I contend that the mechanics of justification by faith alone prohibit it as a viable option for adherents to that

doctrine. Much of the argument ahead is needed to substantiate this claim, to which I shall return after elucidating the interaction of law and grace for Luther and Calvin.²⁶⁹

Turning to the second question regarding the contribution of the will's freedom to the realization of form, I seem to face a conundrum. I claimed in the preceding chapter that free will is akin to the moment of formless matter in creation, implying that free will has no righteousness in itself, and I now say that nature cooperates with grace via free will, giving the will the power to facilitate righteousness via its freedom. I therefore describe the free will as both formless and therefore bereft of righteousness and as an expression of the righteousness intrinsic to nature. How can this be? The question here does not concern righteousness in the will as inclination, as these inclinations at one point or another push nature toward righteousness as the kind of being that nature ought to be, but how the will's freedom, a thing that seems to have no righteousness on its own, could have its own power to contribute to nature's acquisition of righteousness in obedience.

The answer to the conundrum lies in the juxtaposition of freedom and law, with particular attention to the law's need of a limit in order to be valid as law.²⁷⁰ The law must allow some space for the individual to assert him or herself in distinction from it, or put differently, there must be some neutrality separating the law's subjects from the law itself. Consideration of circumstances in which this neutrality is not present proves the point, as a law that makes no room for the individual to plead his or her case when accused is tyrannical and lawless. The individual here lacks the space to distinguish him or herself from the law and stand in opposition to its charges, and for this reason the law is not a law but, forgetting its limits, it becomes an oppressor. The distance needed to defend oneself against the law further presumes a genuine option between obedience and disobedience, and it is the space reserved for this dual possibility that delineates the law's limit as law. The tyrannical law wants to annihilate this possibility and

269. See pages 259ff.

270. Page 55.

enforce an unwavering and complete conformity – though its attempts only divorce outward obedience from the disobedience of the heart that precedes revolt – and with the annihilation of the possibility comes the eradication of the limit, while the genuine and just law knows this possibility as intrinsic to its being as law. The law therefore cannot maintain its character as law without providing for freedom. On the other hand, a law that is too weak to punish those who break it is also no law, allowing injustices because it cannot compel criminals to pay the penalty for their crimes. Just as the law must be limited so that persons can claim a substantive freedom to obey or disobey, and similarly to defend themselves when accused of infractions, so it must possess enough strength to force the moment of freedom as a response to its requirements, a strength constituted by its ability to compel.

If the law should keep its integrity, then, it must balance the authority of righteousness and the limit that defines it as law. Freedom is this balance, a temporary annulment of law not unlike the formlessness intrinsic to the movement of matter from nothingness to form. Spiritual, rational creatures experience many such moments as a result of their interaction with an eternal law, their potential for communion with an infinite God. In the decision of obedience free will both annihilates and consummates itself in conformity with this law, raising itself as it is destroyed.²⁷¹ Given a substantive encounter between free will and law, freedom contributes to the law's movement toward form – that is, toward grace – by standing in a contrast that fulfills itself in its relinquishment. Free will contributes to the law's progress by refusing to inhibit it, closing the distance that defines its freedom and allowing the law to work through the individual concerned, and that freedom is righteous both in affirming the law's limit by its mere presence and by its condoning of the law as limited in consent. Freedom contributes to righteousness by annulling itself as the annulment of righteousness, a necessary and transient limit through which nature's inclination to good must pass if it should express a sincere obedience to an appropriately

271. Unlike the Latin *tollere*, the English language does not have a single word that combines these concepts. The closest it comes is the phonetic similarity between “raise” and “raze.”

bounded law. Extract the will's freedom from this context or, as I have argued, make that freedom equal with the inclinations that envelop it, and the will becomes as vaporous, amoral, and bereft of righteousness as an equally isolated formless matter.

The will, reason, and the body thus provide a contribution to nature's restoration in their combination with divine assistance, and this in spite of the wickedness that draws nature to despair over its incapacity. Just as a person made lame by a debilitating wound does not thereby lose the ability to walk,²⁷² so the nature beset by sin does not forfeit its righteousness entire. Saint Augustine does not believe that sinful nature has perished nor relinquished all righteousness on account of its fault, but that its attempts to find God's truth and obey His law as well as its consent to God's grace witness to both the desire and the ability of a nature deeply wounded but willing to work toward health. That nature retains a corrupted but discernable righteousness means also that it also retains a corrupted but discernable form, a definition disfigured but not undone.

The Righteous Law

That Augustine's foremost teaching on the law designates it as "the letter that killeth" in the absence of grace could amount to a refutation of its righteousness. One could reason that the letter that kills cannot also give life, concluding that the Christian does better to consider the law opposed if not antithetical to grace rather than a partner with its saving work. Augustine's description of the rule of marriage by the same analogy of lameness that he applies to sinful nature further complicates the question of the law's righteousness. If both nature and the law suffer the sickness, it would seem that sin has engrafted itself into the law as well as nature, corrupting the divine imperative to the same extent that it impedes the believer's ability to obey. Yet Augustine's teaching in the Pelagian controversy on the law in its connection to nature and

272. Lameness here is defined by Augustine's analogy of one who walks with a wound, not a lameness that entails the loss of all ability to walk. See the quote on page 81.

sin shows that this is not the case. Whereas sin affects nature internally as lameness, it affects the law only externally, the use of the same image notwithstanding. Sin does not take away the law's righteousness or deform it, but uses the law as an instrument to accomplish its purposes. At the same time, the law's title as "the letter that killeth" does not indicate an actively destructive work, pointing instead to the insufficiency of an otherwise righteous law to save without grace. The righteous law looks to grace as its fulfillment, the inner complement to the outer command.

Augustine's theology of nature and the law developed in response to Pelagius' theory of moral agency.²⁷³ Pelagius asserted capacity, volition, and actuality as the three aspects of human action.²⁷⁴ The first, capacity or ability, Pelagius believed to be placed in nature by God as the permanent and inalienable possibility of doing good.²⁷⁵ Persons could put this capacity to good or bad use, willing and acting either righteously or sinfully. Volition implies the will to carry out a good work, while actuality refers to the deed's coming to pass as a result of capacity and volition. For Pelagius, capacity belongs to the work of God within nature and the latter two belong to the individual agent, with the three faculties potentially working so well that one could reach a state of sinlessness. God had given the capacity for this, leaving it to believers to discipline volition and action to the perfection that He commands.²⁷⁶

In the opinion of Augustine, Pelagius' anthropology threatened the grace of Christ, as he asserted that Pelagius confused nature with grace. Pelagius "made God's grace consist almost entirely" in the capacity that the Creator made inalienable to nature.²⁷⁷ Reading Pelagius,

273. We know of Pelagius's views only through others including Augustine, a fact that arguably distorts Pelagius's moral theory as expounded in his own words. Scholars know just as much if not more of what Augustine thought of Pelagius's theology than that theology itself.

274. *gr. et pecc. or.*, I.4-5.

275. *gr. et pecc. or.*, I.5.29.

276. On the severity of Pelagius' moral doctrine, Armstrong, "St. Augustine and Pelagius as Religious Types," 158.

277. *gr. et pecc or.*, I.38.10, I.7.16.

Augustine could not distinguish the work of grace upon nature from God's creation of nature, as persons received God's gift in the natural capacity to avoid sin.²⁷⁸ He also assessed that for Pelagius sin did not change the constitution of nature, disabling it as a wound, because the capacity remains unaffected by it. Christ did not administer a cure for a diseased nature inasmuch as this capacity, according to Pelagius, retained the ability to avoid sin regardless of one's past transgressions, much less the sin of Adam and Eve.²⁷⁹

The believer needs baptism as a salve for past sins, wiping the slate clean for a new life of obedience according to Pelagius,²⁸⁰ but in this doctrine Augustine discerned no grace needed by the believer beyond baptism other than law and teaching or the example of Christ's righteousness. In addition to accusing Pelagius of confusing "internal" grace with nature, Augustine supposes that Pelagius has reduced grace "externally" to the remission of sins through baptism and the example of Christ.²⁸¹ Pelagius' emphasis on Christ's example placed an enormous, and in Augustine's opinion inappropriate, focus on the individual's free will. Pelagius believed that persons could discern the good and cling to it by nature, having but to see the example of Christ and meditate upon his teaching to set out more resolutely on that course, and with a reasonable expectation of achieving perfection due to one's God-given capacity. "The general result," Augustine states, "is the pointing out, as it were, of a road to us by which we are bound to walk, by the powers of our free will, and needing no assistance from anyone else," a road discoverable by nature and made more easily visible by the example of Christ.²⁸² Augustine in this way charges Pelagius with making the grace of Christ indistinguishable from law.

278. *nat. et gr.*, 59.18.

279. *nat. et gr.*, 69; *gr. et pecc. or.*, II.34.

280. *gr. et pecc. or.*, I.35, 41, 43.

281. *gr. et pecc. or.*, I.42.16. The differentiation of Pelagius' "internal" versus "external" confusions regarding grace is my distinction, not Augustine's.

282. *gr. et pecc. or.*, I.45.48-52; Brown, 352. Brown sums up the differences between the Pelagian emphasis on free will and Augustine's emphasis on grace by contrasting their attitudes toward

On the one hand, Augustine cannot distinguish in Pelagius' writings between grace within the believer and God's gift of the natural capacity to do good, and on the other he cannot distinguish grace from law and example. Nature and law stand on one side in Augustine's criticisms of Pelagius, and grace on the other.

This connection between nature and law matters because both are unable to save persons from sin, a charge applying to nature not only as bearer of an insufficient capacity for obedience but, further, as imprinted with an insufficient natural law. Quoting Paul, Augustine argues that those who did not receive the divine law nonetheless knew of God's character through the natural order. Paul implies "that it was through the visible works of creation that [those without the law] arrived at the knowledge of the invisible attributes of the Creator,"²⁸³ but though they knew God in this way, they denied Him, darkening their hearts and turning away from deeds performed according to nature. Yet obedience to the law of nature would not have saved persons or overcome their sin. The law exemplified in nature shares the same defect as the law given through Moses, such that "sin could not be taken away even by the law... whether it be the law of nature, under which every man when arrived at years of discretion only proceeds to add his own sins to original sin, or that very law which Moses gave to the people."²⁸⁴ Just as those who attained knowledge of the Creator through the creation "received no benefit towards salvation" from it, so those who "know from the law [of Moses] how man ought to live, are not made righteous" by knowing the law they have received.²⁸⁵ Each type of law needs a remedy that delivers the power of obedience to nature, the law being insufficient by itself to effect salvation.

babies. "Augustine had long been fascinated by babies... he had had no hesitation in likening his relation to God to that of a baby to its mother's breast, utterly dependent," while the Pelagian "was contemptuous of babies" and thought of the redeemed individual as mature and free, "able to uphold in heroic deeds" the demands of the law.

283. *sp. et litt.*, 19.38, drawing on Romans 1:18-23.

284. *pecc. mer.*, I.12.4-10.

285. *sp. et litt.*, 20.20, 25.

Marriage, of which Augustine speaks as “precept” or as “lawful,” and of activities that transgress the rule of marriage as “unlawful,” exemplifies the intertwining of nature and law characteristic of his thought.²⁸⁶ The marriage bond involves positive stipulations regarding the roles of the partners, specifically the patriarchal ordering of husband over wife.²⁸⁷ Augustine also reluctantly defends polygamy in the patriarchs, preferring marriage between one of each sex and denying that a woman may have multiple husbands.²⁸⁸ He further proclaims only the “natural use” of the members as according to the law, whose unnatural uses he stigmatizes as “flagitious” and thus “unclean and criminal.”²⁸⁹ This view implies that a law of proper behavior inheres in the body as God’s creation, illustrating the union of nature and law in a particular way of being, and therefore a particular form, fitting for nature as God’s creature. Marriage safeguards persons into conduct in accordance with the law of nature, providing a context for them to obey God by putting their body to use in divinely sanctioned ways.²⁹⁰

The law, nature, and sin come together for Augustine in the metaphor of lameness, which he uses with reference not to sinful nature *per se*, but in the relation of the specific sin of lust to the rule of marriage given by God. Marriage and the coitus it entails are good and produce offspring as a resultant good, yet the sexual act between fallen persons inevitably involves sinful lust and a consequent shame. Augustine employs the image of lameness to show that the lust

286. *nupt. et conc.*, I.3.11, I.6.66, I.11.11, I.20.2.

287. *nupt. et conc.*, I.10.29.

288. *nupt. et conc.*, I.10.

289. *nupt. et conc.*, II.35.32-36; Bernadette Brooten, “Nature, Law, and Custom in Augustine’s *On the Good of Marriage*,” in *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Matthews, Kittredge, and Johnson-DeBaufre (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), 187. Brooten provides an extended ranking of the activities deemed sexually criminal by Augustine. These contribute to her argument that Augustine has adopted his criteria for sexual approbation and censure from the larger Mediterranean world, and that this world’s standards oppressed women.

290. Brooten comments that for Augustine “nature ostensibly denotes the universal and the immutable. The rhetoric of the natural succeeded so well that twenty-first-century persons find it persuasive.” The natural, she argues, is a more important source for Augustine’s view of marriage than custom or politically authorized statutes. “Nature, Law, and Custom,” 193, 185-186.

does not make the offspring evil and that the good of offspring does not make the lust into a good. Marriage is the lame man: “Suppose him to attain some good object by limping after it, then, on the one hand, the attainment itself is not evil because of the man’s lameness; nor, on the other hand, is the lameness good because of the goodness of the attainment. So, on the same principle, we ought not to condemn marriage because of the evil of lust; nor must we praise lust because of the good of marriage.”²⁹¹

The question of the law’s righteousness concerns the nature of the lameness in marriage. If Augustine can depict both nature and the law represented by marriage as lame, are the two defects the same? Has sin altered the constitution of the law by engrafting itself into it, as it has done to nature?

Meditation on the three blessings of marriage recognized by Augustine in comparison to the problem of lust reveals that sin does not touch the law internally. The blessing of procreation results from obedience to the command to be fruitful and multiply, and Augustine argues that God gave persons members appropriate for bringing children about not for the sake of populating the earth, but so that their children might receive regeneration and populate heaven.²⁹² The second blessing, fidelity, refers to the chastity maintained between husband and wife in their dedication to one another.²⁹³ Paul Ramsey makes the excellent point that for Augustine chastity is not self-preservation, as if one person marries another to have someone whom he or she can trust, but that spouses maintain fidelity for each other as vessels for the release of a concupiscence that would otherwise tend toward fornication and adultery. Chastity guarantees that one spouse will give his or her body to the other, each being “made sin” for the other as

291. *nupt. et conc.*, I.8.19-28.

292. *nupt. et conc.*, I.19.3, I.23.9.

293. *nupt. et conc.*, I.19.6-16.

protection for the spouse's soul. "This then is an ethic," Ramsey asserts, "not only of negative restraint, but an ethic of remedy bent in the direction of an ethic of redemption."²⁹⁴

The third blessing of marriage, the sacramental bond, shares in the idea of redemption by modeling the union upon Christ and the church. Drawing from Paul's command that husbands "love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church,"²⁹⁵ Augustine extends the parallel so that the eternal union between Christ and the church applies to husband and wife in the present world. This doctrine, which became prominent for Augustine in *On Marriage and Concupiscence*,²⁹⁶ does not allow divorce due to infertility and charges men and women who instigate divorce for this reason with adultery. If either spouse dissolves the marriage for any reason and remarries, in fact, the abandoning spouse commits adultery by initiating the second union when the first still holds. "Thus between the conjugal pair, as long as they live," comments Augustine, "the nuptial bond has a permanent obligation, and can be cancelled neither by separation nor by union with another."²⁹⁷ Just as the baptized person who turns apostate may return to the church under the permanent pledge of regeneration, so the wayward spouse may return to the faithful one under the nuptial rite. In each case, Augustine warns, this return implies chastisement for breaking away, with the punishment reflecting the permanence of the union.

294. Paul Ramsey, "Human Sexuality in the History of Redemption," in Babcock, ed. *The Ethics of St. Augustine*. JRE Studies in Religious Ethics (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 127. See also Willemien Otten, "Augustine on Marriage, Monasticism, and the Community of the Church," *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 401. Otten takes a similar line in discussing friendship within Augustine's understanding of marriage, noting that "the ultimate importance of one's lifestyle depends on the contribution it makes to the City of God." For an understanding of fidelity in Augustine as more oriented toward "natural companionship" and raised decisively above the good of procreation, see Elizabeth Clark, "'Adam's Only Companion': Augustine and the Early Christian Debate on Marriage," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 21 (1986): 153-154. Each of these sources focuses more on the second and third goods of marriage, saying little of the first.

295. Eph. 5:25.

296. Marie-François Berrouard, "Augustin et l'Indissolubilité du Mariage: Évolution de sa pensée," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 5 (1968): 149-150, 154. Berrouard regards this sacramental understanding of marriage as Augustine's mature position, which he arrived at over the course of his writing.

297. *nupt. et conc.*, I.11.46-49.

Lust attaches itself to marriage in spite of these blessings, contaminating the sexual embrace sanctioned by God as lawful and honorable with shame due to its dependence on “a certain seductive stimulus” for instigation.²⁹⁸ Shame so mars the sexual act that it is uncouth for persons to speak of, much less to see, and the inability to discuss sex or feel its urge in the members without blushing proves to Augustine that lust has stained sex with impropriety. Shame thus sequesters the act pleasing to God and ordained by divine law into a private affair censored for its close connection with lust. The carnal concupiscence that infects the body has a greater presence there, it would seem, than in other activities, banning sex from the sight or hearing of those outside the conjugal pair, who must hide themselves to perform even lawful acts.²⁹⁹

Augustine elucidates marriage’s three blessings against concupiscence and shame in order to point out their divergent origins. The blessings belong “to the essence of marriage,” the substance of the lame person as distinct from the lameness.³⁰⁰ Sin does not adhere to any of these blessings, and thus not to marriage itself, as Augustine argues with regard to the transmission of sin through childbirth: “What now is there in these three blessings of marriage out of which the bond of sin could pass over to posterity? Absolutely nothing. And in these it is certain that the goodness of matrimony is entirely comprised.”³⁰¹ Augustine sharply distinguishes marriage’s goodness from the concupiscence that taints it: concupiscence results from sin, not from marriage. But if concupiscence is not embedded in marriage, how does it work its stain? Augustine answers by returning to the theme of the war of the members.³⁰² In that context concupiscence and the shame attendant to it are

298. *nupt. et conc.*, I.27.27.

299. For Augustine’s perspective on lust and shame, see *nupt. et conc.*, II.16-18. See also I.17.16, where Augustine castigates married couples so given to lust that they avoid procreation, and by his account neglect their children. These do not act as true spouses and come together in “debauchery.”

300. *nupt. et conc.*, I.19.29.

301. *nupt. et conc.*, I.23.31-36.

302. *nupt. et conc.*, I.24.5; cf. page 82 above.

“the plague and mark of sin; that is the temptation and very fuel of sin; that is the law of our members warring against the law of our mind; that is the rebellion of our own selves, proceeding from our very selves, which by a most righteous retribution is rendered us by our disobedient members.”³⁰³

Sin instigates a civil war in nature, changing its constitution from sinless to fallen while seeking to more deeply engraft itself into nature via combat with its good. Sin’s attempt to use the law to draw persons away from righteousness, as exemplified by the concupiscence that stains marriage, must move through nature as its original victim. Whereas sin corrupts nature by adhering to it internally and immediately, it can only use the law through that corruption, trying to work evil by it externally and mediately. Sin does not penetrate the law’s constitution but wants to use it as an instrument from without, grasping the law from its foothold within corrupted nature in order to augment the corruption.³⁰⁴ Though Augustine employs the illustration of a lame person and the lameness to describe the relation of both nature and the law to sin, the law is lame at a remove not applicable to sin’s infection of nature. The law is lame because nature is lame, whereas the sin that touches marriage, and by extension the law in general, “accrues to the human agents from whose union marriage comes into being” and from whom obedience is demanded.³⁰⁵

The lameness that defines the law as “the letter that killeth” has three characteristics: its ability to be used by sin, its revelation of sin, and its inability to effect salvation. The first, exemplified by sin’s making marriage an opportunity for lust, refers to sin’s finding an avenue for evil in the commandment, often driving the believer to sin through the temptation triggered by the prohibition.³⁰⁶ Sin thus perverts the commandment that instructs toward life into an instrument of death. The law also kills by its revelation of sin, shining a light so that the believer should see sin’s offence and, being convinced of guilt and the inability to overcome it, cry out to God for

303. *nupt. et conc.*, II.22.42-48.

304. *civ. Dei*, 13.5.

305. *nupt. et conc.*, II.42.49.

306. *sp. et litt.*, 25.19; cf. 6.46-54.

mercy.³⁰⁷ Augustine returns to the analogy of sin as a wound to illumine the law's function in disclosing its severity while not confusing the law with the medicine of grace nor the sin it reveals.³⁰⁸ Though it magnifies sin's severity, the law's revelation does not make them allies, as Augustine reasons that Paul's assertion that "by the law comes the knowledge of sin" does not implicate the law in sin's destructive activity.³⁰⁹ The law neither works with sin to corrupt individuals and nor does the revelation of sin's presence amount to facilitating it. The law here "kills" by forcing one's acknowledgement of the real killer. This leads to the third manner in which the law kills, that it lacks the power to conquer the sin it has made known. Trust that the law has this power ties the believer to his or her own righteousness rather than God's, implying the attempt to overcome sin by law and will without recourse to grace. The attempt does not succeed and the believer lives "under law" by this righteousness, remaining likewise under sin. "Not that the law is evil," Augustine states, but that its commandments can only make guilty and do not provide the aid necessary for obedience.³¹⁰ Anyone who believes that the knowledge of the law makes one its doer errs, and this error again reveals it as the letter that killeth.

These pitfalls that surround the law are not positive evils or defects against the law's essence but limitations accruing to a thing good and righteous in itself. The first manner in which the law kills involves its use by sin, but this use is external to the law and not inherent in it. The second way in which the law kills, the revelation of sin, likewise does not implicate it in sin's work of destruction. Though it highlights sin's seriousness, the law performs the good work of revealing a wound that it has done nothing to cause. In the third way the law kills, its inability to effect salvation, this limit does not contradict the law's righteousness but emphasizes that it is not

307. *gr. et lib. arb.*, 8.46.

308. *sp. et litt.*, 9.32-49.

309. *gr. et lib. arb.*, 22.8, quoting Rom. 3:20.

310. *gr. et lib. arb.*, 24.58.

enough on its own to save. Anything fashioned by God remains righteous according to the purpose for which it was created unless it should fall, which the law has not. Further, the purpose of the law is not to effect salvation by itself but to point the way. On the one hand, humanity's fallen condition does not annul the law's accomplishment of the purpose for which God gave it³¹¹; on the other, both before and after the fall grace was required along with the law to conform persons to righteousness.³¹² That the law requires grace for nature to fulfill it does not make it a negative or defective entity, but a good designed to be complemented by that other good.

In the contrasts between law and grace at the heart of *On the Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine adamantly rejects the idea that the law possesses sufficient righteousness to save on its own while he gives it a righteousness complemented by, and therefore contributing to, that of grace. Both the comparison of the law of works against the law of faith and that of the law written on stone against the law written on the heart denounce the law as a singular means for salvation while gathering it into cooperation with the grace that saves.

Augustine begins his treatment of the law of works versus that of faith by denying that the former amounts to Judaism and the latter to Christianity. With the exception of changes in ceremonies, for example the replacement of circumcision with baptism, the commands in the law of works apply also to the law of faith.³¹³ That law, like the law of works, commands the believer not to steal, not to commit adultery, and not to covet. The difference between the two does not lie in the presence of commands in one and their absence in the other, but in the attitude of the believer toward those commands. "What the law of works enjoins by menace, the law of faith secures by faith," Augustine contends, such that for the latter the law has become an object of

311. Saint Augustine would likely agree with Paul, however, that the law is "weakened" by sin in the flesh (Rom 8).

312. *corr. et gr.*, 31.1-6.

313. *sp. et litt.*, 21.7-13, 57-62, 73-78.

delight.³¹⁴ “By the law of works, God says to us, Do what I command thee; but by the law of faith, we say to God, Give what Thou commandest.”³¹⁵ This delight accompanies gratitude to God, who is acknowledged as the source of the believer’s obedience through faith in Christ.³¹⁶ While the law of works leaves the believer to his or her own ability to meet its demands and thereby establish the individual’s own righteousness, making the law a threat and a menace, the law of faith trusts in Christ as the source of grace that lifts persons to an otherwise unreachable obedience. In virtue of their confidence in Christ persons can delight in the law; an inward change has transformed what was burdensome into something pleasant.

The concern for inward renovation continues in Augustine’s distinction between the law written on stone tablets and that written on the heart, where the contrast again lies not in the presence or absence of commands but in their imprint upon the believer’s inner life. “*There* it was on tables of stone that the finger of God operated; *here* it was on the hearts of men. *There* the law was given outwardly; *here* it was given inwardly, so that they might be justified.”³¹⁷ Augustine adopts the contrast between stone tablets and the heart from 2 Corinthians,³¹⁸ interpreting it at once as the grace of inner transformation given through faith in Christ and the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy: “After those days, says the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”³¹⁹ Augustine believes this promise has received fulfillment in Christ, in whom the love of God is shed abroad in the heart so that it delights in righteousness and the avoidance of sin rather than

314. *sp. et litt.*, 22.2.

315. *sp. et litt.*, 22.17.

316. *sp. et litt.*, 22.25-30, 18.7.

317. *sp. et litt.*, 29.8-13, emphasis in original.

318. 3:3.

319. Jeremiah 31:31-34, quoted in *sp. et litt.*, 33.

delighting in evil, turning to freedom from slavery.³²⁰ By faith in Christ the finger of God has written a law originally external and a “ministration of death” upon the inner person, where the “ministration of the Spirit” delivers believers from condemnation. The law written on stone has vanished, the new law abides in the heart.³²¹

The external form of the “ministration of death” fades not because it has been defeated as evil, but because another good has taken up and transcended its goodness. Grace overcomes the weakness in the law in the face of sin so “that *the righteousness of the law* might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”³²² As the law of faith contains the commands of the law of works, so the law written on the heart contains those of the law written on stone, in each case indicating that the new application of the law does not contradict the old but takes it up as a preliminary that positively contributes to the work of salvation. Though the law of works or written on stone enjoin their commands by menace or serve as a ministration of death, they do these things only because the righteousness of the law alone lacks the power to save. Grace nonetheless confirms that righteousness by excelling it, enveloping the law’s limitations in the gift of power to fulfill its commands.

Grace as the Love of God Shed Abroad on the Heart

When the sting of his sin drove Saint Augustine to plumb the depths of his inner wickedness in the garden in Milan, acknowledging sin’s intransigence and his inability to subdue it by his own powers, his despair did not indicate the absence of righteousness in his nature and the law that made its faults known. Inasmuch as that law was intrinsic to nature, the righteousness of the two did not differ, exemplifying in their interweaving the form that God instilled in nature at its creation. Augustine as a sinner could not live up to the requirements

320. *sp. et litt.*, 28.4.

321. *sp. et litt.*, 31.1-4.

322. Rom 7:3-4, quoted in *sp. et litt.*, 34.46 (emphasis mine).

implied in that form and the divine law that excelled it. The form left to nature gave insufficient help, as did the law as “the letter that killeth,” and Augustine yearned for a supernatural power in distinction from these that would provide all that nature lacked, overturning the forces that impeded his spiritual progress and converting him to the way that his will hesitated to follow though his mind believed it to be true. This yearning brought him to his knees in the cry that God no longer be angry, that he find some release from the anxieties plaguing his soul.

God answered Augustine’s plea by pouring out supernatural power as an internal and secret infusion,³²³ a grace that overwhelmed Augustine’s heart with certainty so that all doubt receded just as it drew him toward obedience as the love of God shed abroad in the heart. Such power, Augustine would later write, works upon the believer’s “innermost affections,”³²⁴ coaxing him or her into “the sweetness of His grace through His Holy Spirit,” so that the soul takes greater delight in His law than in what contradicts it.³²⁵ Grace transforms the heart by leading it to will rightly, renewing the inner life in a manner immediate to discrete actions. It moves the believer both to will the good and to carry out the will, co-operating with nature in its obedience to the law. Grace is the freedom to obey as a divinely-granted dedication to God’s will in the face of sinful habits and desires, a conversion of nature toward the perfection of the next life, the beatific vision that implies the daily re-formation of nature in the image of God.³²⁶

Grace heals nature of its sin, writing the law’s commands on the heart so that they are done “by nature – not that by nature grace is denied, but rather by grace nature is repaired,” and

323. Cf. *gr et pecc. or.*, I.14.3.

324. *sp. et litt.*, 46.19.

325. *sp. et litt.*, 51.51-54. See also M. Cleary, “Augustine, Affectivity, and Transforming Grace,” *Theology* 93 no. 753 (May- June 1990): 210. Cleary argues that Augustine’s experiential basis for emphasizing grace’s sweetness and delight is a friendship mentioned in the *Confessions* in which his companion died (IV.4-10). “It was just that friendship and its attendant delight had now been purified, transposed to a higher key; and it was this key that would unlock the mystery of grace.”

326. *sp. et litt.*, 41.5, 37.36.

this to the purpose of better obedience.³²⁷ The internal transformation of the believer alters the command once recognized as a threat because, through that transformation, grace fulfills what the law lacks, providing aid to the obedience that the law requires. Grace's action narrows the gap between the prescription of the law regarding what nature ought to be, written to a notable extent within nature itself, and the sin that constrains nature as it is, "elevating and assisting" the believer into conformity with the law's demands. The restoration of the will in love thus mediates grace's fulfillment of the law. The latter's righteousness steps forward unilaterally through the grace that complements it, the same grace that imprints the law's commands upon the inner person in gratitude for the One who gives the command and the newly-bestowed power of obedience by faith. God demands that persons be in accordance with the law of their natures and love one another as His creatures, and this is law. When God enables nature with power for the law's fulfillment, this is grace. "For love," consisting of both the law and the grace that accomplishes it, "is of God."³²⁸

The parallel between law and grace on one hand and reason and faith on the other further illumines the mutually supporting roles between the law and nature as seekers of fulfillment and the grace that fulfills. God gives the law as a righteous resource that looks to grace as the complement that includes and completes it³²⁹; once given, grace leads the believer back to the law in the obedience by which nature attains a greater righteousness. The law is therefore given so that believers might seek grace, while grace is given for the fulfillment of law.³³⁰ In the same way, reason constitutes a natural tendency toward righteousness that requires faith to lead its arguments to the belief in God that complements and extends its search for truth; faith then

327. *sp. et litt.*, 47.18, emphasis in original.

328. *gr. et lib. arb.*, 37.33; see also *sp. et litt.*, 29.24.

329. Although one could make this statement of natural or divine law, I have natural law as inscribed within nature in mind here.

330. *sp. et litt.*, 34.36.

returns to reason as the means by which one procures a deeper knowledge of the convictions that it grants. Though Augustine distinguishes the law and nature from grace as the insufficient contrasted against the power of sufficiency, in each case he subordinates the contrast as a temporary opposition situated within an overarching camaraderie.

The interaction of nature and the law with grace is thus a mutual embrace in which, ontologically speaking, grace empowers a nature deformed by sin toward an incorruptible form, complementing by that empowerment the perfectly formed but limited law that points the way to incorruptibility. The righteousness and thereby the form of both the law and nature is not in doubt, but only whether that form exists at the intended height. Nature does not possess adequate form and lacks the power to achieve the definition it wants, finding both natural and divine law a contribution that does not sufficiently elevate it. Grace thus approaches the law and nature as an ally that wants to heal the deformity of sin, raising nature's righteousness and thereby its form to the standard of the law of incorruptibility. It is at once "the love of God shed abroad on the heart" and the inner love of form, an incitement toward the fulfilled righteousness of the law as an existence conformed to the design meant for nature by its Creator.

CHAPTER 4

GRACE AS FORMLESSNESS: MARTIN LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

The interpretation of Luther's doctrine of justification for which I shall argue here, couched in a language of form and formlessness more indicative of the ontological lenses operative in this study than of his own works,³³¹ would have met condemnation from the Reformer and is sure to draw ire from current adherents of justification by faith. For I will contend that Luther's experience of grace, when scrutinized in light of the parallel between form and righteousness, bears surprising and perilous implications. Whereas Augustine's experience of grace entails a wounded nature and the law, each possessed of a form to be fulfilled by a form-giving grace, Luther's theology, viewed from the perspective of the ontology of form, unintentionally and implicitly construes nature and the law as instances of formless matter, with grace acting to secure them in formlessness against their wayward attempts at form. Executing "the death of death" upon the law as forming so that nature lives by a "law of liberty" that means its liberation from form, the ontological meaning of Luther's experience of grace inverts that of Augustine. The Bishop's grace bestows form, while the Reformer's strips it away. Though the ontological lens that I shall employ in reaching this conclusion focuses only on certain aspects of Luther's theology, not the fullness of his thought or its use by later Lutheran theologians, this ontological reading of Luther suggests troublesome implications in his doctrine of justification by faith that might reveal something about the fissiparous character of Protestantism.

As a preparation for this interpretation of Luther, I will first elucidate the theology of law and grace that appears on the surface of his writings and that conforms to the current scholarly

³³¹ Luther engages in the idea of form only rarely, as for instance in his doubts regarding the Catholic notion of formed faith in the *Commentary on Romans*, LW 25.152, 325, and his comment on the philosophical notion form arising from what is first stripped of form, LW 25.204.

consensus regarding his thought, referring to his 1531 *Commentary on Galatians* as my primary text.³³² This discussion of the conventional reading of Luther will examine his assertion that the law is good but does not justify. While Luther is careful to protect the law's goodness, he still insists that it lacks intrinsic righteousness and the believer cannot acquire justification through obedience to its demands. In this section I will explicate both the law's false use and its two central positive uses in Luther's thought. I will also explain the law's dialectical relation with grace as pertaining to justification. In the second section I will argue that the assertion of goodness without ability to justify that Luther applies to the law also fits his view of nature, with Luther denying an intrinsic righteousness to nature both after and before the fall. While referring to the *Commentary on Galatians*, the argument here requires focus on other works that deal more directly with Luther's anthropology. The *Commentary on Romans* (1515-1516) and occasional reference to other writings will therefore come into play.³³³ Having examined Luther's denial of intrinsic righteousness to the law and nature, I will conclude by turning to his theology of religious experience in order to show how this denial amounts to the denial of ontological form for both.

I shall concentrate for the present on Luther's inadvertent construal of the law and nature as formless after the fall, supplementing this argument in "The Inverted Gospel" with the case that he also implicates both as formless before it. By the conclusion of the dissertation we shall see a Luther consistent in his doctrine of justification by faith alone as applied both prior to and after the fall, and no less consistent in the unwanted consequence that nature and the law are designated as formless while grace assists them toward the abdication of form. This ontological

332. Lecture notes from Luther's students, approved personally by their teacher, compose the *Commentary on Galatians* published in 1535.

333. I will cite Luther's *Bondage of the Will* and the *Commentary on Genesis*, the latter written decades after the Romans commentary. I do not intend by this method to imply that Luther's thought remained stagnant over the course of his writings. I contend that on the topics at hand divergences from one work to another do not exist to such an extent that discontinuity outweighs continuity or that one text significantly qualifies another.

scenario, I later conclude, taints Luther's understanding of grace both before and after the first sin.

Righteousness by Faith, Not Works: The Conventional Scholarly Reading of Luther

The standard reading of Luther's theology of justification by faith opposes law and grace as divergent means to attaining righteousness before God.³³⁴ Though the believer might be tempted to trust in the law, it ultimately brings death inasmuch as it terrifies and accuses the believer on account of sin. Grace nullifies the law's accusation by accusing it in turn, with Christ abolishing the law's curse and providing assurance of salvation. The law thus terrifies and enslaves, having no part at all in justification for Luther, whereas Christ liberates from sin and the law and justification belongs entirely to Him. Despite distinguishing law and grace in this manner, which Lohse characterizes as "not only a difference but an actual hostility between the two," Luther holds them together in a dialectic that implies the necessity of each for the other.³³⁵ One cannot properly understand or experience the law without arriving at the cry for grace, nor can one receive grace without suffering under the law. The believer must continually transition between law and grace, enduring the law's accusations as a presupposition to receiving the grace that negates them, just as one's being grasped by grace must return to the law so that it does not become a source for self-righteousness. Luther contends that a true and God-honoring obedience, in which the believer approaches the law not as an accuser to be feared but in the freedom granted

334. While not synonymous for Luther, grace and gospel are often interchangeable in the *Commentary on Galatians*. They will be used interchangeably in this paper inasmuch as both stand opposed to law, but the difference deserves specifying. The gospel for Luther "discloses what grace and the mercy of God are; what the forgiveness of sins, blessing, righteousness, life, and eternal salvation are; and how to attain to these" (LW 26.313). The gospel denotes all the components of the message of salvation in Christ, while grace is one of these components. As a part of the gospel, grace is freedom from the law so that "the Law that once bound me and held me captive is now bound and held captive by grace or liberty" (LW 26.161).

335. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Context*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 269. Lohse makes this comment while treating the dialectical relation of law and grace for Luther, emphasizing their contrast before asserting their togetherness in his thought.

by Christ, grows out of this dialectic. Just as He gave up equality with God and served humanity out of love, so the Christian succored by Christ's grace practices a joyful obedience.³³⁶

Luther developed this theology against the background of the Catholic doctrines of congruity and condignity, an influential paradigm for receiving righteousness that Luther judged to be based upon human merit rather than God's grace. According to these doctrines, a person with insufficient grace might perform a good work, such as giving alms or attending mass, and by this he or she would receive grace "by congruity" from God.³³⁷ This grace implies a quality given by God in the will that allows for further good works. These latter works, performed with a better grace present in the believer, receive further merit "by condignity," and make the believer worthy of eternal life. Luther assessed these doctrines as a form of justification by works, a righteousness in which the believer merits salvation as the reward for good deeds rather than through faith in Christ.³³⁸

Congruity and condignity entailed a high estimate of the natural inclinations and capacities that contributed to one's obedience. In Luther's day, the emphasis on human initiative was known as doing *quod in se est*, roughly "what is within one." This implied putting forth one's best effort for obedience, which God would see and reward with grace.³³⁹ Luther

336. *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, LW 31.301-303.

337. Steven Ozment notes that in the *Dictata Super Psalterium* Luther equates *meritum de congruo* with a human preparation before the advent of Christ in the heart. At this early point in his thought, Luther has another kind of preparation in mind, one which centers on the individual's acknowledgement of utter powerlessness and complete dependence on God's grace. He later abandoned this emphasis as a doctrine of preparation, furthering his claim that the person adds nothing to salvation and hence cannot take steps to prepare for it. Ozment agrees with Heiko Oberman that, in the wake of Luther's Reformation turn, the sigh of despair "does not refer to a stage of preparation...but to the life of faith itself." Steven Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis: A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson, and Martin Luther (1509-1516) in the Context of the Theological Thought* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), 182; Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 153.

338. LW 26.124-125, 130-131.

339. These ideas received theological articulation through Gabriel Biel, whose work was well known to Luther. In his commentary on Peter Lombard, Biel asserts that God accepts the good work of one who does what he or she can (*quod in se est*) and awards the grace of congruity for it, though not, according

excoriated this view as placing the burden of salvation upon the believer and making the grace of Christ superfluous. Everything hinged, in his assessment, on the believer's natural inclination toward God. The individual played the instigating and primary role in the acquisition of salvation, with God left to grant it as a payment for good deeds. Luther perceived no substantive role for a freely given grace in this scheme; the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the promise of eternal life as God's gift, and the forgiveness of sins added nothing of note, in Luther's judgment, to a construal of the Christian life that boiled down to the individual's work and God's reward for it.³⁴⁰

This account of the Christian life resonates with the false use of the law against which Luther warns his adherents, whereby they would hope to gain justification through obedience. When the Christian perceives that he or she has transgressed God's command and become an object of wrath, not having sufficiently performed *quod in se est*, the law appears as a way out of this predicament. Like the early Luther, the believer supposes that a more holy life will make up for earlier sins, but embarking on this path leads to deeper error. In this way the believer abuses

to Biel, because God owes this grace but out of divine liberality. Biel elsewhere writes: "For God accepts the act of the one who does all that is in him [*actum facientis quod in se est*] as a sufficient reason for awarding him the first grace [*ad tribuendum primam gratiam*], not out of justice due but out of his liberality. But the soul, by removing the obstacle, by ceasing from the act or consent of sin, and by turning itself rightly towards God [*eliciendo bonum motum in Deum*] as to its first principle and end, does all that is in it [*facit quod in se est*]. Therefore God accepts the act of removing the obstacle and the turning towards God as a reason for infusing grace [*ad infundendam gratiam*]. Finally, therefore, by removing the obstacle and by turning towards God, one merits grace *de congruo*." Gabriel Biel, *Quaestiones de justificatione*, 31, quoted in Thomas M. McDonough, *The Law and the Gospel in Luther: A Study of Martin Luther's Confessional Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 35.

Luther rejected this theology in spirit, if not in the letter, in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. Thesis 13 asserts that "Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin." Thesis 16 adds that "The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty." Quoted in Walther Von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982), 77.

340. Beyond this, the theory of congruity and condignity had failed for Luther personally. McDonough summarizes that "All historians of our age agree that the material evidence portrays Luther as a zealous and exemplary Augustinian, obedient to his superiors and faithful to the monastic rule. He prayed, studied, and fasted; he preached and taught the Word of God, and performed other works of charity, he punished his body and soul with all manner of penances; in short, he worked, worked, worked to do *quod in se est*; yet never, at any moment, apparently, did he feel in his own heart the perfect love" spoken of by proponents of the theory like Biel. *The Law and the Gospel in Luther*, 37.

the law, with reason thinking that the person can fulfill the entirety of its demands.³⁴¹ This road, which Luther identifies as the root of various monastic orders and forms of worship, promises that works can merit grace and the forgiveness of sins, but it only increases anxiety and slams shut the door to grace.³⁴² In its worst form, the abuse of the law tempts the believer to construct a path to righteousness that confuses the creature with the Creator, as the individual's reliance on human activity becomes a way of salvation authored by the person rather than God.³⁴³

In lieu of the false use of the law and the active righteousness it prescribes, Luther proclaims passive righteousness as the truth of the Christian life. He affirms that the believer can perform no works, offerings, or ceremonies that gain him or her any righteousness before God. The Christian must struggle continuously against trust in these as if they could justify, despite the necessity of participating in them. The challenge of faith involves the total abdication of reliance upon one's own efforts for salvation and the total transfer of that reliance onto Jesus Christ, the object of faith whose death conquered sin and purchased eternal life for believers. Justification in this way does not take works into account as if they could justify, but the believer receives salvation and its assurance in the conscience in a purely passive manner. Christ has done all the work and the believer has nothing to add. He or she has but to accept the work that Christ has done, placing faith unreservedly in Him, and to resist the temptation to place that faith in one's own obedience. Human righteousness, as Luther discovered in the Wittenberg monastery, does not consist in the measure of the person's obedience before a God righteous as He is wrathful against sin, but in the righteousness of God as His mercy, given freely through Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.³⁴⁴

341. *Commentary on Galatians*, LW 26.347. The relationship between reason and the law will receive further scrutiny in the following section on nature.

342. LW 26.405.

343. LW 26.259.

The Christian life consequently takes on a shape removed from congruity and condignity and focused upon the grace of Christ, with the believer proceeding through two steps. In the first, one sees oneself as a sinner, acknowledging the inability to perform good works. Coming before the law, the person perceives that he or she is “an evil tree,” that “everything you think, speak, or do is opposed to God.”³⁴⁵ Trying to gain grace by works exacerbates this acknowledgment until the person “finds in himself not one spark of the love of God; thus he justifies God in His Word and confesses that he deserves death and eternal damnation.”³⁴⁶ At the same time, the intractability of the believer’s sin drives him or her to Christ. Recognizing the futility of human effort, the individual turns to Jesus without mention of works or merit, falling upon Christ alone as the rock of salvation. This constitutes the second step, the proper honoring of God by accepting His mercy without attempting to share in His glory by works. Rather than earning merit by congruity or condignity, the believer receives it freely through Christ.³⁴⁷

The law has a proper use in these steps and the gospel another, with Luther taking pains to emphasize the distinction. With respect to justification, the law only terrifies, disclosing sin, the wrath of God, and death and hell as divine justice. Rather than abusing the law by seizing it in the temptation to justification by works, here the believer meets the law in its proper role, in which it subjects the conscience to despair at nature’s powerlessness to save itself. Gospel, on the other hand, announces God’s mercy in Christ, the promise of blessing, the forgiveness of sins and

344. Recollecting in 1545, Luther writes of his transformed understanding of the righteousness of God: “I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.” The righteousness of God had changed in Luther’s understanding from something required of those who believe in Him to something given from Him to them. It was no longer the harsh imposition of the law but the liberating grace of Christ. *LW* 34.336-337, quoted in Von Loewenich, 84-85.

345. *LW* 26.126.

346. *Ibid*; cf. *LW* 26.348.

347. *LW* 26.126-127.

pardon from death and hell.³⁴⁸ Law commands what one is to do but does not give the power to accomplish it, cursing the person for his or her insufficiency. Gospel informs the believer of what has been done on his or her behalf and exhorts the person to accept it purely, without concern for works. Gospel and law are thus exact opposites with respect to justification: “Now demanding and granting, receiving and offering, are exact opposites and cannot exist together. For that which is granted, I receive; but that which I grant, I do not receive but offer to someone else. Therefore if the Gospel is a gift and offers a gift, it does not demand anything. On the other hand, the Law does not grant anything; it makes demands on us, and impossible ones at that.”³⁴⁹

The opposition between law and gospel for Luther belies their proximity in both the Scripture and the preached word. One should not scour the Bible for commands and prohibitions, assigning these as law, and do the same for assurances and promises in order to categorize these as gospel. Nor would Luther condone considering the Old Testament as law and the New Testament as gospel. Any text of Scripture and any preached word, including that of Christ’s cross, can be received as law, while the hearer can receive the hardest commands as gospel. The possibility of the word’s reality as law or gospel thus lies with its recipient. If one hears the Scripture or preaching in faith, the word is gospel; if apart from faith, the word is law.

Luther might refer to the law more specifically as the 10 Commandments or the Golden Rule, but its reality is everywhere in the biblical message. This broad understanding of the law, which Ebeling refers to as an “infinite horizon,” reflects the universality of the gospel as a response to its demands.³⁵⁰ The individual carries the law by nature, so that when Moses issued

348. LW 26.312-313.

349. LW 26.208-209.

350. Gerhard Ebeling, *Martin Luther*, 133-136. Ebeling quotes Luther’s claims that the law discloses “what already exists in human nature,” and that the law is already in that nature “in fact.” Lohse adds divine law does not supersede natural law or constitute a form of grace over and above it for Luther, but the Mosaic law renews the knowledge of the natural law in persons too darkened to draw the proper conclusions from it. God gave the Mosaic law in particular in order to “inculcate the natural law afresh” (*Martin Luther’s Theology*, 274). For a summary of the scholarship on Martin Luther’s understanding of natural law, see *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*, ed. Robert C. Baker and Roland Cap Ehlke (Saint

the 10 Commandments he only restated the natural law for Jews whose innate knowledge of it had been darkened. The commandments “add nothing new” to natural law, for it is “natural to honor God, not steal, not commit adultery, not bear false witness, not murder.”³⁵¹ Like the commandments, preaching more clearly reveals the law’s permanent presence in nature, indirectly pointing the believer to the gospel as the true way of salvation.

In the moment of anxiety over one’s fate as saved or damned, the internal battle that Luther refers to as the conflict of conscience or spiritual trial – and to which we shall return – one must make the turn from law to gospel unilaterally, as Luther teaches that one can hope in the law or the gospel, but not the law and the gospel. Believers must face down the inclination to reason according to the law, looking at works performed as if they made one worthy of eternal life. They must instead grasp the grace of Christ by faith, whose function is to lay hold of Him without reference to the law. One cannot mix one’s trust in faith or the law, for if justification comes through Christ, then the law is only an agent of sin, revealing human fallenness while its works provide no aid to justification. One would be deceived to trust in it, falling further from Christ’s grace. On the other hand, if justification comes through the law, then Christ is an agent of sin. The law says that persons must do its works to be justified, but Christ claims justification by faith in Him alone. If He does not justify, those who hope in Him are sinners on that account, and Christ is an agent of their perdition. When the believer seeks righteousness before God’s judgment, either the law is an agent of sin, or Christ; either the law justifies, or Christ; one cannot combine or intermingle the opposing elements.³⁵²

Louis: Concordia, 2011) and Antti Raunio, “Natural Law and Faith: The Forgotten Foundations of Ethics in Luther’s Theology,” in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 96-127. Raunio argues against Althaus and Thompson that one should not interpret Luther’s concept of the law dualistically, as if one law applies to reason and another to love (Althaus), or as if the natural law applies to temporal government while the divine law applies to Christian morality (Thompson). Against these interpretations, Raunio seeks to unify Luther’s concept of the law as one applying in both the natural and divine orders.

351. *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, LW 35.168.

352. LW 26.142-146.

Luther's strict separation of Christ and the law elicited the accusation that he rejected the law *per se*, a charge he vehemently denied.³⁵³ That the law does not justify, he argued, did not render it worthless or divest it of necessary functions. Luther did not mean to castigate the law as evil or destroy it, but to draw the proper boundaries around it. Within its own sphere, the physical or external realm, the law is indispensable for Luther, carrying all the authority of its divine origin.³⁵⁴ From this sphere it also exerts an indirect influence on the spiritual realm, the opposite of the physical. The law exposes the futility of trying to gain salvation by external means and points believers to faith in Christ's grace. The law's application to these two realms corresponds to its two uses as described by Luther. First, in its political use, the law maintains political and social order and restrains the wicked. Second, the law increases the transgressions of the sinful, tearing down self-presumption and driving believers to Christ for grace and salvation. This is the law's theological use, which does not contribute positively to justification but strips the believer of any hope in his or her effort, facilitating the turn to Christ as its sole author.³⁵⁵ One can sum up Luther's attitude to the law, taking these uses into account, in his assertion that the law is holy and good, but does not justify.³⁵⁶

353. Luther had to defend his doctrine against his student Agricola, who misconstrued the separation of the law from justification by rejecting the law itself. Luther dismissed him as antinomian, a word aimed at Agricola's denial that the exposition of the law belonged among the church's tasks. "They have devised for themselves a new method," Luther writes in *Against the Antinomians*, "whereby one is to preach grace first and then the revelation of wrath. The word 'law' is not to be heard or spoken." Luther condemned this teaching as contrary to Christian doctrine. LW 47.114; Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 178-184.

354. On the law as pertaining to externals, see LW 26.91-92, 117, 202, 321, 395-396, 399, 442. In these passages Luther contrasts those who think themselves righteous because of outward works against those who receive justification through faith in Christ. For a treatment of the divine origins of the law in Luther, see McDonough, 76-82.

355. Disagreement exists between scholars about a possible third use of the law in Luther. Rather than the negative function of disclosing sin, this final use would consist in positive exhortation and education in Christian living. Lohse emphasizes that Luther has no explicit doctrine of a third use, and sides against ascribing one to him (*Martin Luther's Theology*, 275). Hans Otto Teifel differs, arguing convincingly that "It is true that Luther does not use the formula of the *tertius usus legis* – the only mention of it in the corpus has been shown to be a Melancthonian insertion – but the substance of the third use is nevertheless clearly present." See Teifel, *The Ethics of Gospel and Law: Aspects of the Barth-Luther Debate* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Service, 1968), 43. Gordon Dicker expresses similar sentiments

Luther clarifies his distinction between the physical and spiritual realms in his discussion of divine blessings.³⁵⁷ God gives certain physical blessings for the present life, such as riches and children, but these remain on the physical level, whereas the higher blessing of eternal life resides on the spiritual level. All who do not have this spiritual blessing remain under the curse, regardless of physical blessings. One must receive justification in order to avoid the curse and secure eternal blessedness, a power that belongs to no physical or outward thing. The entire law belongs to things physical and outward, the “elements of the world,” and as such it “does not produce anything life-giving or saving or heavenly or divine, but only things of the world.”³⁵⁸ Luther nonetheless salutes the law within the physical realm as a thing of the first rank. Behind only faith made concrete in obedience, the law is “the best, the greatest, and the loveliest among the physical blessings of the world,”³⁵⁹ holy and divine, and yet, because it does not touch the spiritual realm or confer eternal blessing, it is a “weak and beggarly element” and “worse than useless for justification.”³⁶⁰ The externalities and physical obedience of the law have become, for

in *The Concept Simul Iustus et Peccator in Relation to the Thought of Luther, Wesley, and Bonhoeffer, and Its Significance for a Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1971), 43.

356. Luther writes that “you should learn, therefore, to speak most contemptuously about the Law in the matter of justification, following the example of the apostle,” adding that “apart from the matter of justification, on the other hand, we, like Paul, should think reverently of the Law. We should endow it with the highest praises and call it holy, righteous, good, spiritual, divine, etc.” (LW 26.365) He expresses a similar sentiment in *Freedom of a Christian*: “We do not, therefore, reject good works; on the contrary, we cherish and teach them as much as possible. We do not condemn them for their own sake but on account of...the perverse idea that righteousness is to be sought through them” (LW 31.363).

357. LW 26.250-251.

358. LW 26.363.

359. LW 26.251. Cf. Tiefel, *The Ethics of Gospel and Law*, 6, 25-26. Tiefel explains the contrast in the significance of the law by placing it in two settings, the first soteriological and the second ethical. In the soteriological realm, the law is negative and to be overcome by Christ, while in the ethical realm the law is worthy of honor.

360. LW 26.407.

Luther, a matter of indifference inasmuch as their performance or lack thereof does not add to justification.³⁶¹

The law nonetheless possesses the critical civil use of restraining transgressions, thereby maintaining public order. Laws command the avoidance of murder, adultery, thievery, and other acts that threaten social well-being. God has commissioned magistrates and other social authorities with the power to uphold these laws and prosecute their violators, securing the general peace. “This is why God has ordained magistrates, parents, teachers, laws, shackles, and all civic ordinances,” so that untamed and dangerous persons should be punished for their crimes and refrain from worse behavior under the threat of consequences.³⁶² The spread of the gospel also requires public peace, as “the tumults and seditions of wild men” might otherwise hinder it.³⁶³ God has given the law with this first function of discouraging external crimes,³⁶⁴ a use that does not touch justification but, at the distance of the physical from the spiritual, allows for the gospel to flourish within a well-ordered society.

The civil authorities instituted by God, however, must abide within their limits according to Luther. When a Christian comes before them, whether magistrate, parent, or pope, relating to earthly or physical affairs, then the authority possesses the God-ordained right to make decisions and give commands by virtue of its social position. God governs and preserves the world by these positions, and the disruption of their duties would be unlawful. On the other hand, the moment that one of these authorities claims a share in justification with Christ, imposing its decrees as if these were necessary for spiritual blessing, salvation, or assurance of pardon, it

361. Luther writes that “it is neither sin nor righteousness to be either uncircumcised or circumcised, just as it is neither sin nor righteousness, but a physical necessity, to eat and drink. For whether you eat or do not eat, you are neither better off nor worse off (1 Cor. 8:8). But if anyone came along and attached either sin or righteousness to it and said: “If you eat, you are sinning; but if you abstain, you are righteous,” or vice versa, he would be both foolish and evil” (*LW* 26.87).

362. *LW* 26.309.

363. *Ibid.*

364. Luther refers to these as “external acts of disgrace” prohibited by the law. (*ibid.*)

oversteps its boundaries and invades a foreign realm. When the pope, for example, seeks to trap consciences with his laws and require the trust that belongs to God alone, then the Christian must resist him. The alliance of faith is with God, and then with authorities insofar as they obey Him. Should they attempt to usurp His place, arrogating the power of justification to themselves, the Christian must reject that claim and oppose the authority that opposes itself to God.³⁶⁵

The law's theological use pertains to justification without adding positively to it. It does this in two ways, first by destroying self-presumption and revealing the depth of one's sin, forcing itself upon the believer as a kind of punishment, and second, by facilitating the unqualified turn to Christ's grace as the only remedy unto salvation.

Luther judged that self-presumption had become the dominant sin of the church in his day. Monks, priests, and members of the Catholic hierarchy had succumbed to the abuse of the law, founding their righteousness on good works performed, vows pledged, laws obeyed, and ceremonies participated in, and by this activity felt confidence in their righteousness. This presumption concealed serious evil within its victims, hiding the smug rejection of God's grace in Christ that Luther called out as a whitewashing of tombs. He argued that God gave the law so that persons might see through the outer image to the reality of inner damnation and misery under sin. The law crushes confidence in works, in outward ceremonies and obedience, and replaces the false righteousness gained through religious practice with an intense awareness of sin and God's holiness against it. "This is the primary purpose of the Law of Moses," Luther writes, "that through it sin might grow and be multiplied, especially in the conscience."³⁶⁶ Rather than lifting oneself up by attention to a law that does not justify, deceiving oneself regarding both its severity and its efficacy, the believer must come before the law in earnest, allowing it to reduce

365. *LW* 26.95-97. This paragraph hints at aspects of Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms, in which he distinguishes the rule of God over the heart from the rule of physical authorities, to include the church. "The distinction between the two kingdoms...thus corresponds to the distinction between law and gospel, without these pairs of concepts being identical," remarks Lohse. Luther makes the distinctions "to serve the purpose that the spiritual remain spiritual and the temporal temporal, lest the two be confused" (315).

366. *LW* 26.309.

him or her “to nothing.”³⁶⁷ The Christian must see that the law leaves one no place to stand, no jot or tittle of natural righteousness with which one might overcome sin.

In this way one experiences the law as spiritual confinement, viewing it as a prison and object of hatred especially in moments of spiritual trial.³⁶⁸ Just as the Israelites wanted to flee the law at Sinai as soon as they received it, as “in the very hour in which the people heard the Law nothing was more hateful to them than the Law, and they would have preferred death to hearing the Law,”³⁶⁹ so the believer “finds nothing more odious or intolerable” than the law’s interrogation of the heart. With the law come innumerable and unfulfillable commands; by the inability to obey the believer becomes aware of sin in its intensity and permanence, so that one enters the first step Luther’s Christian life in being “truly humbled and reduced to nothing in [one’s] own eyes”;³⁷⁰ by the awareness of sin the believer acknowledges the wrath of God against it; and with the wrath of God the sinner knows and feels his or her destiny as death and hell. At this point the conscience endures extreme anxiety, the heart being mortified under unremitting accusation. It seems, “as long as the trial continues, that the devil is roaring at us terribly, that heaven is bellowing, that the earth is quaking, that everything is about to collapse, that all the creatures are threatening us with evil, and that hell is opening up in order to swallow us.”³⁷¹ The believer senses “a true taste of death,” an emotional recognition of the inevitability of doom under

367. *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31.348; cf. H.J. Iwand, “The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 no 2 (Summer 2007): 218, 223. Iwand emphasizes that Luther does not reduce the law to the political order, lest he join the Antinomians who thought the law belonged in the courthouse but not in the church. Luther rather understands the law “as not merely a challenge that invites the person to do good works, but as that which God’s law really is, namely, a calling that claims the entire person – his body, soul, and all his powers.”

368. LW 26.336.

369. LW 26.320.

370. LW 26.126; on Luther’s thought concerning the permanence of sin, see McDonough, 27-44.

371. LW 26.382.

the law's condemnation.³⁷² In outward life one might appear holy, doing good works and earning others' esteem, but one inwardly perceives that God judges differently from His creatures, with his law a torture to the conscience.³⁷³

In the midst of its terrors, by faith the human spirit emits the "sigh of the heart," the cry of "Abba! Father!," an apparent moment of weakness that turns out to be the believer's greatest strength.³⁷⁴ In this moment the law fulfills its theological function as the Christian feels the emptiness of human striving in its entirety, progressing to the second step in the Christian life by looking to Christ for rescue from wrath. Thus the law does not make good the promise of eternal life, nor does it make one righteous, but it supports grace and the promise in an indirect and roundabout way, pressing the believer down as a prelude to the sigh. Through the law "God wounds in order to heal; He kills in order to make alive,"³⁷⁵ but it is Christ alone who heals the law's wound, Christ alone who calls the believer from death under the law to life under grace. For Christ, though innocent in His own person before the law, out of free will became "a curse for us," a sacrifice that the believer must grasp in application to him or herself in order to escape the

372. LW 26.145.

373. James F. McCue's excellent article on *simul iustus et peccator* details the historical development of the church's focus on purity of conscience. Introspective practices of penance and confession appeared to have reached a crisis point in Luther's day, having become a part of everyday life as early as the fourteenth century. Augustine, by contrast, was not forced to deal with the requirement that "all one's mortal sins be confessed as the ordinary condition of salvation," the aspect of Christian consciousness that plagued Luther. "*Simul iustus et peccator* in Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther: Toward Putting the Debate in Context," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 no 1 (1980): 81.

374. LW 26.384; cf. LW 26.329.

375. LW 26.348. Luther hinted at this conception of the law in his early description of its "spiritual understanding." In the *Dictata Super Psalterium* (1513-1515), Luther argues that those who understand the law spiritually approach it as commanding the destruction of the flesh's desires but lacking the power to give new life. Conceived in this way, the law is incorporated into the experience of liberation and salvation as a destruction of sin preceding the reception of Christ. There exists, in the words of Steven Ozment, a "friendly convening" between the law spiritually understood as the destroyer of fleshly desires, especially the presumption of one's own righteousness, and the grace of Christ as the gift of new life. In this convening, however – and here is the critical point – the destruction of sinful desires is a presupposition for grace but not an efficient cause. The law guides persons to Christ only by revealing its utter insufficiency for salvation, and neither compels grace's appearance nor cooperates actively with it. Ozment, 124-127.

law's barbs.³⁷⁶ Christ's victory must rule over the heart and conscience as one accomplished "for you and me," transforming the interior disposition.³⁷⁷ If one appropriates this victory with a sincere faith, believing that Christ has conquered sin, death, and the curse for me, then they have been conquered, and Christ "wants us to believe that just as in His person there is no longer...any vestige of death, so this is no longer in our person, since He has done everything for us."³⁷⁸

Luther embraces the force of his assertion that Christ became a curse for us as a key for understanding grace and the believer's experience of it. He will not permit a metaphorical rendering of Christ's being sin and a curse, as if His becoming sin referred to His sacrifice for sin, or if His becoming a curse meant the same.³⁷⁹ Luther maintains that Christ took the sin of the world upon His body, that on the cross one finds Him among thieves because sin had made Him a thief. The Christian should consider his or her sins and, turning to Christ on the cross, understand them to be His as if He had committed them. The sin that He shoulders in our stead, says Luther, adheres to Him not only as a quality or adjectivally but substantively.³⁸⁰ Like sinners who find themselves so condemned that they are not only miserable or accursed, but seem to have become misery, sin, and the curse, so Christ becomes all of these on behalf of persons.³⁸¹ The believer must affirm that Christ has put on humanity's sin in its fullness, including one's own, if faith in Christ should justify.

Made a curse for us because wrapped up in our sins, Christ's work in justification submits Him to the assault of the law's curse, at once engaging His righteousness in a duel with

376. Gal. 3:13; *LW* 26.277-291.

377. *Freedom of a Christian*, *LW* 31.357.

378. *LW* 26.284.

379. *LW* 26.288.

380. Luther understands substance in the *Dictata* externally, referring by it to qualities of body or soul received extrinsically. For example, the substance of the glutton is food, and that of the ambitious person is glory. Our sin becomes Christ's substance in the sense that it becomes that which defines Him as taken upon Himself. Ozment, 106-107.

381. *Ibid.*

the sin of the world that He bears. The law sees that Christ has taken on the world's sin and castigates Him, attacking Him and killing Him on the cross.³⁸² This conflict with the law's curse points to the deeper conflict within Christ Himself, who by taking up humanity's sin has become both the sin of the entire world and the righteousness of justification at the same time. These opposites within Christ battle one another as "the sin of the entire world attacks righteousness with the greatest possible impact and fury."³⁸³ But sin cannot conquer the unconquerable, and does not prevail against Christ's immortal and invincible righteousness. On the cross, the life of Christ "emerged victorious when it had been conquered, conquering and killing death in turn," overcoming the challenge of sin and the law.³⁸⁴ In this way death loses its sting, a blessing gained by faith in Christ's righteousness alone and without the help of works, so that the believer lives freely under grace.

The Christian appropriates Christ's victory as "the death of death" upon the law, in which He nullifies it as a harbinger of wrath and destruction, simultaneously wielding Christ's grace as a law against that law. Where the old law binds, accuses, and curses, the law of Christ liberates by binding the law that binds, accusing the law that accuses, and cursing the law that curses.³⁸⁵ In contrast to the death threatened by the law's curse, the Christian therefore has "another death, that is, life, which makes me alive in Christ."³⁸⁶ Interpreting Paul, Luther calls Christ's killing of the law that kills a new law, "the law of liberty," which he understands not as a new set of commands in lieu of the old but freedom from the burden the law lays upon the conscience. Liberty means the undoing of the law's claim to justify and, by extension, the torture imposed on the believer

382. "Now the Law comes and says: 'I find Him a sinner, who takes upon Himself the sins of all men. I do not see any other sins than those in Him. Therefore let Him die on the cross!' And so it attacks Him and kills Him" (*LW* 26.280).

383. *LW* 26.281.

384. *Ibid.*

385. *LW* 26.161.

386. *LW* 26.163.

through that claim. By the law of liberty the believer announces that he or she has no business with the law, that by putting the curse to death Christ has liberated the conscience for peace.³⁸⁷ Christ frees the individual to regard the law with indifference in matters of justification, so that the believer makes the transition from the law as justifying, which was experienced as a form of slavery and anguish, to grace as the antithesis to the law and a true justification. By grasping Christ the entire law is made abrogate, destroyed as an object of fear.³⁸⁸

Christians who have made the transition from law to grace, having removed the law as an obstacle, embrace Christ as their new life. In *Freedom of a Christian*, Luther uses the analogy of union in marriage to explain how the believer receives this life, gaining blessing from Christ while relinquishing one's sin to Him.³⁸⁹ Christ the bridegroom enters the union as grace, salvation, and life, with a glory that stands over the law. The believer comes, on the other hand, as a bride under the curse, deserving damnation for sin. When faith unites them, the believer grasping Christ's work on the cross in a personal and effectual way, the qualities attending to the bridegroom transfer to the bride while the bride's migrate to the bridegroom. "Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow the things that are his."³⁹⁰ The believer puts on Christ's righteousness as imputed, not earned but freely given by the Savior, and the sins that he or she might commit are made of no account because the righteousness of Christ covers them. Works

387. LW 26.157-158. Cf. F.E. Mayer "Human Will in Bondage and in Freedom: A Study in Luther's Distinction of Law and Gospel," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 22 no 10 (Oct 1951): 731. Mayer remarks that the law is the first tyrant faced by the believer for Luther, before sin, Satan, and death.

388. One should not interpret the believer's grasping of Christ for Luther as an active acceptance of the savior, but a being overpowered by the presence of God. In *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967), 38-39, Wilfred Joest makes this point in his contrast of more recent construals of the individual's relation with God as that between a mutually involved I and Thou against Luther's understanding of the individual's being overwhelmed by God's action.

389. *Ibid.*, 60-61.

390. LW 26.157.

contribute nothing to this imputation, as Christ gives it to the sinner to appropriate His righteousness by grace, through faith alone.³⁹¹ The awareness of this gift, as well as Christ's bearing of one's sin, illumines the believer to a full recognition of Christ's justifying work and the glory due Him.³⁹² Not only has Christ killed the law that kills, but He has granted eternal blessing by the free bestowal of righteousness.

The individual's transfer from law to grace stands in a sense as the apex of the Christian life, but in another sense it belongs to an ongoing dialectical process. The Christian's movement between law and grace or gospel for Luther is not unidirectional, but consists in an ever-renewed back and forth, for though the grace of Christ conquers the law's curse, the believer faces the temptation to make Christ into another lawgiver. This misunderstanding of the singular righteousness of faith in Christ (that one should in no way join it with works) stained the religion

391. Von Loewenich writes that faith, for Luther, "is the radical renunciation of any attempt to flaunt one's achievements before God...Every religious achievement, every legalistic form of piety is slavery and leads to bondage. The religion of grace, the piety of faith, means becoming a child again and leads to "the glorious liberty of the children of God." Luther's painful experience of the servitude of legalistic piety led him to oppose, with holy zeal, any attempt to transform the state of being God's child into a form of slavery" (77-78). In the realization of imputation these sentiments are especially pertinent. The believer recognizes that God has made him or her His child, and that this glorious liberty has nothing to do with religious attainments through the law.

392. McDonough argues that the believer's acceptance of righteousness from Christ "is not intrinsic or ontological but merely imputed or alien...God no longer looks upon the believer's sins as meriting damnation; they are cloaked over by the infinite merits of Christ" (53). "There is no place," he adds later, "for entitative and qualitative changes in man," as if there were some alteration of the person's being (54). Ozment corroborates this external conception of imputation in his assessment of Luther's understanding of "substance" in the *Dictata* (105-110). In imputation, Christ's killing of the law and gift of righteousness becomes the believer's substance, the external circumstance that defines him or her. Faith in Christ is in this sense the origin and ground of the believer's life (see note 51).

These construals of imputation put little emphasis on its internal or mystical aspect. In *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1999), 211-212, Richard Marius sums up this perspective by saying that "the bond between Luther and mysticism does not ultimately seem essential or even very strong...Even less extreme forms of mysticism [those that do not advocate a direct union of the soul with God] seem to be too cozy to coexist with Luther's sentiment that divinity and humanity, holiness and sin, are separated by a profound gulf that only Christ can bridge and that we cannot cross over by the emotional and mental discipline that the mystics savored."

Dissenting from this view, Heiko Oberman argues that Luther retained a place for mystical affect as gleaned from Tauler. He broke from medieval mysticism by focusing not on an internal movement upward toward God but a movement downward, with *gemitus*, groaning under one's sin, serving as the emotional channel for experiencing God's presence. For Oberman, Luther affirms that Christ in heaven and faith in the heart are "inseparably intertwined," that "it is not an imagined but a real matter" (144). One should not overlook this mystical aspect of faith, according to Oberman, who stresses that "Epithets such as 'external' or 'forensic' righteousness cannot do justice to Luther's doctrine of justification" (150-151).

of both the Catholics, who mixed faith with works, on the right, and the Anabaptists or “sectarians,” who believed Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone but nonetheless returned to the necessity of works, on the left.³⁹³ Luther urged his followers to chart a middle course between these extremes, sustaining in their personal lives the balance in which the antithesis between law and grace does not blur. Thus the individual, when the law presses down so that he or she struggles to hope in the face of sin, must cry out for the gospel to come to the rescue. On the other hand, when a person who enjoys grace begins to attribute justification to the self, thinking that Christ gave it because of one’s supposed goodness in obedience or using the confidence of salvation to impose rules upon others, the law must come in to crush one’s pride.³⁹⁴ Ideally, the believer remains suspended between the fear of death and hell due to the law’s curse on one side, and a false understanding of grace as a new legal authority on the other, avoiding the poles of utter hopelessness and self-presumption while grasping Christ in the middle. Knowledge of Christ comes alive in the dialectical transition between the poles, a movement made possible by the appropriate juxtaposition of grace and law.³⁹⁵

Suspension in this dialectic, in which the believer celebrates the righteousness imputed by Christ, leads to a life of obedience modeled after His service on behalf of sinners. The imputation of righteousness from without flows outward in good works in which the believer cooperates with it.³⁹⁶ Just as Christ gave up His equality possessed with God to descend in servitude to humanity, the Christian in possession of the inward benefits of faith becomes the servant of others, denying sinful desires and making sacrifices in order to be of help to them.³⁹⁷ In this movement from faith’s height to obedience’s depth, faith retains priority as the Christian’s

393. *LW* 26.9-10, 144.

394. Cf. Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 269.

395. Cf. Marius on the existential dialectic of faith and despair, 205.

396. *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, *LW* 31.297, 299.

397. *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, *LW* 31.302.

first “work.”³⁹⁸ Works performed in faith do not attempt to justify but are the fruits of justification, and one must therefore inquire concerning the heart before inspecting the work. If the tree is good, so the fruit; if the tree is bad, likewise its produce.³⁹⁹ All one’s doing, Luther argues, should occur on the basis of the faith which becomes concrete in the work, manifesting itself outwardly in obedience. This faith is the motor, the “do-all” in works which both love the neighbor and glorify God when performed in the freedom of Christ.⁴⁰⁰

The law’s claim to justify banished, its righteousness negated, and its threat of perdition thereby annulled, the believer returns to the commands and engages them out of joy rather than anxiety and love of Christ rather than fear of punishment. One no longer worries about satisfying the law’s demands or whether mercy shall be granted. Grace has been given; obedience is free. Luther adds two stipulations to protect this freedom, each reflective of the law’s lack of resources for justification. First, one cannot compel others to perform works as if these justified, nor should one tolerate such compulsion. Freedom of conscience necessarily stands above works, and while the church might teach expectations of behavior, it cannot trouble the consciences of believers by adding that salvation depends on them.⁴⁰¹ Second, the believer must remember that not the deed but its use is what counts, as Luther argues with reference to biblical quarrels regarding the freedom to eat food dedicated to idols. “It is possible,” he affirms, “to avoid certain foods for one reason, namely, out of a concern for charity...it is good to render such service to a weak brother” who has not grasped the Christian’s freedom from the law.⁴⁰² To avoid foods as if this made one righteous, by contrast, is not charity but works-righteousness, and the Christian should shun it. The accent does not lie in one’s eating or not eating, but in the motive of love for others

398. McDonough writes that for Luther “faith in God’s work is an obligation and a commandment.” Obedience is nonetheless “not a means” for salvation “but a gift” (100).

399. *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31.361; LW 26.255.

400. LW 26.264, 266.

401. LW 26.90-91, 118-119.

402. LW 26.111.

expressed in the action. One does not carry out a good work for the sake of the work, but performs out of freedom the duties that, despite being commanded, are soteriologically immaterial.

A Nature that Does Not Justify

I shall here argue that Luther's assertion that the law is good but does not justify applies as well to human nature. Inasmuch as it is created by God, nature is good in all its parts and on the whole. Reason can distinguish between lower and higher goods among earthly things; the will can choose freely between earthly courses of action, guided morally by the natural law imprinted on the heart by God; and the body can develop skills to be put to earthly uses. Despite the good inherent in nature and its abilities in the physical world, scholars agree that in the wake of the fall Luther considers the person "soteriologically de-substantial."⁴⁰³ Turning from earthly matters to heavenly ones, the person depends totally on Christ's grace, receiving justification as a gift from Christ in complete passivity.⁴⁰⁴ Luther viewed nature as bankrupt of powers that might make one holy or justified, and though it includes capacities by which one can call it good, but with respect to justification nature adds nothing.

While I will focus on fallen nature throughout this section, I shall also argue that nature possesses no greater soteriological efficacy prior to the fall than after it for Luther. Whether in paradise or under sin, and whether considered *qua* creature or *qua* sinner, nature depends wholly

403. Steven Ozment coined this term (128), which Jenson condones in his treatment of Luther's anthropology in *The Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther, and Barth on Homo Incurvatus in Se* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 61.

404. The Lutheran ideal of passivity has received criticism from feminists who argue that it reflects a male perspective. They contend that men have traditionally held positions of power, with the concomitant temptation to abuse it. It makes sense, then, that men should be taught passivity as a virtue against egoism. Women, on the other hand, have traditionally lacked power. For them to value passivity exacerbates an already unjust situation, leading to a harmful denial of the self. Daphne Hampson concludes that for women, the idea "that the self should be broken, that the person should learn to live from another who is God," as the Lutheran tradition teaches, "must be judged highly detrimental." "Luther on the Self: A Feminist Critique," *Word & World* 8, no. 4: 339.

on grace as an external act of God for its justification. In this way nature remains in parallel with the soteriological powerlessness of the law throughout.

Luther's anthropology departs significantly from the tradition that preceded him by defining the person under the theological categories of flesh and spirit, and it is in the context of these categories that one finds his concept of nature. In his doctrine of the fallen person, Luther does not divide the person into faculties like will and reason or soul and body in order to attach sin to one part rather than another. The body is no more sinful than the soul, nor is reason more or less sinful than the will. Luther also departs from the Platonic separation of the person into higher and lower parts. "Flesh" does not connote the bodily and lower element while "spirit" connotes the intellectual and higher part. Luther avoids these philosophical anthropologies for a more theological one. "Flesh" and "spirit" denote not parts of the person but the whole as oriented toward or away from God. One either lives totally under the rule of sin, obedient to it in every part, or one lives under the rule of the spirit, battling against sin as *simul iustus et peccator*. In the former case the person is flesh, a condition that "refers to existence under the Fall."⁴⁰⁵ The person as "flesh" turns toward his or her own directions rather than focusing on the Creator, living subject to sinful desires as a consequence. The spiritual person, on the other hand, lives for God's sake and according to His will. This does not imply a transfer from being wholly flesh to being wholly spirit, but that the person serves God and sin at the same time. Having received the grace of Christ by faith, the believer is righteous before God by imputation while remaining a sinner in fact. The Christian life consists in a struggle against the sin that, despite its permanence, has had its power to condemn nullified by Christ.⁴⁰⁶ In this sense the person of spirit is *simul iustus et peccator*.⁴⁰⁷

405. Jenson, 77.

406. There is debate among scholars over the notion of progress in the moral life for Luther. On the negative side, Hampson asserts that inasmuch as the person is always *simul iustus et peccator* and "constantly beginning" according to Luther, there is therefore "no history of the development of the self; no movement within ourselves from being a sinner to being righteous...Each moment we must live anew from

While the duality of flesh and spirit receives the major accent in Luther's anthropology, the division of the outer from the inner receives a minor one. Luther writes in *Freedom of a Christian* that fallen persons have two natures, the spiritual and the bodily, dividing the two according to their relevance for justification. "According to the spiritual nature, which men refer to as the soul, [man] is called a spiritual, inner, or new man. According to the bodily nature, which men refer to as flesh, he is called a carnal, outward, or old man."⁴⁰⁸ The inner person receives the gospel and the benefits of the Holy Spirit, experiencing Christ through faith. The hearing of the Word envelops the heart, transforming the believer inwardly from a bad tree to a good one. As noted in the foregoing section, faith then flows outward from the inner person into one's physical life in good works.⁴⁰⁹ Though worthy of note, especially with an eye toward the following study of Calvin, one should not overstate Luther's contrast between the person's inner and outer natures. He subordinates it to the theological anthropology outlined above such that,

God" (335). Dicker adds that while the *simul* is not static but dynamic in terms of the movement between falling out of and returning to the spiritual life, the person does not "progressively master baser affections and increasingly perfect [one's] life and conduct" (44). Any notion of progress is thus highly qualified. On the positive side stand Mary Gaebler and Risto Saarinen. Gaebler, who otherwise agrees with Hampson's feminist critique of Lutheran passivity, takes issue with her assertion that Luther does not allow for progress. She counters that Luther's later works regard the self as both "valuable and responsible," and a subject of moral agency worthy of theological attention. Room exists in his later works "for a growth in righteousness" as a crucifying of residual sin by faith. See "Luther on the Self," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 22 (Fall 2002):115, 124. Writing in the context of the debate in New Testament scholarship over the "New Perspective" on Paul, Saarinen echoes Gaebler by arguing that Luther affirms that "the Pauline Christian can fulfill the law in Spirit – the person becoming almost a different person than the one described" in Romans 7. "The Pauline Luther and the Law: Lutheran Theology Reengages the Study of Paul," *Pro Ecclesia* 15 no 1:76.

407. On Luther's definition of the person as flesh or spirit, see Jenson, 66-71; Dicker, 34, 37-39; and Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei, Vol. II: From 1500 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 11-12.

408. LW 31.344.

409. Jüngel defends Luther against charges of an interiorizing subjectivism by arguing that he desires a self that is turned outward from its inwardness. Luther's graced self, "in total contrast to an "I" shut up in its "inwardness," can *allow himself to be called out of himself* and can actually *come out of himself* so as to become a new man. It is the inner man who can abandon himself in order to enter into others" and engage them. *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther's Significance for Contemporary Theology*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1986), 63, emphasis in original. Jenson echoes Jüngel in *The Gravity of Sin*, 76.

though the individual possesses an inner and an outer nature, these are together either flesh or spirit.

The good of nature consists in an inborn knowledge of God and the moral law, as well as physical endowments that allow society to survive and flourish. God has shown His existence to all persons via creation, which witnesses as the visible to the invisible. Exposed to God's reality by His handiwork, all persons are without excuse. In addition, God has etched knowledge of Him upon the heart, a reality to which the ubiquity of religion testifies. Luther argues that the propensity to establish idols and worship them as gods betrays an innate though darkened knowledge of the Creator. When persons believe in an invisible deity, ascribing power, wisdom, and immortality to it, worshipping and obeying it, and calling on it for aid, "then it follows most surely that they had a knowledge or notion of divinity which undoubtedly came from God."⁴¹⁰ Persons might fashion the divinity according to their whims, making a god "adjusted to their needs and desires," but the seed of the knowledge of God nonetheless resides within their nature.⁴¹¹

Luther secondly affirms a moral law written on the heart that persons should do unto others as they would have done to themselves. "All men have a certain natural knowledge implanted in their minds (Rom. 2:14-15)" of this rule, "which they know naturally."⁴¹² The moral law includes other commands, for example that one have no gods other than God.⁴¹³ It also instills a more general understanding that persons depend on God's will and ought to obey His

410. *Commentary on Romans*, LW 25.157.

411. Ibid. Bengt Hoffman quotes from Luther's table conversations: "Knowledge of God... is divinely imprinted upon all men's minds. Under the sole guidance of nature men know that God is, without any acquaintance with the arts or sciences. There has never been a people so wild and barbaric that they did not believe in a divine power of some kind that has created all things." LW 10.190-191, quoted in *Theology of the Heart: The Role of Mysticism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 1998), 78.

412. *Commentary on Galatians*, LW 27.53; cf. *Commentary on Romans*, LW 25.182-183.

413. Simo Peura, "What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation," in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 79.

decrees.⁴¹⁴ God has thus bestowed a natural moral sense upon persons such that they know in an innate and general way what is good to do and what evil. This “law of nature,” so construed by Luther, provides “the foundation of human law and all good works.”⁴¹⁵

Humanity maintains the social order with the help of this inborn moral capacity, as despite the fall persons can carry out all the functions necessary to sustain earthly life. The “natural endowments,” as opposed to the spiritual, remain in good order, with persons able to hold government office, “to steer a ship, and to do other tasks that have been made subject to man according to Gen. 1:28...Procreation, government, and the home have not been abolished by such statements, they have been confirmed.”⁴¹⁶ Humanity can thus develop a number of practical excellences that pertain to mundane matters, but one must keep these in their proper sphere. Luther denies the transfer of physical powers to the spiritual realm, with regard to which persons are “completely drowned in sin...In divine matters, therefore, man has nothing but darkness, error, malice, and perversity of will and of intellect.”⁴¹⁷

Luther cares first and foremost for the person’s condition with respect to justification; all else is secondary.⁴¹⁸ The good qualities in nature discussed above, inasmuch as they add nothing to justification, belong on the periphery in matters of soteriology. Nature’s sinfulness owns the center, because it is as a sinner that God saves the believer. Luther thus qualifies the good that he

414. McDonough, 31.

415. *LW* 27.35.

416. *LW* 26.174-175.

417. *Ibid.*

418. Lohse compares the relevance of Luther’s anthropology with respect to creation and justification by stating that “What theology has to say about creation is a prius compared to statements about the fall, sin, and the sending of Jesus Christ. Hence, from the outset, a theological anthropology is structured differently from a philosophical anthropology: It is oriented in a much more unified fashion. Sin and justification thus stand at the midpoint of Luther’s anthropology” (*Martin Luther’s Theology*, 243).

ascribes to nature as intrinsically distorted and irrelevant for salvation.⁴¹⁹ This applies to the inborn knowledge of God and the moral law as well as nature's physical endowments. Sin has twisted the first two so that they give no advantage toward justification. The inborn knowledge of God, if not directed persistently by Him, inevitably turns to idols. Even in light of this direction persons resist worshipping Him, preferring to serve themselves. The moral law written on the heart endures a similar darkening, as "human reason is so corrupted and blinded by the malice of the devil that it does not understand this inborn knowledge; or, even if it has been admonished by the Word of God, it deliberately neglects and despises it."⁴²⁰ In the case of physical capacities, it is sin to recognize them as anything more than worthless for spiritual concerns, with Luther completely removing them from questions of justification.

Luther's doctrine of sin bears the weight of his anthropology like Atlas holding the world, and it is here that he is arguably at his most innovative. Original sin for Luther denotes

"a total lack of uprightness and of power of all the faculties both of body and soul and of the whole inner and outer man. On top of all this, it is a propensity toward evil. It is a nausea toward the good, a loathing of light and wisdom, and a delight in error and darkness, a flight from and an abomination of all good works, a pursuit of evil"⁴²¹

while sin as flesh refers to

"something most profound in our nature, indeed, it is our very nature itself, wounded and totally in ferment."⁴²²

419. Failure to emphasize this point with respect to human nature can lead to obfuscation in other areas of Luther's theology. Asian theologian Yoshikazu Tokuzen, hoping to form a bridge between Luther's thought and the respect for nature characteristic of the Far East, describes Luther's respect for the natural world without placing it in the context implied by his anthropological pessimism. Maurice Schild, who responds to Tokuzen's article on "Nature and the Natural in Luther's Thought," makes the same mistake. Luther may say wonderful things about nature as God's handiwork, but these comments are contained, even imprisoned, within a theological preoccupation with justification that denies nature as a good tending toward salvation. Yoshikazu Tokuzen, "Nature and the Natural in Luther's Thought," *East Asia Journal of Theology* 1 no. 1 (1983): 31-37; Maurice Schild, "Nature and the Natural in Luther's Thought: Reaction to a Paper by Yoshikazu Tokuzen," *East Asia Journal of Theology* 1 no. 1 (1983): 38-43.

420. *LW* 27.53.

421. *Commentary on Romans*, *LW* 25.299.

422. *LW* 25.351.

Luther radicalizes Christian teaching concerning sin in two ways. First, he reverses the scholastic teaching that sin consists principally in actions, words, and thoughts rather than in nature itself. Those who preceded Luther taught that the person remained good in substance despite an inclination to sin evidenced in particular acts. These thinkers regarded sin as something relatively extrinsic to nature, with persons permitted to look on themselves as seriously flawed but more or less whole. For Luther, on the other hand, Christians might consider words, thoughts, and deeds sinful, but the sin with which they must struggle is in fallen nature itself. It is a part of their being. To regard sin as a matter of qualities or particular acts, as if it did not attend to the person *in toto*, fails to ascribe to it the force advocated by Luther. For him there is no separation: nature, though created good, is now permeated by sin.⁴²³

Second, Luther defines sin as more than a privation in a good nature, referring to it as a propensity toward evil. He asserts in the *Commentary on Romans* that it is impossible for persons to will the good because one is “always inclined toward evil to such an extent that except for the grace of God he could not be moved to anything good,” later defining the “sin which is in us” as “an evil will which inclines toward the evil and abhors the good.”⁴²⁴ Sin is like a disease that has overtaken nature and given it a new direction. In the words of H.J. Iwand, Luther understands sin as a “positive, passionate will to life...an affective tendency – a wishing, a willing, and a drive that is fully present in every person.” Sin so envelops the individual that it is “as if life, being,

423. Luther writes that “The common saying that human nature in a general and universal way knows and wills the good but errs and does not will it in particular cases would be better stated if we were to say that in particular cases human nature knows and wills what is good but in general neither knows or wills it” (*LW* 25.345). See also Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Shultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 153.

424. *LW* 25.222, 240; cf. 25.266 and Dicker, 34. Christians prior to Luther remarked that fallen nature possesses an inclination toward sin, as Thomas À Kempis writes that “we are born with an inclination towards evil.” À Kempis and others in his train balanced this admission with the exhortation to “Do what you are able,” with the promise that “God will bless your good intention.” Luther’s total rejection of the latter teaching distinguishes him from his predecessors. Thomas À Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Leo Shirley-Price (New York: Penguin, 1952), I.13, I.7.

and existence comprise one singular, uniform motion in sin.”⁴²⁵ Without grace, Luther writes, nature becomes “not only incurable but unrecognizable.”⁴²⁶

Sin consists in nature’s being curved in upon itself, its desire to worship itself as its own god. The fundamental sin for Luther is pride as a form of idolatry, manifest especially in religious self-presumption. Sin sees no object for itself other than itself, turning all its activity, including goods and relationships pursued, to selfish ends. Self-love taints all that a person thinks, says, and does by orienting these to the exaltation of nature at the expense of God and others. God cannot be God to the nature that wants to be its own god, nor can such a nature love its neighbors. Whereas grace discerns God’s purposes and places God’s will before its own interests, fallen nature “sets itself in the place of all other things, even in the place of God, and seeks only those things which are its own and not the things of God.”⁴²⁷ All nature’s gifts and capacities, insofar as they submit to this incurvature, are in permanent darkness. No amount of works, whether fasting, ceremonies, or religious practices, can cleanse nature of its iniquity. It cannot hope to be free from sin apart from grace, upon which it relies entirely.

Sin thus defiles nature so thoroughly that its resources for justification no longer exist. Like the law, it is good but has no power to justify. I have argued this by looking at nature on the whole, only hinting at the relationship of its component parts, including reason and the will, to justification. At this point I will take up these components individually, showing how Luther calls reason, the will, and the body good while denying to each any power in soteriological

425. H.J. Iwand, “The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther,” 226-227. Jenson finds Luther’s language of an active propensity to sin troubling: “The danger in abandoning a privative account of sin and evil is that sin obtains an autonomy which allows it to actually transform the person into something other than God’s good creature. As a result, salvation comes to be seen as a certain (perverse) kind of *creatio ex nihilo*, which amounts more to a wiping of the slate clean and starting over rather than the vindication of creation. This has all too often been the case in Protestant soteriology and is no doubt involved in the scanty doctrines of creation, environmental apathy and disembodied spirituality endemic to much of Protestantism” (56).

426. LW 25.351.

427. LW 25.346. Luther continues: “Nature...thinks that all the things it sees are nothing unless they serve to its advantage, exist for it and are done for it. And then it esteems them, if it can appropriate them for its own benefit, use, and good.”

matters.⁴²⁸ My consideration of these elements will also contend that Luther allows no soteriological good to nature prior to the fall. Adam and Eve's life in paradise depended on the Holy Spirit given as a gift, not upon natural soteriological abilities. Luther holds them up in their sinless state as a model for the soteriological barrenness of fallen humanity, arguing that if sinless persons relied solely upon the Spirit for blessedness, how much more should those enslaved to wickedness turn to grace alone.

Luther argues that the fallen will possesses freedom in the earthly realm but lacks power regarding justification. In worldly affairs, those having to do with one's possessions and person *coram hominibus*, the will suffers no compulsion and can do as it sees fit in accordance with social law.⁴²⁹ Luther thus allows free choice concerning things that are "beneath" the person. In what lies above, Luther takes the opposite attitude, condemning "the free will of man, his natural powers, wisdom, righteousness, all self-invented religion, and whatever is best in the world."⁴³⁰ Like the law, the will has no potency for justification. One should not trust in it as if it possessed the power to procure righteousness through obedience.

428. I will here examine broad topics in Luther's thought in only a few pages. The conclusions I draw shall therefore remain somewhat general, and I do not pretend to a full investigation of the details of Luther's understanding of these elements within nature. As for reason, the brief argument that I shall make is informed by the lengthier treatment by B.A. Gerrish in *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). My discussion of the law and will shall say only what is obvious in Luther's thought. This is possible, I contend, in an area of Luther's theology that remained relatively stable. "Since the 1515/1516 Romans lecture, and for the rest of his life," comments Lohse, "Luther polemicized in the harshest manner against assigning fallen humanity a free will...Luther always held that his position on the human will's bondage to sin was the chief question between him and Rome" (*Martin Luther's Theology*, 256). As for the body, Luther does not often tie it to nature in the texts under consideration in the way that he does for will and reason. I include the body under nature by appeal to Luther's rejection of a faculty anthropology in favor of viewing the person as *totus homo* (Jenson, 66-71). Luther also recognizes, per above, a spiritual and a bodily nature within the single person that lives as flesh or spirit.

One might object that consideration of nature as reason, will, and body leaves out important aspects of Luther's anthropology, namely the heart and the conscience. I respond that, though Luther assigns these an important place in his anthropology, he does not speak of them in terms of their powers. Christ may enter into the heart and the conscience be freed by His victory over the law, but these connote no positive contribution by the heart or conscience for Luther. They are therefore not part of the discussion at hand, which concerns the supposed avenues by which nature might add to justification.

429. *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33.70.

430. LW 26.58.

Responding to Erasmus in *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther refutes the notion that the fallen will has even a slight power to turn to God. Apart from God's grace, he argues, this slight power can do nothing for itself. On the one hand it is ineffective in its efforts, and on the other it stands apart from the grace of God, and "what the grace of God does not do is not good." From this Luther concludes that free choice unmoved by God's grace succumbs "immutably" to evil, existing as captive to it. One may praise the will highly in the physical realm, but it deserves no praise in spiritual matters because its ineffective spiritual power amounts to "no power at all."⁴³¹

The powerlessness of the will is tied to the condemnation drawn from the law, whose accusation and terror renders the will dead, exposing its inability to free the person from sin. Luther can thus maintain the will's freedom "in all those things that are subject to reason," meaning the physical realm, but "the bondage of the will under sin, total depravity, death" and condemnation is the basic soteriological consequence of the law.⁴³² The will thus belongs on the side of the law in opposition to grace, crushed by it in demonstration of nature's futility. Luther also thereby commits himself to a doctrine of predestination that, in his view, comforts the bound conscience by placing its justification entirely in the hands of God.⁴³³

431. LW 33.66-67; cf. LW 25.183-184, 371-373. In *Iustitia Dei*, McGrath compares Augustine and Luther on the will: "Whereas Luther's doctrine of justification is based upon the concept of *servum arbitrium*, Augustine's is based upon that of *liberum arbitrium captivatum*, which becomes *liberum arbitrium liberatum* through the action of *gratia sanans*. Luther does not appear to envisage a liberation of *servum arbitrium* after justification, in that the servitude of man's will is seen as a consequence of his creatureliness rather than his sinfulness" (18).

432. Mayer, 732, 737.

433. *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33.289, 293. The believer's despair at the will's inability to obey the law has a flip side in the certainty of God's grace. That salvation resided entirely in God's hands was a source of great solace for Luther. No gap existed for him between God's willing grace for an individual and the inevitability that that grace would accomplish its purpose. "God does not reflect on our salvation powerlessly and ineffectively" for Luther, "but willed to realize this in the history of his plan and reaches his goal in virtue of his omnipotence." Luther combines "God's gracious disposition and that which it effects in us as a result, justification or salvation." Catholic theology in general does not profess this combination with such certitude. Its space for the work of the will allows that God may have a gracious disposition toward persons that does not inevitably effect justification. Stephen Pfürtner, *Luther and Aquinas on Salvation* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 123-124.

The soteriological impotence of the will applies prior to the fall as well as after it for Luther. In *The Bondage of the Will*, he answers an argument that the command addressed to Adam implied his freedom of will, retorting that God meant by it to show Adam how futile his will was without assistance from His spirit.⁴³⁴ Luther argues that “although the first man was not impotent when he had the assistance of grace,” he could not will obedience “when the Spirit did not add it to him.” The sinless will of persons before the fall does not affirm their righteousness, as without the presence of the Spirit they also would sin. “It is thus shown in that first man,” Luther concludes, “what our free choice can do when it is left to itself and not continually and increasingly *actuated* and *augmented* by the Spirit of God.”⁴³⁵ Adam and Eve’s wills added nothing to their existence as justified in the garden, which they enjoyed solely by the actuating presence of the Spirit. They had no power for righteousness on which to rely other than the *donum superadditum*, possessing an ineffective power in themselves.⁴³⁶ For Luther, then, the first couple proves the impotence of the will in fallen humanity by exemplifying it in persons not yet stained with sin. If these had to rely on God’s external action to keep them in paradise, Luther argues, how much more must sinners relinquish dependence on their own powers and trust in Christ alone.

An objector could point out that Luther does not depict the fall in this way in his *Commentary on Genesis*, where he expounds the craftiness of the serpent and Eve’s turn from God’s Word without referring to the removal of God’s Spirit. The human will appears

434. LW 33.120-121.

435. LW 33.124, emphasis mine. See also Cameron A. MacKenzie “The Origins and Consequences of Original Sin in Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*,” *Concordia Journal* 31 no. 4 (Oct 2005), 394. MacKenzie writes on this point that Luther “attributes a kind of “free will” to Adam, but one that does him no good apart from God’s Spirit.”

436. Cf. McGrath’s point regarding the will’s weakness as a function of humanity’s creatureliness in footnote 431.

accountable for the first sin as if its obedience were the principal reason for continued life in Eden.⁴³⁷

I respond with Luther's assessment of God's command to Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "For Adam this Word was Gospel and Law," Luther writes in the commentary.⁴³⁸ This application of the Gospel-Law paradigm to Adam in Eden puts sinless nature in the same soteriological situation as its fallen counterpart. For Adam and Eve, the law implied demands and threats in the event of disobedience, just as it does in fact for fallen nature, and did not provide a road to continued life in paradise. The point that the law did not justify in the garden is confirmed by Luther's connection of the fall with trust in works, even relating original sin to the monastic ethic.⁴³⁹ In both the garden and the monastery, sinners construct an idolatrous path toward righteousness constituted by an engagement in works as if they justified. God's command as gospel, on the other hand, reminds Adam and Eve of their powerlessness and complete dependence on His mercy for salvation. God gave the command in Eden as a Word meant to direct them toward a lack of trust in themselves and total trust in Him. Their sin consisted in a powerless nature's unbelief in God and its attempt to invent a new god for itself, turning at once to its own deeds.⁴⁴⁰ This mirrors the meaning of wickedness for the fallen, who sin by refusing to believe God and turning to works. The soteriological impotence of nature, as well as the form of its sin, remains the same both before and after the fall.⁴⁴¹

437. *LW* 1.141-162.

438. *LW* 1.146. Luther elaborates on Satan's attack on the Word by which Adam and Eve trusted in God by faith. The chief temptation for the first couple was unbelief in that Word and the turn to idolatry, which Luther connects with monasticism (149). "Uncorrupted nature," Luther writes, "had a Word or command that was beyond Adam's understanding and had to be believed" (154). That is, the command was gospel as well as it was law, and the temptation is to grasp the command as law rather than gospel. This point is elaborated in chapter 6.

439. *LW* 1.161.

440. *LW* 1.149.

441. Luther also briefly restates the argument, originally made in *Bondage of the Will*, that the weakness of unfallen nature should remind sinners of the greater weakness of fallen nature: "Let these

Shifting to reason, we begin with Luther's description of it as the most vaunted of gifts bestowed by God. It involves the ability to measure time by days and years and to develop arts and sciences. It places humans on par with angels in comprehension and understanding, lifting them above the beasts. By reason persons can rise to the heights of philosophy and maintain the social order according to rational rules. Like the inborn moral law, reason affords knowledge of earthly things so that society can survive and flourish.⁴⁴²

One must take care to separate fallen reason's esteem within the earthly realm from its irrelevance in spiritual affairs. When turning to justification, Luther affirms reason's bankruptcy as its inclination to the law. Reason looks eagerly to the law as a source of righteousness, supposing that performance of its demands will win merit before God.⁴⁴³ It can only think of Christ as a lawgiver, constructing the Savior according to its whims and inevitably distorting justification by grace through faith, desiring to conflate it with righteousness based on the law.⁴⁴⁴ "As soon as reason and the Law are joined," Luther writes, "faith immediately loses its virginity. For nothing is more hostile to faith than the law and reason."⁴⁴⁵

A negative form of the knowledge of God is possible through reason according to Luther, as by it one can say what God is not.⁴⁴⁶ This admission qualifies Luther's critique that reason does not give proper glory to God and is thereby inimical to faith. In conjunction with the law,

events [the fall] be a warning for us that we may learn what man is. For if this happened when nature was still perfect, what do we think will happen to us now?" (*LW* 1.156)

442. Cf. Lohse, 197; Tiefel, 101-105.

443. *Freedom of a Christian*, *LW* 31.376. Gerrish characterizes this tendency of reason as the "legalistic assumption." He argues that Luther's quarrel is not with reason *per se*, but with this particular faulty tendency (85-86).

444. *LW* 26.368-369.

445. *LW* 26.113. The concept of joining does not summarize all the ways in which Luther relates reason and the law. Gerrish notes that "The law is the *object* of reason, as Christ is the object of faith. Reason *knows* nothing but the law. Reason always relapses into *thinking* about the law" (87, emphasis in original).

446. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 199-200.

reason wants to fashion a way of salvation that allows it to walk by its own powers under a Christ who validates its efforts. In so doing reason robs God of glory as the One by whom salvation comes. A gulf separates reason from justifying faith, the one seeking a share in justification by following the law and the other rejecting the law for grace in Christ. For faith, in light of the cross, believes “things that are impossible, untrue, foolish, weak, absurd, abominable, heretical, and diabolical – if you consult reason.”⁴⁴⁷ Luther’s distillation of faith and reason according to contrary ways of salvation stands near the center of his teaching. Reason may receive all the praise due to earthly and physical things and exist in fellowship and parallel with the law, but like the latter it has no share in justification and antagonizes the grace given through faith. Like the law, it possesses no soteriological worth.

Luther regards reason as powerless to justify prior to the fall as a consequence of the will’s primacy in his anthropology. As noted above, Luther does not think of fallen nature *per se* but as inclined toward or away from God. One either exists as flesh, turned away from God and ruled by sin, or as spirit, looking to God for mercy and deliverance from sin. The orientation of the will determines the orientation of the person on the whole, steering the individual in one of the two directions and determining the capabilities of reason. If the will refers what it does, has, and knows to itself rather than God, existing as flesh, this orientation nullifies reason’s ability to possess saving knowledge of God in Christ. If the will refers these things to God, existing as spirit, faith can use reason to understand soteriologically relevant truths.⁴⁴⁸ “Reason,” Lohse summarizes regarding Luther, “is of an instrumental character. It is always used for something or by something deeper than itself. With natural [i.e, fallen] man reason is determined by self-will.

447. LW 26.228-229.

448. Bernhard Lohse, “Reason and Revelation in Luther,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 13 no. 4 (Dec 1960): 350-353.

With man under revelation reason is being freed from that self-will.⁴⁴⁹ In each case, the will determines the capabilities of reason.

The inability of the sinless will to maintain obedience apart from the Spirit thus entails a like powerlessness for reason. As a faculty subordinate to the determining direction of the will, reason serves it as a tool that has no independence for counteracting the purposes to which the will puts it. When the will turned to sin in Eden, formerly relying on the Spirit to keep it from so turning, reason followed suit as the inferior to the superior. Wherever the will goes, reason goes, and if the will is impotent for righteousness without God's Spirit, so is reason. As far as I am aware, Luther gives us no rationale for supposing that this logic applies after the fall and not before it. On the other hand, his assertion that Adam and Eve's impotence in the garden is an example for fallen persons implies the futility of reason just as much as the will pre-fall.

The combination of a thing's goodness with its inability to justify applies also to bodily works, which possess goodness with respect to the natural endowments noted above as well as their conformity to God's commands.⁴⁵⁰ Persons use the body to maintain the social order, to build and sustain various projects, and in procreation. Soteriologically, by contrast, the bodily works remain subject to the law and have no use for righteousness. One must keep the body under control by submitting it to the law, as Luther writes: "Each one should do the works of his profession and station, not that by them he may strive after righteousness, but that through them he may keep his body under control."⁴⁵¹ Having received grace, one may put works to the better purpose of loving others according to the divine will, but here as well they do not add to justification in Christ but result from it.⁴⁵² In a similar way, the obedience of Adam and Eve did not ground their blessedness in the garden but resulted from the Spirit's gift. Like the sinless will

449. Lohse, "Reason and Revelation," 358.

450. Page 139.

451. *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31.369-370.

452. *Ibid.*

impotent in the garden, so were the works of the sinless body no help for remaining in paradise.⁴⁵³

One must consequently overcome the temptations to hope in bodily works as if they could justify the fallen and to regard them as if they had justified the sinless. Both prior to and after the fall, Luther understands justification as a gift of God that requires faith in His power alone.

Luther writes concerning the works of nature that “no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom, or in producing unrighteousness or servitude.”⁴⁵⁴

While this statement applies to the body and the law as external, its principle applies to reason and the will inasmuch as the proper respect for these internal faculties belongs in their application to external things. Reason as the adversary of faith and the will as powerless for justification neither have any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom nor in producing unrighteousness or servitude. The law and the body, reason and will neither make the fallen individual’s condition worse insofar as he or she already suffers under original sin and has no power for justification, nor can they add anything positively as a personal effort to earn justification by merit.⁴⁵⁵ If Luther allowed that any of these had a power to worsen the Christian soteriologically, he would risk their possession of an equal power for improvement, and vice versa. He has cut them off entirely from justification, locating their significance among earthly things in contrast to the heavenly. Altogether they are soteriologically de-substantial, without resources on which the person could count as an influence for or against eternal life.⁴⁵⁶

453. I have not found direct consideration of the body’s soteriological power prior to the fall in Luther’s writing. I revert to the argument that if Adam and Eve provided a model for the weakness of fallen humanity by exemplifying it in their sinless state, then their bodies and bodily works gave them no resource for justification.

454. *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31.344-345. Luther applies the statement specifically to fallen nature, although it applies to nature before the fall as well per the arguments above.

455. This point relativizes the claim that reason worsens the person’s condition by inclining him or her toward the law. Reason’s inducement to self-presumption through works produces no basic change in the individual’s soteriological condition.

456. If the believer has no soteriological resources on which to rely, one might ask, how is saving contact with God possible? A point of contact must exist for the believer to receive the grace of Christ. Here one encounters the idea of *synteresis* found in the scholastic theology that preceded Luther. Drawing

Righteousness consequently comes from outside the individual, an extrinsic quality bestowed upon a nature that has none intrinsic to itself. What holiness one might find in the self is not enough, but this “not enough” does not imply a foothold upon which one might found some confidence in nature’s ability, for a holiness that is not enough amounts to no holiness at all.⁴⁵⁷ Despite the goodness involved in the elements of nature, the person has no power regarding justification. All the believer’s powers count for nothing;⁴⁵⁸ the presence of God in Christ counts for everything post-fall, just as the Spirit counted for everything in Eden. When Christ showers his grace on the fallen person as “for you and me,” the individual receives the truth that persons have nothing in themselves in which they can boast, no cause for glory that they can claim, but understand that all boasting and glory belong to God. All righteousness, holiness, and honor derive from Him, and He bestows these on the believer from outside as a gift. Having received it, the Christian may feel joy and gratitude, but he or she has no cause for pride.

Like the law, nature considered as reason, the will, and the body is good but does not justify. In this manner the law and nature exist in soteriological parallel, possessing goodness in what pertains to the physical and external and receiving the honor due them in that realm. But neither has any righteousness nor import for matters of justification, an assessment that applies to sinless nature for Luther just as it applies to the sinless law. With these claims in hand, we shall proceed to explore the practical dynamic of religious experience that underlies their theological formulation.

on Ozment and editorial comments from the *Commentary on Romans*, Jenson summarizes that the *synteresis* “seems to have its roots in Augustinianism and Neoplatonism and can refer to a natural knowledge of the moral law, an inclination or desire for the good or a spark of divine intellect. In any case, what the tradition of *synteresis* sought to define is the ‘inner dignity’ of the person” (68). Whereas Luther’s adversaries believed that the *synteresis* allowed persons to love God above all else and perform works of the law, his pessimism regarding natural capacities could not stomach such a positive construal. The *synteresis* remains as soteriologically void for him as the rest of nature, presuming not a positive capacity for reaching up to God but the unqualified lack of such a capacity. The person’s soteriological point of contact with God consists in acknowledging the complete lack of resources that would imply the capability of contact with God. Cf. Oberman, 126-154, esp. 153; Hoffman, 83.

457. In *LW* 26.109, Luther writes that Christ is the “entire holiness” of fallen nature.

458. *LW* 26.114.

The Righteousness of God: Grace as the “Death of Death” and the “Law of Liberty”

The discovery of grace as the passively received righteousness of God marks a turning point in Luther’s long struggle with the law, a struggle that determines the meaning of grace for consciences trembling with dread like his. Early trust in the law had given way under the weight of its demands and the curse they threatened, until in despair Luther found a grace totally apart from the law and in refutation of its claims to justify. There are, then, three aspects or steps to the Christian experience of grace according to Luther’s personal example, rather than the two that he explicitly describes in the *Commentary on Galatians*⁴⁵⁹: (1) an initial trust in the law that Luther views as inescapable because of the tendencies of reason, or the temptation to abuse the law by seeking justification through it; (2) finding that trust futile because of the uncountable expansion of commands, a movement toward the law’s right theological use of exposing the depth of sin and indirectly goading one to Christ; and (3) the acceptance of the grace of Christ alone, received in faith, as the cure for the law’s threat of perdition. These steps reveal in personal experience what I have shown Luther to argue theologically, namely that both human nature and the law are totally without righteousness, having no resources or powers that add to justification. But to have no righteousness entails, according to the first ontological lens, that a thing has no form, and so Luther unwittingly designates the law and nature as formless according to the passive righteousness of justification by faith alone. Indeed, when Christ executes “the death of death” upon the law and announces “the law of liberty” for nature, He completes the annulment of the law as forming at the same time that He liberates nature from the form it would gain by that law. To explain how this is so, I will briefly summarize the three steps of the Christian life by reference to supporting texts, moving from there to the ontological significance of Luther’s experience of grace.

459. LW 26.126-127; page 120.

As a young monk, Luther took up the law with unusual vigor, trusting in it as a way of righteousness.⁴⁶⁰ His years of confidence in devotion, fasts, ceremonies, and worship as if these could save constitute the first step, in which the believer seeks justification via the law. When this way of justification brought on anxiety, Luther felt the temptation to continue to trust in the law, as in times of angst “reason takes it upon itself to promise God that it will fulfill all the works of the entire law,” doubling its efforts along its prior course.⁴⁶¹ Looking back on this way of life in the *Commentary on Galatians*, Luther observes that “those who perform the works of the Law with the intention of being justified through them not only do not become righteous but become twice as unrighteous...I have experienced this both in myself and in many others.”⁴⁶² A paragraph later Luther explains in some depth the dynamic of the conscience that seeks justification via obedience. This passage, as a reflection of Luther’s personal development and his later doctrine concerning the law, is critical for our following ontological analysis, justifying its quotation in full (the italicized portions are my emphasis):

“Therefore anyone who seeks righteousness through the Law does nothing by his repeated actions but acquire the habit of this first action, which is that God in His wrath and awe is to be appeased by works. On the basis of this opinion he begins to do works. Yet he can never find enough works to make his conscience peaceful; but he keeps looking for more, and even in the ones he does perform he finds sin. Therefore his conscience can never become sure, but he must continually doubt and think this way: “You have not sacrificed correctly; you have not prayed correctly; you have omitted something; you have committed this or that sin.” Then the heart trembles and continually finds itself loaded down with wagonloads of sins *that increase infinitely*, so that it deviates further and further from righteousness, until it finally acquires the habit of despair. Many who have been driven to such despair cried out miserably in the agony of death: “Miserable man that I am! I have not observed the rules of my monastic order. Where shall I flee from the countenance of Christ, the wrathful Judge? If only I had been a swineherd or the most ordinary of men!” Thus at the end of his life a monk is weaker, more beggarly, more unbelieving, and more fearful than he was at the beginning, when he joined the order...The Law or human traditions or the rule of his monastic order were supposed to heal and enrich him in his illness and poverty, but he became weaker and more beggarly than the tax collectors and harlots...Therefore neither past nor present works are enough for him, regardless of their quantity or quality; but he continually looks at and looks for ever-different ones, by which he attempts to appease the wrath of God and to justify himself, until in the end he is forced to despair...Therefore it is impossible for men who want to provide for their salvation through the Law, as all men are inclined to do by

460. Page 62.

461. LW 26.347.

462. LW 26.404.

nature, ever to be set at peace. In fact, they only pile laws upon laws, by which they torture themselves and others and make their consciences so miserable that many of them die before their time because of excessive anguish of heart. For one law always produces ten more, until they grow *to infinity*.⁴⁶³

Though in it Luther describes the way of perdition by sustained trust in the law rather than justification as the transition from law to grace, this passage informally outlines the law's transformation from presenting a temptation to seek one's own righteousness through it, which Luther elsewhere refers to as its abuse by the believer, to what he calls the law's proper theological use, that of bringing the Christian to a robust knowledge of the depth of sin, reducing nature's powers to nothing and denying their contribution to justification while nourishing despair of the law as a way of righteousness. Applied to Luther's own experience and given a voice in the passage, the mediating term between one's approach to the law as that meant to "heal and enrich" and its eventual terminus in despair is the recognition of the law's infinite demands. Everywhere the Christian looks, good deeds required but undone swallow up obedience performed. As the commands multiply, pressing down upon the believer by their uncontrolled expansion, he or she perceives that the law has become limitless, even infinite. It thus mutates from a promised way of justification into a tomb and a prison because it lays an unlimited demand upon a finite creature. Yet in this movement the law also begins to perform its right theological use in convincing the believer of the utter insufficiency of works for justification, driving him or her to despair at nature's "wagonloads of sins that increase infinitely." So long as the believer continues to trust in the law despite this despair, he or she is consumed by a sinful agony, whereas the movement from despair of the law to total reliance on Christ through faith is the true path to justification.

The passage consequently implies an interaction between law and nature that moves in contrary directions. On one hand, the law appears to nature, here under the guidance of reason, as the way to justification, and nature clings to it as such. The hope that the law should lead the

463. LW 26.404-406.

believer to justification remains present despite the contrary pressure exerted by the expansion of commands “to infinity,” whereby the Christian finds that the law undermines its own lure toward justification and crushes confidence in nature’s power to procure it via obedience. The law thus holds out assurance of salvation and peace of conscience only to pull them back, submitting the believer to a deadly teasing from which he or she appears to have no escape.

The law’s growth to infinity undergirds its role in the “conflict of conscience” or spiritual trial central to Luther’s understanding of religious experience. “It is the devil’s habit” in this conflict, Luther says, “to frighten us with the Law and to set against us the consciousness of sin, our wicked past, the wrath and judgment of God, hell and eternal death, so that thus he may drive us into despair.”⁴⁶⁴ As the product of its increasing boundlessness, the law’s tendency to annul its apparent offer of justification looms over the individual’s consciousness in the moment of angst, so that when Christians consider the law they immediately perceive its terror. At these times it seems “that the devil is roaring at us terribly, that heaven is bellowing, that the earth is quaking, that everything is about to collapse...that hell is opening up in order to swallow us,” in other words, that perdition is sure because nature has no available means to secure grace against its sin.⁴⁶⁵ Nature endures its “reduction to nothing” under an unforgiving law, experienced as a “true taste of death” under the law’s sting.⁴⁶⁶ This anxiety under the law, however, presupposes the promise of justification via obedience toward whose annulment the law itself tends; the law’s ability to terrify depends upon its apparent validity as the way to salvation, a way that the believer endures as the progressive revelation of anguish.

Grace as “the righteousness of God” shatters this process by announcing a way of righteousness completely apart from works and by faith alone, trusting in the righteousness of Christ given freely by the Savior and received in total passivity by the believer. This new way of

464. *LW* 26.10.

465. *LW* 26.382.

466. See pages 126-127 above.

justification rescues the believer from the torment of the infinite law because it successfully negates that law's presupposition, that nature should take it up as the way of redemption. In the wake of justification grasped by faith alone, the law has lost all power to frighten because it has lost all power to tempt, with its validity as a path to heaven decisively denied. Faith accomplishes what the law's expansion to infinity could not, overcoming reason and the apparent righteousness via the law by the realization of the total lack of righteousness, and thus the utter insufficiency for justification, of nature as well as the law. In another sense, though, justification by faith alone fulfills the law's movement of self-annulment, completing the nullification of the law as a way to justification with a power greater than its own unbounded expansion. The total annulment of the law, and therefore the quieting of its terrors, is the passive righteousness that struck Luther as though he had entered "through open gates into paradise itself." He would subsequently theorize this experience as the sigh of faith in the midst of spiritual trial: "In every temptation and weakness, therefore, just cling to Christ and sigh! He gives you the Holy Spirit, who cries 'Abba! Father!' Then the Father says: 'I do not hear anything in the whole world,' neither the terrors of the devil nor the threats of hell, "except this single sigh" that is the Christian's acknowledgment that justification belongs to Christ alone, and that nature and the law play no part.⁴⁶⁷

This experience executes "the death of death" upon the law at the same time that it proclaims "the law of liberty" for nature. Whereas the law accused and cursed the Christian for not meeting its increasing demands, Christ accuses and curses that law, putting it to death as a persecutor of the conscience. "Thus in my flesh I find a death that afflicts and kills me" – the law and its punishment for sin – "but I also have a contrary death, which is the death of my death and which crucifies and devours my death," that is, the death of Christ, appropriated by the believer in

467. See page 128 above; cf. *LW* 26.382, 384 and *Freedom of a Christian*, *LW* 31.355.

faith, that vanquishes the law's terrors.⁴⁶⁸ This appropriation of Christ's death over the law frees the believer from the law's power of compulsion, rendering the law an object of indifference at the same time that it liberates the conscience for assurance in its Savior.⁴⁶⁹ "Thus the law that once bound me and held me captive is now bound and held captive by grace or liberty, which is now my law."⁴⁷⁰ The believer lives by a new and liberating law applied not to nature but to the law that would damn it, a new law that releases nature from the old unto justification in Christ. This application of grace to the law and nature, annulling the one in order to liberate the other, lies at the core of religious experience according to Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone.

What, then, does one make of this experience given the premise that having righteousness means having form, and that that which has no righteousness has no form? The law and nature lack all righteousness in Luther's theology, so that they also appear to lack all form or exist as formless matter. Though Luther would vehemently object to this reading of his theology, asserting that he has not construed the law and nature as formless though he denies their righteousness, the trajectory of his understanding of religious experience belies his objections. One must here remember, as we begin to explain the ontological significance of the model of religious experience outlined above, two points argued in the introduction. First, in the view of the ontological lenses guiding this study, the law is intrinsically a forming entity, as having a particular way of being, and thus having form, means having a law of one's being. Second, two characteristics define the law as law in its application to persons: (1) the law's limit in human freedom and (2) its authority to compel. Without these the law ceases to retain its definition as law. One should also recall that nature is possessed of form as created by God, growing in life as it progresses in righteousness (that is, in form). Bearing these points in mind, I shall argue that

468. *LW* 26.160; cf. 26.162.

469. *LW* 26.90-91, 118-119, 157.

470. *LW* 26.161.

Luther's theology unwittingly designates the forming law and formed nature as formless, accomplishing their deprivation of form with the help of a deforming rather than forming grace.

Luther's early attempt to find justification through the law becomes, in his theology, a temptation to abuse it that Christians undergo as a ubiquitous fault of nature. One cannot eradicate reason's inclination to trust in the law, a deceptive allegiance against which Luther would warn his followers as antithetical to justification by grace through faith. Here the law appears, according to the block quote above, as that meant to "heal and enrich" nature in its "illness and poverty." Ontologically, by this inclination nature looks to the law to do what it is purportedly meant to do: to give some form to nature as natural law, and to point sinful nature toward grace as the power that accomplishes that form's fulfillment. Nature looks to the law and says, via reason, "My form is insufficient for justification, and I must have more to escape the wrath of God. Therefore I will seek form through obedience to the law, doing what is in my power and hoping in grace to provide all that I lack."

This way of justification failed in Luther's experience with the expansion of the commands "to infinity,"⁴⁷¹ a development that signals the beginning of the law's dissolution into formlessness. The law's limitlessness in practical application to a finite creature means likewise its limitlessness in the realm of being, an infinity achieved by the eradication of its limit in nature's freedom of will. For the law's commands everywhere convincing the Christian that he or she is under the curse, allowing no respite from their assaults and convicting nature of multiple sins for each single act of righteousness, *condemns the believer before he or she acts*. This ubiquitous and inescapable condemnation renders human freedom meaningless; it is the law pressing down as a tomb and a prison, a tyrannical infinite victimizing the finite will that would hold its boundary. It is also the experiential source of Luther's dictum that the will is powerless with respect to justification, which is to say that the will suffers the curse no matter what it has done or will do. The insufficient righteousness that the will might claim for itself devolves into

471. See the italicized portions of the block quote on pages 153-154.

no righteousness at all, and the individual in the midst of spiritual trial endures the law's infinity as the roaring of hell and the devil. As the law progressively expands, then, squeezing its limit into insignificance, it simultaneously abdicates its form, casting off its definition in the believer's experience as the loss of mercy. The law as a direction toward righteousness given for nature's benefit transforms into something cold and cruel, a terror to the conscience.

Both the law's expansion toward an infinite tyranny and the concurrent shrinking of free will undermine the law's authority as a way of righteousness, but they do not succeed in annulling that authority entirely. So long as reason continues to trust in the law for justification, it maintains some strength to compel. The final deforming of the law, in which it decisively loses its authority as justifying at the same time that it relinquishes all limits, must consequently occur at the hands of a new and different power. Grace as "the righteousness of God" received in total passivity and gained as the gift of Christ through faith alone is this power, irrefutably annulling the law as a way of righteousness and conquering reason's proclivity toward it. Only through the realization of this new path of assurance, this justification grounded solely in the work of Christ, does the sabotage of the law's authority begun in its infinite expansion find consummation. The law loses all authority as a way of justification in the believer's acknowledgment of Christ's grace "for you and me," the sigh of "Abba! Father!" that expresses one's turn exclusively to Christ in abdication of the righteousness of the law and nature. In that moment, the law's movement "to infinity" gains an equal footing with its temptation as a supposed means to "heal and enrich," annulling the temptation and negating the law's claim to compel. The growth into a tyrannical infinity that is the law's annulment as merciful concludes in the annulment of the law *per se*.

In this latter annulment the limit that gave the law definition as law succeeds in its withdrawal at the same time that the law's authority is abolished. Nature's turn to Christ by faith alone entails the proclamation that the will is utterly powerless and thereby utterly bound, reducing its freedom as well as all its supposed righteousness to nothingness. The free will

squeezed by the law's advance to infinity becomes the limit abolished by the individual's own abdication of it. This abdication destroys the law's object in the will, and the destruction of the will means the destruction of the law. The latter no longer has a limit because it has no will to delimit it, just as it has no authority because it meets no will to receive its commands. The law no longer makes sense as law, both as uncontained and lawless in its boundlessness and as inchoate in its lack of strength to command. The law has become lawless and a contradiction: in a word, it is formless. As seen through the first of ontological lens, this is the meaning of grace by faith alone as "the death of death" executed upon the law.

The undoing of the law means the liberation of nature, which finding the accusing law accused and the condemning law condemned, grasps its existence under "the law of liberty." And yet, because the law put to death by grace is the natural law that gives nature its form,⁴⁷² nature suffers a parallel devolution. Inasmuch as the death of the law negates the principle by which nature possesses definition, one cannot distinguish its liberty from that law from its life apart from that definition. To be totally free of the law, to render it into indifference and strip it of the righteousness that is its form and direction to form, implies nature's own descent into formlessness. The liberty realized through faith alone, the righteousness of God through Christ experienced "for you and me" that the believer might feel as the gates of paradise thrown open, in fact drives home the fiat in which the law melts into mist so that nature might follow it there. The same grace that proclaims "the death of death" for the law as the giver of form thus announces "the law of liberty" for nature as deprived or freed of it.

One could object at this point that Luther's theology explicitly annuls the law only soteriologically, cancelling its effect in the conscience, but does not thereby annul the law in itself. In the same way, the claim that nature has no righteousness negates its soteriological relevance but does not, according to the objection, affect it ontologically. Thus the annulment of the law's soteriological power in pressing home its commands and making nature aware of the

472. See pages 121-122 above.

course, as well as the recognition that nature has no righteousness, does not imply the designation of both as formless matter. But this objection cannot stand in light of the premised connection of righteousness and form, which is an expression of the parallel between soteriology and ontology descriptive of formed natures.⁴⁷³ If when a being acts righteously it gains life, and if it descends toward death in sin as a deprivation of righteousness, so that the quality of being adjusts in concert with the soteriological activity, how shall the denial of all righteousness to nature not locate its existence in that death which is its loss of form? And how shall the law have its soteriological functions annulled without enduring the annulment of its being? One cannot distinguish the negation of a thing's soteriological form from the negation of its ontological structure. Put another way, nature *is* its way of being, its form, and thereby its righteousness, so that the total annulment of nature's righteousness implies the annulment of its existence *qua* nature. Similarly, the law *is* the command, and its righteousness is the righteousness of the command. To blot out that righteousness, and thus the command that is the structure of the law, annuls the law as such.

But the problems that the objector must face extend further still. The defender of Luther claims that a particular soteriological form for the law can be annulled (its claim to righteousness as a contribution to justification) without annulling the law's content, or the law *per se*.⁴⁷⁴ This separation between form and content is born of the conviction that nature receives justification by faith alone, wherein the form of one's ethical life has no bearing on the content of one's status as saved or damned. However, if my exegesis of Luther's story of the experience of grace is correct, justification by faith alone presumes the connection between form and content that it wants to annul. For when the law grows to infinity in the conscience, exhibiting an unbounded expansion of activity or form, it loses its content as merciful in concert with the expansion. Grace by faith

473. See page 34ff.

474. I here refer to my earlier distinction of soteriological form as a kind of activity from ontological content as a state of being including particular attributes. See page 34ff.

alone annuls this distortion of the law by negating the connection between form and content, so that the infinitely expanding law no longer looms as a terror to the conscience. In order to do away with the connection between form and content with respect to the law, then, justification by faith alone first posits it. By extension, the objector who claims that grace annuls only the law's soteriological form but not its content *qua* law undermines his own argument, for in grounding this belief upon the doctrine justification by faith alone he implicitly affirms the connection he wants to reject. The objection consequently fails to detract from the conclusion that grace annuls the law and nature in themselves.

One could also rebut the objection that Luther annuls the law only soteriologically by pointing out an important lacuna in his theology of the law. On one side, Luther considers divine, natural, and political law as essentially one law in opposition to grace. Discussing the works of the law, Luther contends that "whatever is not grace is Law, whether it be the Civil Law, the Ceremonial Law, or the Decalog."⁴⁷⁵ Divine law only restates the natural law, which also serves as the foundation for political law. The law may have different applications, therefore, but it is fundamentally one law. On the other side, the law has two functions, the soteriological function of convicting sinners and the political work of maintaining order. The problem I pose to the objector is this: how can grace annul only the soteriological function of the law and not the political when these are only different versions of the same law? Regardless of the distinction between its uses the law is one law, and Luther provides no argument for why grace's annulment of this one law should stop at its soteriological function and not include its political one. That Luther did not wish to disrupt the political order of his day does not fill this void, for it is my contention that the implications of his theology, besides positing a law bereft of form, belie his desire for social stability.

Viewed through the lens of the parallel between righteousness and form, then, Luther's theology of grace entails the designation of both the law and nature as formless matter. This is an

475. *LW* 26.122.

objection to his theology that he did not anticipate and would undoubtedly reject were he with us today. Does Luther not affirm the law as a constituent in the dialectic between law and gospel at the heart of his construal of the Christian life, and thus as always necessary to the Christian? How, then, can Luther annul the law, and how can nature be annulled as lacking the law that gives it form, if he emphasizes the law's necessity? And what of the ontological status of the law prior to the fall? If Luther annuls the law as formless after Eden, is the law also annulled as formless in paradise? I shall put off the investigation of these questions until "The Inverted Gospel," where I argue both that the annulment of the law happens as a function of Luther's dialectic and that he construes the law and nature as formless prior to the fall. Just as in Luther's personal experience the positing of the law serves as a prerequisite to the grace that annuls it, the dialectic of law and gospel presupposes the law so that one might hear the gospel of grace that negates it. This dialectic pertained even to life in the garden, though not in the same manner as after the fall. Luther's theology of justification by faith thus inverts the gospel of grace unto form espoused by Augustine into an unexpected message of grace as formlessness, a message maintained both in the wake of the original sin and, as we shall see, prior to it.

CHAPTER 5

JOHN CALVIN'S VARIATION ON JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

Whereas Augustine's experience of grace confirmed the law as form-giving by elevating and assisting nature to obedience, Luther's experience of grace completes the annulment of a law already losing definition by virtue of its growth from an apparent help to salvation into an infinite series of commands. Luther's annulment of the law as form-giving further signals the liberation of nature from that law, so that nature also relinquishes form as it accedes to grace. This devolution of the law and nature occurs, I have argued, under the doctrinal umbrella of justification by faith alone, the theological foundation for an experience staked upon the law's irrelevance for justification. Where Augustine's grace presumes the necessity of the law and lifts the believer to its standard, Luther's grace rejects the law and frees nature from it.

What shall one make, then, of Calvin, who combines Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone with his own doctrine of the inseparability of justification and sanctification, or grace and law? On one hand, Calvin writes that justification by faith alone "is the main hinge on which religion turns," which the believer must grasp in order to rightly conceive his or her relationship to God and the nature of divine judgment.⁴⁷⁶ That salvation stands upon this doctrine as the basis and sum of all piety for Calvin⁴⁷⁷ establishes a basic congruence between him and Luther, entailing fundamentally similar ontological implications for their understandings of religious experience. As with Luther, I shall argue that Calvin's version of religious experience implies the designation of the law and nature as formless and grace as deforming, a conclusion that places the

^{476.} *Inst.*, III.xi.1. This chapter will focus on the 1559 *Institutes* as representative of Calvin's mature thought. By focusing on this edition of Calvin's work, I do not mean to ignore developments over the course of his writings. I contend that these remain of a minor character for my attempt to show how Luther and Calvin stand on one side while Augustine stands on the other.

^{477.} *Inst.*, III.xi.1, III.xv.7.

Reformers on the same side against Augustine. On the other hand, Calvin diverges from Luther by combining justification with sanctification, concepts that Calvin distinguishes theoretically but not in fact. The sun's light is not heat and its heat is not light, but the two cannot exist apart from each other. In like manner, Calvin asserts, justification and sanctification are two inseparable aspects of the one grace of Christ.⁴⁷⁸ For Calvin, the recipient of justifying grace necessarily obeys the law embedded in it, striving ceaselessly toward the "full reformation" by which sinful nature becomes a new creation.⁴⁷⁹ Though this insertion of law under the heading of grace departs in meaningful ways from Luther, I view it as a relative disharmony subordinate to the Reformers' basic congruence. Both Calvin and Luther imply an understanding of the law and nature as formless and grace as deforming, but only Calvin's grace, I intend to show, encompasses the law as a party to its deforming power.

My argument for these claims begins with a discussion of Calvin's thought on nature and the grace that justifies it, where I will show how his anthropology, like Luther's, affirms a nature that is good but without power to justify. This section will also sketch the theological details

478. *Inst.*, III.xi.6. Karla Wübbenhorst argues that the notion of the inseparability of justification and sanctification as opposed to the successive relation from the former to the latter represents both an advance in Calvin's thought from 1536 to 1559 and an improvement upon the rebuttal of Luther and Melancthon to charges of antinomianism. That justification and sanctification occur at the same time, she argues, stands as "Calvin's great *simul*." Karla Wübbenhorst, "Calvin's Doctrine of Justification: Variations on a Lutheran Theme," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 111-112.

Scholars have sought to clarify the relative importance of justification and sanctification in Calvin's thought with attention to their placement in the *Institutes*, where sanctification precedes justification. Wendel and Niesel argue along similar lines that by forwarding sanctification Calvin intended to rebut those who charged the Reformers with a passive or antinomian attitude toward the moral life. "The plan he decided upon," Wendel writes, "does not signify that he attributed a greater importance to regeneration [i.e., sanctification] than to justification," although it would have shown that he did not advocate a passive moral attitude as attendant to justification by faith. François Wendel has Calvin's standing with both Roman authorities and his didactic attitude toward Protestant believers in mind when making this assessment in *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1963), 233. Wilhelm Niesel likewise argues that "Calvin placed his doctrine of regeneration before his doctrine of sanctification in order from the start to forestall the objection of Roman theologians." *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 130.

479. *Inst.*, II.i.9. Calvin writes of the mind that "that part in which the excellence and nobility of the soul especially shine has not only been wounded, but so corrupted that it needs to be healed and put on a new nature." The believer does not receive this new nature in its fulfillment in the present life, but works for it in the hope that looks forward to the next.

Calvin's doctrine of grace in light of nature's lack of righteousness, taking into account his doctrine of predestination. In the next section, I will assess the significance of the law for grace, arguing that for Calvin, as for Luther, the law is good but has no power to justify. I shall explore as well how Calvin's doctrine of sanctification embeds the law within grace, subtly predestining the former to the latter. For the elect, I will demonstrate at the conclusion of this section, the law and nature each have grace as their ultimate end, a shared quality of the law and nature that I refer to as "parallel predestination." The final section outlines the ontological meaning of Calvin's theology of religious experience, focusing on the inner movement identified in the *Institutes* as the "descent into the self." It also puts the concept of parallel predestination to work in the context of Calvin's combination of the experience of grace with an ethic of ceaseless obedience. This section illustrates both the basic ontological congruence that Calvin shares with Luther and the relative disharmony that distinguishes them.

Nature and the Grace of Justification

Calvin has a number of positive things to say of human nature with respect to earthly affairs, touting the individual's ability to act honestly, earn a good reputation, and use reason for the good of society.⁴⁸⁰ Relative to the rest of physical creation, humanity possesses an exceedingly high value, including its unique design for communion with God. Yet the moment that one considers the relation of nature to its Creator and later Judge of its sin, the tables turn dramatically. Calvin's theology of justification places God and nature in polar opposition: God possesses all righteousness, majesty, and the right of judgment over the creature, whereas the person, especially as sinful, has no righteousness or goodness and confronts God as a veritable

480. Mary Potter Engel, *John Calvin's Perspectival Anthropology*. American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 14.

nonentity.⁴⁸¹ Nature's claims to possess righteousness because of its good works, as if one could lessen the heterogeneity between the Creator and the creature through obedience to the law, fail to mitigate the chasm between them by even an inch. Only the grace of Christ as distinguished from the law pacifies God's wrath and justifies the sinner. In the summary of nature familiar from the investigation of Luther, Calvin views nature as good, but without power to justify.

My argument that Calvin sees nature as good but without power to justify will apply this description to nature both before and after the fall. To this end, I will put the work of two Calvin scholars, T.F. Torrance and Mary Potter Engel, to my own purposes. I will lean largely on Torrance to explicate Calvin's view of nature prior to the fall, particularly Calvin's doctrine of the *imago dei* as enjoyed in Eden. I will then utilize Engel's perspectival analysis of Calvin's anthropology to assess his doctrine of nature post-fall. "Perspectival analysis" refers to Calvin's implicit method of describing nature from two perspectives, that of God versus that of humankind, while dividing the divine perspective so that nature can approach God as both the creature before the Creator and the sinner before the Judge and Redeemer.⁴⁸² Engel's analysis shows how Calvin speaks admirably of nature and its powers from the human perspective, whereas from either aspect of the divine perspective Calvin consistently reduces nature to nothing, leaving it no claim to intrinsic righteousness.⁴⁸³

481. Lanier Burns sums up the polar emphases pivotal for Calvin's theology as "the perfections of God's grace and the depravity of humankind," showing how sin so corrupts the individual that no intermediate thing is left by which one could acquire salvation. Lanier Burns, "From Ordered Soul to Corrupted Nature: Calvin's View of Sin," in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 87-90.

482. Engel notes the lack of a scholarly consensus around Calvin's theology at the outset of her work. Some scholars have focused on Calvin's more pessimistic statements on nature, but others have offered a more optimistic reading in light of Calvin's occasional praise for human capacities and his role in shaping modern notions of human dignity. A third group has argued that that the contradiction between Calvin's derogatory remarks and his more positive evaluations reflects the realities of human experience as perceived through Scripture. Engel goes a great distance toward untying the knot of Calvin's anthropology with her theory of perspectivalism, which argues that "the coherence of Calvin's anthropology lies in its dynamic perspectival structure" (x-xi, 1).

483. In Engel's estimation, comparing Calvin's human perspective with that of God as Creator yields an absolute contrast between the relative goodness of the one and the infinite good of the other.

The description of nature's lack of righteousness provides an entrée into Calvin's doctrine of justification, which I will discuss by showing how he adopts key features of Luther's formulation. For both, the individual receives justification passively and by faith alone, with an externally imputed righteousness granted by Christ, and with the benefit of a conscience cleansed from anxiety over sin. Calvin also affirms the predestinating will of God as active in justification, tying the salvation of the sinner to God's eternal decree. Calvin's very close agreement with Luther on these details of the doctrine of justification gives fuller shape to the basic congruence that binds the two thinkers, demarcating the boundaries within which one can observe the relative disharmony that I will address in the next section.

The theme of basic congruence and relative disharmony characterizes fundamental anthropological categories at work between Luther and Calvin.⁴⁸⁴ Both Reformers eschew the faculty anthropology of their Catholic predecessors, locating sin not in one part of nature but affirming that its effects pervade the whole.⁴⁸⁵ Calvin further adopts the same theological division of "flesh" versus "spirit" employed by Luther to describe nature's various orientations. Just as for Luther, for Calvin nature is either "spirit," a condition denoting nature's basic orientation toward God, reflecting the divine image either as sinless in Eden or as regenerated by the Holy Spirit (despite remaining sin), or "flesh," a state in which nature directs its activities to its own glory, defiling the image and dwelling in depravity. Apart from the grace of Christ, Calvin views sinful nature as carnal and turned decidedly away from God. In it "there is nothing

Placing persons side by side with the eternal majesty, Calvin judges all of creation including humankind "as nothing." Engel writes that "before the permanent and enduring life of the eternal creator all else, regardless of its worth in other contexts, is evanescent, infirm, fragile, and shadowy." When shifting to a comparison of the human perspective with that of God as Judge and Redeemer, the contrast between the nothingness of the creature and the majesty of the Creator grows into contradiction, actively opposing the sinful creature to the holiness of God. The result of the comparison is nonetheless the same: "Once again, we hear a call to reduce ourselves to nothingness, though this time Calvin has in mind a humility based on our knowledge of our sinful condition" (7, 15).

484. For Luther's understanding of these categories, see page 136.

485. *Inst.*, II.iii.1.

but flesh.”⁴⁸⁶ On this dour assessment of nature, as well as the framework of flesh versus spirit that it assumes, Luther and Calvin stand as one.

Though he shares this congruence with the defining categories of Luther’s anthropology, Calvin departs from him by failing to take up Luther’s accent on the division of the physical or outer nature from the spiritual or inner one. Calvin distinguishes between the body and the soul, describing the mind and the will as critical constituents of nature’s spiritual aspect, but he does not magnify the difference between the soul and the body as Luther often does, nor does Calvin’s anthropology contrast an inner against an outer nature. Calvin sees nature as fundamentally unified, both under the theological categories of flesh and spirit and in his more philosophical description of nature as soul and body. Though a point important enough for us to encounter it later in this chapter, Calvin’s lack of a strong division between the inner and the outer natures marks only a relative disharmony between him and Luther, a divergence that qualifies their agreement on the more fundamental definition of nature as flesh or spirit.

But what, then, of nature as spirit prior to the fall? Did the first couple possess intrinsic righteousness while living in Eden? Calvin affirms that Adam and Eve there enjoyed a righteousness perfectly reflective of the divine glory, having “full possession of right understanding...[Adam’s] affections kept within the bounds of reason, all his senses tempered in right order, and he truly referred his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker.”⁴⁸⁷ The first couple knew God to the greatest extent that creaturely capacities afford,⁴⁸⁸

486. *Inst.*, II.iii.1.

487. *Inst.*, I.xv.3.

488. Calvin does not explicitly describe the knowledge of God that Adam and Eve possessed in Eden according to his distinction between knowing Him as Creator and Redeemer. This distinction does not structure the *Institutes* until the 1559 edition. In earlier versions, Calvin organized his thoughts around a description of the law followed by grace. The 1559 volume places both law and grace in book 2, subsuming them under the knowledge of God the Redeemer. In this work Calvin relocates justification to book 3, which deals with the subjective apprehension of the types of knowledge differentiated in the first two books (Wübbenhorst, 106). In his notes to the *Institutes*, Battles maintains that both kinds of knowledge did not entail cognitive objectivity, but an “existential apprehension” of God as one’s Creator and Redeemer (*Inst.* I.i.1, note 1).

living in gratitude to Him as the originator and preserver of their lives, responding to his blessings with the humility appropriate to His grace. They were thus properly ordered to the rest of creation, partaking in the rectitude by which all the parts contribute to the divine reflection in the whole.⁴⁸⁹ Like an image illumined in stained glass, the *imago dei* shined with full resplendence through Adam and Eve as pieces in their proper place, rightly aligned with respect to God, themselves, and other creatures.

The simile of stained glass tends toward the construal of Calvin's *imago* doctrine championed by T.F. Torrance, who posits that Calvin understands the *imago* in nature as a reflection in a mirror. God designed nature in order to reflect His glory, holding it before Himself in order to perceive His image in it.⁴⁹⁰ Insofar as it bears this reflection, the soul participates in the divine righteousness and coheres with the purpose for which God created it. Insofar as it lacks this reflection, human nature is perverted and defiled. The *imago* itself, therefore, does not belong to nature, which contains only the equipment for the reflection. God surveys the divine image in humanity not by examining what He has made intrinsic to nature, but as a reflection that He has added to nature by an act of grace.⁴⁹¹ From God's perspective, the *imago* pertains to individuals through that dynamic relation in which "the whole being and life of man continues to hang on the gracious will and decision of God from moment to moment."⁴⁹² It consists in God's perpetual grace toward the creature and the latter's answer in humility and obedience. Calvin might insist that the *imago* has its seat in the soul, but one should understand this statement by remembering that the image only sits there when the person is properly ordered to God's glory. Per Torrance's interpretation, the image has no natural or substantial relation to human nature,

489. Thomas F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 44-47.

490. Torrance, 53.

491. Torrance, 74-75.

492. Torrance, 61.

but exists in “a reflection of the whole soul and in the soul of that which the soul is not in itself.”⁴⁹³

Calvin can speak in this fashion of the *imago*'s relation to human nature because in the strict sense, according to Torrance, it belongs to Christ. One discerns human nature in Calvin's thought not by looking at the creature and its natural qualities but at the Redeemer who bears the image intrinsically. Christ *is* the image, and both His eternal being prior to the Fall and His incarnation as the Word made flesh after it provide the key for understanding what human nature ought to be as the bearer of that image. Persons share in the image through Christ as He mediates it to them, relating to them with a grace that preserves nature in communion with its divine origin. Adam and Eve possessed the image through this grace, bestowed upon them by Christ as the integrity that fulfills human nature in obedience to and glorification of the Father.⁴⁹⁴

The righteousness of the *imago* comes to human nature from outside, leaving no righteousness or life in nature itself, a position seconded in H. Paul Santmire's treatment of the believer's “life in righteousness” in Calvin's theology. “Life in righteousness” refers to more than biological existence received from God, denoting the fullness of life that implies “peace of conscience and felicity.”⁴⁹⁵ Nature's righteousness does not differ qualitatively from the divine righteousness but receives definition from it. The creature claims no righteousness at all and finds no cause for pride in the capacity to reflect the divine glory, for this capacity amounts to nothing unless God puts His reflection there by grace. The alternative to human emptiness, the infinite majesty of God, fills nature with life and righteousness because it possesses these intrinsically and imparts them to the soul. Calvin's idea of righteousness and life foregoes their

493. Torrance, 55. The image indeed “hangs over man...both as his destiny and as the law of his being,” an understanding that suggests no law intrinsic to nature or destiny inherent in its being (66).

494. Torrance, 36, 86.

495. H. Paul Santmire, “Justification in Calvin's 1540 Romans Commentary,” *Church History* 33 no. 3 (S 1964): 296.

connection with nature, as Santmire notes that “the continual and manifest affirmation of the Creator’s lordship” defines his view of righteousness, while he perceives life as “that mode of being possessed only by the one who is righteous,”⁴⁹⁶ that is, the one given the reflection of the righteousness that belongs intrinsically to God alone.

Engel agrees with Torrance’s description of Calvin’s *imago* doctrine from the divine perspective, and I believe that she would accept Santmire’s argument from that point of view as well. From the perspective of God as Creator, she admits that Calvin sees the *imago* as the dynamic relation of grace and humility highlighted by Torrance,⁴⁹⁷ and that the metaphor of the mirror aptly describes the image from this point of view. She would nonetheless respond, and I with her, that these interpretations of Calvin’s anthropology remain too narrow because they do not take the human perspective into account.⁴⁹⁸ From that perspective, Engel finds Calvin working from contrary assumptions, using analogies other than a mirror that imply a permanent possession of the image in human nature. References “drawn from the arts of coin-making, engraving, and printing”⁴⁹⁹ suggest a construal of the *imago* in terms of natural endowments constitutive of human nature as well as the dynamic relation in which God views His image as in a mirror. Engel concludes that from the divine perspective the image remains external to nature, whereas from the human perspective nature owns elements of the image internally. One can allow such substantival elements, I contend, so long as they are not thought to amount to

496. Santmire, 297.

497. Engel, 54.

498. Engel contends that both Torrance and Niesel force Calvin’s conception of the *imago* into overly systematic patterns, failing to approach it from the variety of perspectives engaged in Calvin’s work. *Perspectival Anthropology*, 38.

499. Engel, 53. Cf. Henri Blocher “Calvin’s Theological Anthropology,” in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 72. Blocher makes parallel comments in criticism of Torrance: “Calvin ascribes an authentic consistency to created being – only, with God governing and sustaining. His point...is that every creature, and human creature, remains utterly dependent on God...he does not wish to deny a true possession of properties [to human nature], provided that it is acknowledged to be under God, “in God” (Acts 17:28) and in dependence on Him.”

righteousness or life before God. Nature thus possesses some good, but one must avoid viewing that good – including the good possessed before the fall – as if it implied any intrinsic righteousness or gave the creature any means for justification before God.

When Adam and Eve fell, sin ruined the image of God and provoked a plethora of injustices, overturning the right order in which the *imago* is illumined and replacing it with a nature that “is a seed of sin.”⁵⁰⁰ Nature turned in a direction directly counter to the reflection of God’s glory, as if the soul’s mirror had fallen away from the Father who would behold His image in it. Calvin understands this original turn as *infidelitas*, an unfaithfulness in which the creature disavows the Creator by pilfering the divine righteousness and applying it to itself.⁵⁰¹ Indeed, for Calvin sin consists essentially in the attribution of righteousness to the creature, a righteousness that one cannot claim for nature without robbing God of glory. “Man cannot claim for himself even a crumb of righteousness,” Calvin exclaims, “for just so much is plucked and taken away from the glory of God’s righteousness.”⁵⁰² Sinful nature perpetually wants to seize this righteousness for itself, as “there is nothing, indeed, that man’s nature seeks more eagerly than to be flattered...since blind self-love is innate in all mortals, they are most freely persuaded that nothing inheres in themselves that deserves to be considered hateful.”⁵⁰³ Nature further believes that it can live a life pleasing to God by its own power, an attitude borne of the original arrogation of righteousness and the resultant plummet from paradise.

By contrast, Calvin severely denounces fallen nature as “not only destitute and empty of good, but so fertile and fruitful of every evil that it cannot be idle.”⁵⁰⁴ Calvin believes that sin overcomes nature “as by a deluge,” so that it taints “all that proceeds” from nature and “never

500. *Inst.*, II.i.8.

501. Burns, 97.

502. *Inst.*, III.xiii.2.

503. *Inst.*, II.i.2.

504. *Inst.*, II.i.8.

ceases in us, but continually bears new fruits.”⁵⁰⁵ Nature exists as flesh, totally depraved and subject to desires contrary to the will of God, while the image of God is virtually destroyed. I say “virtually” because Calvin concedes, on the one hand, that sin “obliterated” the image of God in Adam and his posterity, separating nature’s mirror from its intended reflection with inestimable force.⁵⁰⁶ This separation refers to sin’s total destruction of the spiritual gifts of faith, righteousness, and everlasting life inherent in the image, of which nature is so deprived that “all qualities belonging to the blessed life of the soul have been extinguished” from it. The natural gifts affiliated with the image, on the other hand, specifically earthly applications of reason and will, were not annihilated. They retain some being, but suffer such corruption that “a shapeless ruin is all that remains.”⁵⁰⁷

Calvin’s teaching on the seed of religion illustrates his view of sin’s defilement of natural gifts. He contends that human nature possesses a sense for the supernatural inscribed on the heart that inclines it toward worship,⁵⁰⁸ but this sense does not compel Calvin to acknowledge a righteousness intrinsic to nature. On the contrary, and despite its desire for divine things, Calvin sees this feeling as so twisted and blind that it would sooner create a crowd of false gods than worship the true one. He decries nature’s seed of religion with conviction: “man’s mind, full as it is of pride and boldness, dares to image a god according to its own capacity; as it sluggishly plods, indeed is overwhelmed with the crassest ignorance, it conceives an unreality and an empty appearance as God.”⁵⁰⁹ Far from guiding nature toward God, the seed of religion “produces only the worst fruits,” so that Calvin impugns nature as “a perpetual factory of idols.”⁵¹⁰ Torrance

505. *Ibid.*; *Inst.*, II.i.9.

506. *Inst.*, II.i.5.

507. Torrance, 90; *Inst.*, II.ii.12.

508. *Inst.*, I.iii.

509. *Inst.*, I.xi.8.

510. *Inst.*, I.iv.4, I.xi.8.

captures the spirit of Calvin's doctrine on this point when he asserts that for the Reformer every movement of nature "is towards destruction,"⁵¹¹ while the activity of the seed of religion constitutes a liability rather than a boon, driving nature toward perdition rather than salvation.⁵¹²

In addition to the seed of religion, nature retains the ability to distinguish good from evil in the wake of the fall. This capacity too serves little positive function, since conscience consistently perverts the natural intuition regarding right and wrong, confusing vice and virtue.⁵¹³ This natural knowledge of good and evil, in conjunction with the natural inclination toward the divine, give nature no step forward from its state of corruption. They rather exacerbate that state by leaving nature without excuse for its iniquity.⁵¹⁴ The absence of the image due to sin thus serves a purpose opposed to the image's God-given meaning. Designed to manifest the harmony of creature and Creator, exalting human nature as a reflection of God's glory, the image's absence disgraces nature and judges its impiety.⁵¹⁵ Nature discerns its depravity in the darkness that it feels should be light, but the darkness so overwhelms it that efforts undertaken in the hope of sight only increase its blindness.⁵¹⁶

511. Torrance, 100.

512. Calvin makes a similar argument with regard to natural theology, which he rejects as a means for arriving at the knowledge of God. Though the divine image shines in the creation, evident in the natural environment, providential justice, and especially human nature, persons cannot perceive it on their own. Absent the grace of God through Jesus Christ, which allows one to see as through glasses, sin leaves persons blind before the creation's witness (*Inst.*, I.v.14, I.vi.1-3; Torrance, 40-41). They are more prone to make nature into a god than recognize the Creator whose glory shines through it, fashioning an idol out of nature before living in humility before its Author (*Inst.*, I.v.4-6).

513. Torrance, 102.

514. *Inst.*, II.ii.22; Niesel, 49.

515. Torrance, 101; Niesel, 46. In Niesel's assessment, the fall is like "the minus sign preceding the whole sum of what Calvin teaches about man and his relation to God. The fall means that man's whole relationship to God is reversed." In application to the *imago dei*, that which would exemplify humanity's special glory as God's mirror becomes an accusation against its depravity.

516. Engel adds that the natural gifts that remain to nature after the fall extend beyond merely rendering it inexcusable before God, as nature can claim the actual good that grounds mutual obligation between persons and peaceful subjection to laws, two points that form the foundation of a Christian social ethic (56, 59-60).

Turning from Calvin's consideration of the *imago dei* to the elements within nature that might contribute to justification, namely reason and will, I will make regular reference to Engel's distinction between the human and divine perspectives at work in Calvin's anthropology. Calvin calls both reason and will good from the human perspective, whereas from the divine perspective neither indicates any righteousness intrinsic to nature nor provides resources for justification. Reason and will are each "as nothing" before God, and like the nature whose capacities they constitute, they are good but do not justify.⁵¹⁷

Calvin hints at the distinction between the human and the divine perspectives when he contrasts "earthly things" versus "heavenly things" with regard to reason. Earthly things concern the present life rather than eternity and do not refer to the Kingdom of God, whereas heavenly things include "the pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness, and the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom."⁵¹⁸ This division structures Calvin's separation of the praise due to reason in the former sphere from its uselessness in the latter. It also sets the stage for Engel's distillation of the human from the divine perspective in her explication of this aspect of Calvin's thought.

Calvin lauds reason in its application to earthly things, which have to do with the liberal arts, household management, government, and technological skills. Engagement in these earthly activities allows nature to manifest its powers, including its natural understanding of the laws needed to preserve society. The seeds of these laws, Calvin avers, "have, without teacher or lawgiver, been implanted in all men."⁵¹⁹ Natural reason also possesses the ability to build upon and perfect the arts in which persons have been trained.⁵²⁰ These gifts of nature are present apart

517. As with my treatment of Luther, I will here address in a few pages facets of Calvin's theology that could compose the subject of books. I justify this shorter attention by noting that I do not wish, at this point, to add anything controversial to Calvin scholarship, but to deepen the consensus held by both Torrance and Engel that Calvin does not admit any righteousness to human nature, though Engel qualifies this assertion by adding that nature has goodness relative to other created things.

518. *Inst.*, II.ii.13.

519. *Inst.*, II.ii.13.

520. *Inst.*, II.ii.14.

from the revelation of the law or the gospel, so that Calvin can look admirably upon the heights attained in philosophy, disputation, rhetoric, and mathematics in pagan societies. He assesses that “Those men whom Scripture calls ‘natural men’ were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.”⁵²¹ These gifts of reason, when viewed from the perspective relative to humanity, lift nature onto a pedestal before the rest of creation.

From the divine perspective of God as Creator, on the other hand, the gifts of reason are of no avail. Juxtaposed against God’s eternal wisdom, human reason “appears as nothing but childish babbling.”⁵²² The absolute contrast between the temporality and finitude of creaturely wisdom and the eternal fullness of its divine counterpart, which also applied to Adam and Eve prior to the fall, reduces all that might receive credit as human wisdom to insignificance. From the perspective of God the Creator implicit in Calvin, Engel contends, “Adam and Eve’s wisdom about the garden, even before they fell, was smoke compared to the word God addressed to them and the wisdom they would have in their eternal life.”⁵²³ That which possesses value and praise before other persons has no such value before God, and what seems good in that relative forum God reveals as worthless before the divine majesty. Confronted with the righteousness of others, persons may argue whether reason makes them more or less righteous; confronted with the divine righteousness, creaturely wisdom evaporates before the infinite standard of knowledge.⁵²⁴

521. *Inst.*, II.ii.15.

522. Engel, 75.

523. *Ibid.*, 76.

524. *Inst.*, II.ii.2. Calvin writes: “Suppose that we but once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and to ponder his nature, and how completely perfect are his righteousness, wisdom, and power – the straightedge to which we must be shaped. Then, what masquerading earlier as righteousness was pleasing in us will soon grow filthy in its consummate wickedness. What wonderfully impressed us under the name of wisdom will stink in its very foolishness.” This passage concerns sinful rather than sinless nature before God, but its spirit applies to both comparisons. In each situation the creature’s wisdom comes to nothing before the divine standard.

The infinite contrast between temporal and eternal wisdom from the perspective of God the Creator grows into contradiction when sin-stained reason stands against God the Judge and Redeemer. Left to itself, natural reason will not perceive, aim at, nor make an effort toward the understanding of God,⁵²⁵ but continually “conceives, instigates, undertakes, and attempts” what is “always evil.”⁵²⁶ Because reason always leads persons away from God’s throne rather than toward it, the light of nature being no more than darkness in matters of the saving knowledge of God,⁵²⁷ He must make anew the mind of the one who would comprehend the path of the Kingdom by illumination through the Holy Spirit.⁵²⁸ This illumination requires that one confess the glory of reason from the human perspective as “stupidity and vanity...utterly reducing it to nothing” before God.⁵²⁹ Human wisdom apart from this illumination shrinks into nonexistence, so that nature gains no credit as righteous before the Judge and Redeemer for possessing it. Engel rightly emphasizes that for Calvin one cannot divide saving wisdom between God and nature; God’s wisdom deserves all the credit for nature’s righteousness, while in the absence of illumination, the spark of natural wisdom immediately goes out before the Judge. Reason thus can claim a relative goodness before other persons and on the level of earthly things, but before God as both Creator and Judge and Redeemer it is as nothing. It has no glory in virtue of which nature can assert its righteousness before God, whether as a creature without sin possessing that righteousness from without or a sinful creature begging the Redeemer to regain what was lost.

Proving the relative goodness of reason for Calvin is easy in comparison to his teaching on the will, where the challenge lies not in establishing that it makes no contribution to justification, but in showing that it retains goodness even from the human perspective. In

525. *Inst.*, II.ii.18.

526. *Inst.*, II.ii.25.

527. *Inst.*, II.ii.19.

528. *Inst.*, II.ii.19-20.

529. *Inst.*, II.ii.20.

soteriological matters, Calvin argues that the will is “so depraved” that “it can be moved or impelled only to evil.”⁵³⁰ By following this impulsion the will acts according to the necessity of nature as sinful. That is, sin so stains nature that it necessarily inclines to evil, while the will nonetheless remains free, according to Calvin, because in acting in accordance with necessity, it does what it likes and suffers no external compulsion.⁵³¹ This freedom does not, then, entail the liberty of choosing that which is soteriologically beneficial to nature or good in God’s sight. Taking John 15:5, “Apart from me you can do nothing,” as his cue, Calvin concludes that Christ “does not say that we are too weak to be sufficient unto ourselves, but in reducing us to nothing he excludes all estimation of even the slightest ability.”⁵³² Calvin’s evaluation denigrates the will as powerless to change nature’s slavery to sin, whereas the Holy Spirit must regenerate the will for it to incline toward God and choose what is soteriologically good. Yet then as well the credit belongs not to nature but to the Spirit that actuates the will previously enslaved to evil. Calvin thus renders the will completely ineffective and wholly incompetent for justification. From the divine perspective, for Engel the perspective of God the Judge and Redeemer, the will has no power to justify. Its goodness, should one desire to ascribe some to it, must derive from the relative perspective that applies among persons.⁵³³

530. *Inst.*, II.iii.5.

531. *Inst.*, II.ii.7. We shall return to this point below.

532. *Inst.*, II.iii.9.

533. Engel summarizes that for Calvin “from the absolute perspective of God as Judge he must argue that the will, as part of the *imago dei*, and freedom are *wholly* lost” (138, emphasis in original). She curiously does not include the divine perspective of God as Creator in her assessment of the will’s power for Calvin. As a part of the *imago dei*, by which nature has a righteousness before God as God bestows it, the will nonetheless cannot be said to provide nature with intrinsic righteousness prior to the fall. Calvin also makes no explicit statements in the *Institutes* to the effect that the will possessed a righteousness of its own before the introduction of sin. It is rather the case, as I have shown, that the creature in Eden remained dependent on the dynamic power of the creator for its existence, including the capacity to will.

Ben Warburton, in his chapter on moral inability in Calvinism, employs a beautiful illustration that describes the master as well as the tradition that followed him. Looking to the natural world, Warburton argues that one sees three kingdoms, the mineral, the vegetable, and the animal. The three kingdoms remain distinct such that “by no possible means that lie within the reach of its own power or natural action can any object or member belonging to one of the lower kingdoms enter into that kingdom

Investigating Calvin's doctrine of the will with regard to mundane choices in life, one finds no ready distinction between "earthly things" in which the will exercises freedom and "heavenly things" in which it does not. Instead, Calvin insists that God's providence acts in particular mundane cases. "The force of God's providence extends to this point: not only that things occur as he foresees to be expedient, but that men's wills also incline to the same end."⁵³⁴ This passage hints at two difficulties for positing free will from the human perspective in Calvin's thought. First, when God foresees what is expedient, one should not separate this from His foreordaining it. God foreknows what He foreordains and foreordains what He foreknows, so that God actively regulates all that takes place from His position as divine ruler. That for Calvin this regulation indicates not a fatalistic mechanism but parental care does little to soften the implication that God has decided events without reference to a substantive human will.⁵³⁵ Second, God's foreordaining and foreknowledge apply to the will so that it turns to the object that God would have for it. If "God, whenever he wills to make way for his providence, bends and turns men's wills even in external things," they are not "so free to choose that God's will does not rule over their freedom."⁵³⁶ In light of these assertions, one wonders what kind of freedom Calvin has left to nature.

which is above...that line can only be passed and that gulf bridged by a member in one or other of the higher kingdoms seizing hold upon and assimilating one which is in the kingdom beneath it." The plant may make use of the mineral for its sustenance, adding it to the vegetable kingdom, while the cow may devour the plant, lifting what was a vegetable into the animal kingdom. The doors between the kingdoms are "hermetically sealed" on the lower sides, and can be opened only from above. In the same way, human nature's powers of reason and will find the realm of heavenly things hermetically sealed to them, and must rely on God's action from above in order to access that kingdom. Ben A. Warburton, *Calvinism: Its History and Basic Principles, Its Fruits and Future, and Its Practical Application to Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 145-147.

534. *Inst.*, II.iv.6.

535. Engel, 130.

536. *Inst.*, II.iv.7.

Calvin responds by deepening his argument for the two aspects of freedom, noted briefly above,⁵³⁷ that belong intrinsically to the will. The first concerns its freedom from external hindrances or compulsions that would force one particular course of action over another. The will always remains free from such coercions because, regardless of the ability to carry out what it wills or the lack thereof, the will wills as it desires.⁵³⁸ External forces compel only the will's ability to act, not its character as will in desiring a particular action. This explanation of the will's freedom from external coercion dovetails with Calvin's second argument, which states that the will as "natural human inclination or desire (*voluntas*)" is inviolable because it always does as it pleases.⁵³⁹ The will bound to always sin (*non posse non peccare*) remains free not because it chooses for or against God, but because it always fulfills its desires in being so bound. Even when God bends the will to the end He would have for it, it retains its definition as a choice that moves the person to ends that it also has chosen. God intervenes, but "it is not coercion, which violates the very humanity of men and women by denying their *capacity to will* or their ability to deliberate."⁵⁴⁰ Divine providence, in Calvin's argument, does not destroy this freedom of the will.

Understanding the will's freedom as liberty from external compulsions or a capacity to choose attendant to the presence of desire paints a rather gaunt picture of the will's powers, and may not satisfy those who wish to press Calvin's version of the will's freedom. It suffices for my argument, however, to emphasize that nature has no freedom to choose for or against God in soteriological matters. From the divine perspective, nature has wholly lost the freedom to choose for God that it received as a benefit of the unstained *imago dei*. On the other hand, Calvin leaves open the possibility of another aspect of the will not destroyed but defaced by sin. Seen from the

537. Page 179.

538. *Inst.*, II.iv.8.

539. Engel, 130.

540. Engel, 134.

human perspective, the non-soteriological will might possess such small good that the first thing Calvin wishes the reader to know about it is its subjection to God's providence, but even as subject, one could describe it as a good thing without power to justify.⁵⁴¹ Reason and the will for Calvin, then, like nature on the whole, are good but soteriologically bankrupt, without resources or powers for righteousness.

When nature perceives that it lacks all resources for justification, acknowledging concurrently that it has sinned against God and must suffer the law's curse lest it find a remedy, it cries out for Christ's grace. The believer accepts this grace through faith, which Calvin calls "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise [of salvation] in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."⁵⁴² That Calvin does not think of faith as a righteousness intrinsic to nature is clear in two ways. First, the Holy Spirit gives faith such that faith's "work" does not belong to nature. Through faith the Spirit leads the believer to the gospel, using it as a supernatural gift to illumine the mind and heart so that the promise in Christ might enter them. Without this work of the Spirit the gospel falls flat, failing to hit its target.⁵⁴³ Second, Calvin understands faith in its connection to nature as an empty vessel. He writes of faith that "unless we come empty and with the mouth of our soul open to seek Christ's grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ."⁵⁴⁴ Faith amounts to an empty capacity whose readiness to be filled depends on the sincere confession of that emptiness. In describing faith in this way, Calvin protects his main

541. Engel, 134. If one argued convincingly that Calvin has no substantive doctrine of free will, this would not refute my argument that for him the will is good but does not justify. Its goodness, according to the Augustinian premises I have elaborated, would then consist in its having being, whether or not that being has a substantive freedom. The more important point, and the more easily proven one, maintains that Calvin does not allow the will to add to justification in any manner, describing it as soteriologically useless.

542. *Inst.*, III.ii.7.

543. *Inst.*, III.i.4. Wübbenhorst comments that "One of the things that makes Calvin's mature doctrine of justification distinctive is this role he gives to the Spirit. Not only sanctification but also justification in the 1559 *Institutes* is unquestionably pneumatological" (110).

544. *Inst.*, III.xi.7.

objective, that Christians “do not take the power of justifying away from Christ” by supposing that faith contributes positively to justification.⁵⁴⁵ The gospel justifies by grace through faith, but neither “grace” nor “faith” implies a subtraction of glory from God in order to share it with nature.

Calvin employs a doctrine of imputation similar in certain respects to Luther’s in order to explain the righteousness the believer gains through faith. Like Luther, Calvin asserts that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness absolves the believer of sin before God’s judgment, transforming the verdict that the sinner receives from “guilty” to “not guilty” without reference to works of the law. Justification, per Calvin, is “the mere benefit of Christ...received by faith,” so that the doomed become righteous “not by approval of works but by God’s free absolution.”⁵⁴⁶ Those who possess no intrinsic righteousness acquire it as given by Christ, holding it as a gift that establishes a saving righteousness where there was none to speak of.⁵⁴⁷ Departing slightly from Luther, Calvin also argues that justification entails reconciliation, which H. Paul Santmire interprets in Calvin as “God’s giving the believer actual communion with the righteousness of Christ.”⁵⁴⁸ Justification includes a participatory aspect for Calvin, so that affirming that Christ has taken one’s guilt means immediately that communion with God has been to some extent restored. Imputation introduces the righteousness of Christ as a foreign element that stands in

545. *Inst.*, III.xi.7. Wendel summarizes Calvin’s position in this manner: “Considered in itself, the faith that makes our union with Christ is nothing; it is of ‘no dignity or value,’ it is ‘only instrumental.’ Indeed, the man who has recognized that faith is a gift of God must not presume upon it as though it were something that he possessed of his own. Its value or importance lie in its object or content; that is, in Jesus Christ” (241).

546. *Inst.*, III.xi.3; cf. III.xi.11, 23.

547. *Inst.*, III.xi.11.

548. Santmire, “Justification in Calvin’s 1540 *Romans* Commentary,” 302. Though Luther’s understanding of justification is largely forensic, his stress on the necessity of knowing Christ’s grace “for you and me,” and thus in a personal way, suggests a communion that resembles Calvin’s notion of reconciliation (see pages 128-129 above). The distance between the two is of lesser rather than greater import.

before the Judge, at once making the believer acceptable and initiating his or her reunion with God.⁵⁴⁹

As recipients of Christ's righteousness, Christians "experience such participation in him that, although foolish in ourselves, he is our wisdom before God; while we are still sinners, he is our righteousness; while we are unclean, he is our purity...all his things are ours and we have all things in him."⁵⁵⁰ Calvin's doctrine of imputation thus involves a notion of transfer much like Luther's.⁵⁵¹ Putting on the eternal righteousness of Christ, the sinner who had no powers for defense against divine judgment receives an infinite righteousness and "that power which has been given [to Christ] in heaven and on earth, by which to crush Satan for us and shatter the gates of hell,"⁵⁵² whereas Christ receives the punishment meant for those who have provoked God's wrath because of sin.⁵⁵³ The rebellious sinner takes the place of the righteous Son while the Son accepts the lot of the sinner, reversing the judgment accorded to each.⁵⁵⁴

The transfer of righteousness relieves the despair of conscience that the believer would suffer before the Judge, with nature taking further comfort in this work as God's alone. For "man has a right will not from himself," according to Calvin, "but that it flows from the same good pleasure by which we were chosen before the creation of the world."⁵⁵⁵ One's chosenness according to God's predestinating will dictates that one should become His possession, bearing an underlying efficacy for redemption in Christ. The divine immutability ensures that the redeemed

549. Santmire, 303.

550. *Inst.*, III.xv.5.

551. See pages 131-132 above.

552. *Inst.*, III.xv.5.

553. *Inst.*, ii.xvii. Here Calvin adopts the satisfaction theory of the atonement.

554. Cf. Santmire, 300.

555. *Inst.*, II.iii.8.

have no cause for worry, as “Those rooted in God can never be pulled up from salvation.”⁵⁵⁶ The union with Christ effected by grace through faith carries out the predestinating decree in the believer’s heart, sealing the promise of salvation announced for the blessed before the creation. The believer can thus view Christ in light of the eternal promise of reconciliation and its fulfillment, as He accomplishes the predestinating decree as both the Mediator from God to the believer and as “the goal of faith” as it looks from the believer to God.⁵⁵⁷ “As God,” Calvin writes, Christ “is the destination” toward which the blessed move, the eternal end that God has ordained for them. “As man,” Calvin continues, Christ is “the path by which we go.”⁵⁵⁸ Whether gazing upon Christ as the deliverer of predestined assurance or its fulfillment, He embodies the decree as an unchanging pronouncement and the softest pillow upon which the wearied conscience rests.

Given the foregoing interpretation of Calvin’s anthropology and his doctrine of justification, the parallels between him and Luther run deep. When illumined by Engel’s distillation of the human from the divine perspective, Calvin’s anthropology yields a portrait of nature deemed good from the human perspective but without power or resources for justification, and therefore without intrinsic righteousness when viewed from the divine perspective, an assessment that applies to nature *qua* creature as well as *qua* sinner. Despite occasional distinctions, the Reformers’ anthropologies join hands in the thesis that nature is good but does not justify.

556. *Inst.*, III.xxiv.6. Cf. Gabriel Fackre, “Calvin on Justification in Evangelical and Ecumenical Perspective,” in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 147. Fackre notes Calvin’s distinctive perspective that justification “for me” is in the foreground while that “for the world” is in the background. “Justification in Calvin,” he notes, “begins in the sovereign purposes of the Father,” tying it to God’s purposes for the wider world as well as the individual.

557. *Inst.*, III.ii.1.

558. *Inst.*, III.ii.1.

At the same time, Calvin's doctrine of justification picks up numerous key features of Luther's formulation. Calvin denies that works count at all toward justification, exhorting the believer to rely wholly on faith in Christ's grace. He also understands Christ's righteousness as given by imputation, though he differs from Luther by adding an emphasis on the believer's union with Christ. Thirdly, Calvin and Luther each praise the grace of justification as the only assurance for a conscience stricken before God's judgment. Fourthly, each pads this assurance by reference to God's predestinating grace.⁵⁵⁹ Seeing these points of agreement, I do not mean to imply that no differences exist between Calvin's and Luther's conceptions of justification by faith alone. I intend to drive home the claim that, when compared to Augustine's assertion that works and nature's powers add something positive though insufficient to salvation, the differences between the Reformers dwindle before their similarities. Regarding the soteriological powerlessness of nature and the grace of justification the Reformers stand together, grounding their basic congruence in opposition to Augustine.

Law and Grace in Calvin

For the purposes of this study, the most significant variation distancing the Reformers concerns the relation of the law to grace. Luther teaches that grace everywhere opposes the law, arguing that, above all, grace liberates the conscience from its curse and renders its commands a matter of indifference for justification. Though Calvin mirrors Luther in insisting on the uselessness of the law for justification, he also weds the law to grace with such force that the justified necessarily engage in a tireless obedience, with the expectation of "unceasing progress" in sanctification.⁵⁶⁰ Through grace, the hearts of the elect "are so effectively governed by God that they follow him with unwavering intention," striving imperviously in the law as servants of

559. See page 144, especially footnote 433.

560. *Inst.*, III.vii.5; cf. III.xvii.6, III.xiv.10.

the divine master.⁵⁶¹ Where Luther's grace emphasizes the believer's liberation from the negative aspects of the law, Calvin's grace catalyzes the believer to ceaseless obedience under its commands. A meaningful gap separates Calvin from Luther on this point.

Yet to one who claims that Luther has an essentially negative view of the law and Calvin an essentially positive one, I answer that both see the law as good but not able to justify, a stance that expresses the Reformers' basic congruence with respect to the law.⁵⁶² The divergences between Luther and Calvin do not concern the law's power of justification, because both deny it; nor does it concern their assessment of the law on the whole, as both call the law good; the divergence concerns the scope of the law's goodness, specifically how it is good in relation to the grace that alone justifies. For Luther the law is powerless but good in its opposition to grace, for Calvin the law is powerless but good as embedded in grace. The ceaseless obedience to which Calvin exhorts his followers reflects this embedding by goading the believer into conformity to the law that, however worthless for justification in itself, is tied inseparably to saving grace.⁵⁶³

561. *Inst.*, II.iii.10.

562. Scholars who emphasize the difference between Luther and Calvin focus on the variation regarding the law's goodness between the two. They argue that Calvin sees the law as fundamentally good in way that Luther does not, implying that this difference is of primary significance for comparisons between them. See, for example, Edward Dowey's "Law in Luther and Calvin," *Theology Today* 41 no. 2 (Jul 1984): 152-153. For a nuanced interpretation of Calvin on the law that lands on his view of it as essentially positive, see I. John Hesselink, "Law and Gospel or Gospel and Law? Calvin's Understanding of the Relationship," in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of John Calvin*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1988), 28-29. Those who emphasize the similarity between Luther and Calvin tend to lift up their shared emphasis on the law's inability to justify. See Michael Horton, "Calvin and the Law-Gospel Hermeneutic," *Pro Ecclesia* 6 no. 1 (Winter 1997): 27, 37-38; and Stephen W. Ramp, "John Calvin on Preaching the Law," *Word and World* 21 no. 3 (Summer 2001): 262-263.

563. Steven Coxhead argues that Calvin endorses a subordinate doctrine of justification by works in addition to his primary doctrine of justification by faith. The obedience the believer performs within the context of the covenant, he argues, constitutes a second form of righteousness that has justifying significance for Calvin. I concur with his argument that obedience can serve as a second kind of righteousness, but the assertion that this righteousness justifies clouds the significance that Calvin gives to justification by faith alone. Whatever righteousness one may gain by works for Calvin, it is not a justifying righteousness but a righteousness gained by the gracious regeneration unto the divine image undertaken in consequence of the justifying righteousness of faith. See Steven Coxhead, "John Calvin's Subordinate Doctrine of Justification by Works," *Westminster Theological Journal* 71 (2009): 1-19. The privileged position that Calvin gives to righteousness via faith as justifying is seen in his responses to the Council of Trent, where he reserves the power of justification entirely for faith, its' necessary connection to works

The variation that divides the Reformers concerning the law amounts, from this perspective, to a relative disharmony subordinated to their basic congruence. It is a conflict nestled within concord.

That Calvin embeds the law within the grace of the covenant in Christ means that law's inability to add to justification does not denote unqualified opposition to grace, but opposition as removed from the context of grace.⁵⁶⁴ When the believer attempts to procure righteousness via the law, forgetting the grace of Christ as the only avenue for justification, he or she plucks the law from the soil in which it thrives and wields it as dead and deadening. Here the law opposes grace in the way it does for Luther. By contrast, when the believer looks to Christ as the sole source of justifying righteousness, having received His grace as the forgiveness of sins and assurance of pardon, he or she turns necessarily to the law as planted in its proper milieu. The believer finds, in Calvin's terms, that the justification of the sinner by Christ cannot exist apart from the "impulsion" of the Holy Spirit toward sanctifying good works.⁵⁶⁵ "As Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable – namely, righteousness [justification] and sanctification. Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he at the same time bestows the spirit of adoption, by whose power he remakes them to his own image."⁵⁶⁶ Christ pardons the sinner without the law, but sanctification or progress in holiness via the law is the inseparable accompaniment to that accomplishment, working toward

notwithstanding. See John H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 96-98.

564. I have borrowed the notion of "embedding" from Wilhelm Niesel (92-93). For Calvin's contextualizing of the law in the covenant, see also I. John Hesselink, "John Calvin on the Law and Christian Freedom," *Ex Auditu* 11 (1995): 77-78.

565. *Inst.*, II.ii.26.

566. *Inst.*, III.xi.6.

the restoration of the *imago dei* in the present life.⁵⁶⁷ Here Calvin draws law and grace into a union foreign to Luther.

Calvin juxtaposes the opposition and harmony between law and grace in the *Institutes*, II.ix.4. He here writes that the contrast between the law and the gospel, by which Paul “contends that we are pleasing to God through grace and are accounted righteous through his pardon,” is a firm one. Those who rely on the law cannot fulfill it, and Christians can point to no one other than Christ who has obeyed it perfectly. For this reason the righteousness of the law fails, so that one must turn wholly to Christ. His righteousness, given through faith alone, opposes the law as futile for justification and to the exclusion of works as a medium for the forgiveness of sins.⁵⁶⁸

Calvin then writes that this opposition “does not so supplant the entire law as to bring forward a different way of salvation. Rather, [the gospel] confirmed and satisfied whatever the law had promised, and gave substance to the shadows.” The suggestion that the gospel “confirms and satisfies” the law allows us to initially define the law, gospel or grace, and their harmonious theological relation. By the law Calvin means “the form of religion handed down by God through Moses,” with a strong emphasis on the 10 commandments.⁵⁶⁹ It is important to note here that Calvin, like Luther, believed the Decalogue was a special application of natural law and not essentially different from it, so that divine law in general does not differ from natural law but restates it.⁵⁷⁰ The law can also refer more widely to the Old Testament in the sense of “the law

567. I will describe Calvin’s teaching on this restoration below.

568. Cf. *Inst.*, III.xi.13: “If by establishing our own righteousness” through the law, attributing soteriological value to it and nature working through it, we then “shake off the righteousness of God, to attain the latter we must completely do away with the former...so long as any particle of works righteousness remains some occasion for boasting remains with us.”

569. *Inst.*, II.vii.1.

570. Calvin writes that “the law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men.” (*Inst.*, IV.xx.16; cf. Wendel, 206). He makes this assertion in his discussion on the validity of customary laws of various nations and not as a part of his treatment of divine law in Book II of the *Institutes*. In his thought, the divine or moral law witnesses to the natural law that is also the proper foundation of civil laws.

and the prophets.”⁵⁷¹ The promises of forgiveness of sins in Christ in the Old Testament indicate His presence within it for Calvin, giving evidence of the overlap between the law and the gospel in his thought. The gospel, understood in Calvin’s broad sense, includes the promises of salvation in Christ delivered to the patriarchs, whereas in Calvin’s narrower sense, the gospel denotes the fulfillment of those promises in “the proclamation of the grace manifested in Christ.”⁵⁷² Gospel is synonymous with grace in the narrower sense, while the broad sense reminds the Christian of Christ’s presence in the law prior to the incarnation. The Jews looked to Christ through the Old Testament as the fulfillment of a promise, and He reveals what was there lightly outlined. “From this we infer that, where the whole law is concerned, the gospel differs from it only in clarity of manifestation,”⁵⁷³ a central element in Calvin’s understanding of the positive relation between law and gospel.

I will deepen my examination of the theoretical relationship between law and grace in Calvin’s thought by proceeding through his three uses of the law. The first use illustrates Calvin’s understanding of the law’s opposition to grace, describing the law as disembedded from and opposed to Christ’s righteousness. One must choose, at this juncture, between the righteousness of the law and that of grace through faith, with the choice of one implying the rejection of the other. Unlike the first use of the law, the second use of restraining the wicked resists easy categorization as embedded within grace or not. With these two uses, one can nonetheless observe that Calvin has hardly broken from Luther, reversing the order of Luther’s

571. Cf. Hesselink, “Law and Gospel,” on law and gospel as referring to the Old and New Testaments (16).

572. *Inst.*, II.ix.2.

573. *Inst.*, II.ix.4. Opponents accused Calvin of harmonizing the law and the gospel too fully. He responds to them in *Inst.* II.xi, “The Difference Between the Two Testaments.” Here he details numerous points that distinguish the New Testament from the Old. See also Hesselink, “Law and Gospel,” 19-23.

two uses but preserving their content.⁵⁷⁴ It is Calvin's third use of the law that drives a wedge between the Reformers. Calvin argues with a force unknown to Luther that the law remains relevant to those under grace, writing that though believers "have the law written and engraved upon their hearts by the finger of God...they still profit by the law" as preached.⁵⁷⁵ As I shall show, this third use manifests the harmony of law and grace in which the law is embedded in Christ as both its foundation and fulfillment.

The first use of the law, "while it shows God's righteousness, that is, the righteousness alone acceptable to God," also "warns, informs, and lastly condemns, every man of his own unrighteousness."⁵⁷⁶ When one judges one's sin under the law's standard, all pretensions of goodness and righteousness fall away. The pride that one might have felt before others falters, and in its place one confronts the powerlessness of nature to meet the law's requirements. The individual discovers a horde of vices within, defiling the heart in spite of outward appearances, perceiving also that the law lacks the power to heal the iniquities that it reveals. It cannot aid persons to obey it perfectly and secure the righteousness that God demands. In Calvin's estimation, no one can achieve such righteousness, which stands beyond all human capacities. The longer one focuses on the law the deeper he or she plunges into spiritual despair, as for Calvin the law only foments God's wrath. The believer who looks to it for hope will find his or her salvation cut off, and in its place all sorts of threats that hang over the person as sinner. The law thus encounters the individual as "the most immediate death."⁵⁷⁷

The futility of the law for justification and the punishment it threatens also drive the believer to Christ's grace as his or her only refuge. The more deeply one burrows into nature's

574. Luther's first use of the law is political, and his second theological, whereas Calvin reverses the order. Differences in content between the two uses for the Reformers, however, are difficult to discover.

575. *Inst.*, II.vii.12.

576. *Inst.*, II.vii.6; cf. II.vii.7.

577. *Inst.*, II.vii.3.

depravity, buckling under the law's weight, the more "the grace of God, which nourishes us without the support of the law, becomes sweeter, and his mercy, which bestows that grace upon us, becomes more lovely."⁵⁷⁸ The believer exasperated by the law's revelation of sin comes to see that solace exists only and totally in Christ, so that "naked and empty handed," the one nearly swept away by nature's wickedness flees to Him for protection.⁵⁷⁹

The law's second use stands largely outside of such soteriological concerns, with Calvin directing it to the social world. The law functions here to "restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just or right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law."⁵⁸⁰ It must bridle those who would stir up trouble in public life, keeping them in check through fear of punishment. Love of God does not instigate these persons to pursue others' well-being, but dread of the law hinders them from injuring their neighbors. At the same time, the second function helps the not-yet-regenerate by holding them within the bounds of outward righteousness. Public laws serve as an initial tutor for those destined to embrace Christ's grace, guiding them away from sin while preparing them, however obliquely, for a deeper love of God's discipline. Given this aspect of the second use, Ralph Sundquist is correct to group it with the first as "pre-Christian," that is, these two uses apply to the sinner as not yet justified by faith. But the role of the second use with respect to the law's embedding in grace is not so simple; on one hand, it has no prominent relation to the grace that justifies, especially as a restraint for the wicked, but on the other it provides remedial instruction in the law for those who will one day obey it as embedded in grace.⁵⁸¹ The law's second use, therefore, assumes a middle position

578. *Inst.*, II.vii.7.

579. *Inst.*, II.vii.8.

580. *Inst.*, II.vii.10.

581. Ralph R. Sundquist, *The Third Use of the Law in the Thought of John Calvin: An Interpretation and Evaluation* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1972), 53.

between the first use that places the law beyond its embedding in grace and “the third and principle use” that describes it as embedded.⁵⁸²

The third use of the law addresses the believer justified by grace in the heart, facilitating the sanctification inseparable from justification in two ways. Persons first become better acquainted with God’s will via the law, so that the heart might not wander without direction. Calvin compares the Christian blessed by grace to a servant who turns to the law in order to “observe his master’s ways more carefully in order to conform and accommodate himself to them.”⁵⁸³ The law secondly arouses believers to sustain their obedience and avoid transgressive paths. Calvin likens the law to a whip, goading the justified like mules to the tasks that God has prepared for them. It pushes those under grace into the ceaseless obedience typical of God’s service, not allowing them rest from good works.

In its third use, the law’s imperatives are grounded in the grace of Christ, embedded in His role as the Mediator of grace. As I shall explain, Calvin teaches that Christ’s mediating grace was active in Eden; Christ also grounds the law or Old Testament as its foundation; He is likewise at work, though in a muted way, within the law through its ceremonies and the promises that point to Him; and He is its goal as the terminus in which the law finds fulfillment. One approaches the law in its proper context as enfolded within the gracious covenant established in the Mediator, whose delivery of justifying grace entails engagement in the non-justifying but necessary law allied with it. If, at this point, Luther were to accuse Calvin of blurring the antagonism between law and gospel, Calvin would respond that while the law certainly does not justify, God is always one and unified. So also is His revelation to humanity through Christ’s

582. *Inst.*, II.vii.12.

583. *Inst.*, II.vii.12.

grace and the law embedded within it one and unified, a revelation consistent throughout salvation history.⁵⁸⁴

Invoking Christ's mediatorship of grace prior to the fall, Calvin argues for both the necessity of grace and the uselessness of works in Eden. "Certainly, the eternal *λογος* was already mediator from the beginning, before Adam's fall and the alienation and separation of the human race from God,"⁵⁸⁵ Calvin writes, confirming the priority of grace in paradise. Calvin adds in the *Institutes* that Adam "was blessed" in Eden "not because of his own good actions, but by participation in God" given through grace, commenting also that "Even if man had remained free from all stain, his condition would have been too lowly to reach God without a Mediator."⁵⁸⁶ The harmony between humanity and God prior to the fall thus resulted from grace rather than obedience to the law. Adam and Eve's union with God depended, as Torrance says, solely on His "Word of continuous creation and communication," or Christ's mediatorship as the grace that kept them conformed to the divine image, and not on any merit of their own.⁵⁸⁷ Though the outward sign of disobedience to the law attended the fall, it fundamentally consisted in the rejection of God's graciously given presence, the abdication of the image that Adam and Eve were too lowly to reach apart from Christ's mediation.

In the wake of the fall, Calvin understands the law as a communication from God to humanity couched within in the Mediator's grace. The promises of atonement for sins and the gift of God's favor to Abraham would have meant nothing if not "grounded in the grace of

584. Hesselink, "Law and Gospel," 17-19.

585. "Second Reply to Stancaró," quoted in Byung-Ho Moon, *Christ the Mediator of the Law: Calvin's Christological Understanding of the Law as the Rule of Living and Life-Giving* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006), 104.

586. *Inst.*, II.ii.1, II.xii.1.

587. Torrance, 65, 86. "Thus the *imago dei*," Torrance elsewhere writes, "depends entirely upon the grace of God and is maintained only in relation to that grace. To fulfill his destiny as made in the image of God man must live a life of thankful dependence on the goodness of God without seeking to arrogate anything of God's gifts to himself as if they were his own." This applied to Adam and Eve as well as to fallen humanity (80).

Christ,⁵⁸⁸ and the covenant of the law given to the Jews has its “sole foundation” in Him.⁵⁸⁹ “The Old Testament,” Calvin affirms, “was established upon the free mercy of God, and was confirmed by Christ’s intercession.”⁵⁹⁰ The law has its source and stability in Christ as the spring from which it arises, witnessing to His mediatorship. Calvin even claims that the law and the gospel, the Old Testament and the New, do not differ in essence but share a single “substance and reality.”⁵⁹¹ To approach the law rightly requires viewing it as a minister founded upon and participating in His grace. Calvin thus affirms the law’s goodness by circumscribing it within the contention that persons meet God through Christ alone,⁵⁹² while one errs by conceptualizing and engaging the law outside of its Christological context.

Calvin argues that the Jews possessed Christ through the ceremonies prescribed in the Old Testament, so that Paul can write that they “ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink” as Christians.⁵⁹³ Believers in Christ should not consider the Jews inferior because of their ceremonies, Calvin warns, because Christ mediated the divine presence through them. The ancient ceremonies revealed the pattern of the mission that Christ would assume in the incarnation, imparting His presence more obliquely than His taking on flesh, but imparting it nonetheless.⁵⁹⁴ Calvin can thus confirm that the Jews “had and knew Christ the Mediator, through whom they were joined to God and were to share in his promises.”⁵⁹⁵

588. *Inst.*, II.vii.16.

589. *Inst.*, II.x.4.

590. *Inst.*, II.x.3.

591. *Inst.*, II.x.2. On Christ as the foundation of both law and gospel, see Horton, 34; on the single essence of the two covenants, see Ramp, 264.

592. *Inst.*, II.vi.4.

593. 1 Cor. 10:3-4; *Inst.*, II.x.5. See also Niesel, 108.

594. Moon, 110. Moon argues that Christ can be present to the Jews prior to the incarnation for Calvin based on his doctrine of Christ’s spiritual but real omnipresence.

595. *Inst.*, II.x.2.

Those promises also manifest the presence of Christ within the law, although as suspended until His arrival. Calvin argues that the covenant God made with the Jews concerned spiritual as well as earthly things.⁵⁹⁶ They looked to eternal life with God as much as any physical blessings, with the covenant opening their eyes to the same eternal realities hoped for by the church.⁵⁹⁷ The Jews sought after redemption in Christ, understanding that no worship pleases God but what looks to Him.⁵⁹⁸ “Under the law,” writes Calvin, “Christ was always set before the holy fathers as the end to which they should direct their faith,”⁵⁹⁹ so that “they might turn their eyes directly to Christ in order to seek deliverance.”⁶⁰⁰ In the promises, Christ appeared to the Jews in outline as the Mediator who purchased their salvation despite their living before His appearance on earth.

The advent of Christ transposes the law into a new key, one that consists not in new commands nor the rejection of old ones but in the fulfillment of the grace latent in the law. In Christ the pattern of the Old Testament ceremonies meets its goal, and in Him the promises of the full revelation of grace are realized. Prior to the incarnation, the Jews knew His grace dimly, as a shadow. The outward observances of the law struck consciences with fear, Calvin argues, but could not seal joyful obedience on the heart. In Christ, however, one beholds the Mediator directly as the “full splendor” of the image of God, a grace “more richly enjoyed” than that of the Jews and like the brightness of midday compared to the shadow.⁶⁰¹ The ceremonies of the Old Testament fall away in His light, rendered obsolete by His presence. Christ also seals the promise

596. *Inst.*, II.x.7.

597. *Inst.*, II.x.9.

598. *Inst.*, II.vi.1.

599. *Inst.*, II.vi.2.

600. *Inst.*, II.vi.4, cf. II.vii.1.

601. *Inst.*, II.ix.1.

of grace on the heart, consummating the expectations of the Old Testament faithful while negating the curse upon nature's disobedience.⁶⁰² He alone frees the conscience and energizes the heart to obey willingly, finding delight in the law's commands. At His arrival, Christ manifests clearly the grace hinted at in the law and toward which it was oriented from its beginning. As the law's origin He is also its goal, both the presupposition from which it springs and the destiny toward which it points.

Despite the law's inseparability from and embedding within the grace of Christ, one must take care to remember Calvin's teaching that grace alone justifies. The law's planting in the soil of Christ does not change that assessment; the law still does not justify because salvation falls on Christ's mediating grace rather than obedience to the commands embedded within it. Grace, properly understood, envelops the law as its participant, but the emphasis lies on grace as the foundation and end of the law and not the law itself. Christ as foundation and origin defines the "from where" of the law, so that it is referred back to the Mediator as the lone necessity for salvation. Christ as goal and fulfillment defines the "to where" of the law, so that its meaning belongs to the gracious end to which God's providence directs it. At no point in this dynamic does the law offer an independent or substantive righteousness that distinguishes it from Christ's grace, but accompanies justification only as gathered into that grace.

Calvin's embedding of the law within grace provides a theoretical template for his construal of the Christian life, where one finds the same pattern at work. Just as Calvin embedded the Old Testament law between its foundation in Christ's mediatorship and its fulfillment in His coming, so he embeds the Christian's life of ceaseless obedience between the decree predestinating the believer to grace and the eternal life in which that grace is fulfilled. The following pages trace the arc of that life with an eye toward the necessary connection between sanctification and justification, or law and grace.

602. *Inst.*, II.ix.2.

Obedying the law's constant demands as an expression of the hope of salvation, Calvin's believer straightaway encounters the sloth of nature, a slowness identified with nature's pride in its abilities. "For many sinners are so drunk with the sweetness of their vices that they think not upon God's judgment," and one must shake off "such sloth" in order to meet the grace of Christ.⁶⁰³ The law is intended to stir nature up from this "inborn sluggishness," encouraging persons by precepts that prove nature's futility before the specter of judgment.⁶⁰⁴ But the law does not provide sufficient encouragement, and the will, Calvin argues through the words of Augustine, succumbs "through weakness" when surrounded by so many temptations.⁶⁰⁵ The individual is left in the struggle to obey ceaselessly in spite of nature's sluggishness at the same time that he or she grows anxious under the threat of perdition, so that one cannot help but beseech God for saving grace.

God delivers this grace through the inward renewal in which He replaces the obstinate "heart of stone" with a new and eager one "of flesh."⁶⁰⁶ This does not mean that the individual receives a new will, but that grace reverses the will's orientation. The person who obeyed out of fear begins to obey out of love, having experienced the "feeling of delight" that calms the terrified conscience and remakes the recalcitrant will so that it takes pleasure in the law.⁶⁰⁷ Emptied of "natural feeling," the mind turns to God's commands as purged of worldly desires.⁶⁰⁸ The heart becomes "wholly other" as God wipes away the will that rejected His ordinances and regenerates it as one tending toward righteousness.⁶⁰⁹ This purification of mind and heart,

603. *Inst.*, III.xii.8.

604. *Inst.*, II.ii.4, II.vii.14.

605. *Inst.*, II.iii.13. Calvin quotes from *On Rebuke and Grace*, 38.

606. *Inst.*, III.iii.8.

607. *Inst.*, II.iii.14, II.iii.9.

608. *Inst.*, III.vii.4.

609. *Inst.*, II.iii.6.

reforming the inner springs of action so that one “is zealously inclined” toward what is right, catalyzes the life of ceaseless obedience through the confidence of salvation, or of one’s place among the elect.⁶¹⁰ Henceforth the believer is a new creation endowed with “a new spirit and a new heart,” a son or daughter of heaven rather than hell.⁶¹¹

By its graced obedience, nature becomes a participant in the divine action that seeks to restore the creature to the image of God in Christ.⁶¹² God’s reconstruction of the image means that the Mediator has reoriented nature through the law to the restoration of communion with the Father. The purpose of the law at this point, according to Calvin, is “the fulfillment of righteousness to form human life to the archetype of divine purity. For God has so depicted his character in the law that if any man carries out in deeds whatever is enjoined there, he will express the image of God.”⁶¹³ The new creation into which God makes the believer pursues the restored image in a life in which God “join(s) man by holiness of life” to Himself, making the person “cleave” to his or her Maker.⁶¹⁴ Both the will and reason, in particular, receive a new direction as guided by God’s spirit, though the glory for their participation redounds to God alone.

Calvin taught that will or desire composes the first part of a good work, while the exertion to accomplish it is the second part. “The author of both,” however, “is God.”⁶¹⁵ While

610. *Inst.*, II.iii.9, III.xiv.8.

611. *Inst.*, II.iii.8.

612. Merwyn S Johnson, “Calvin’s Handling of the Third Use of the Law and Its Problems.” In *Calviniana: The Ideas and Influence of John Calvin*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker. Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1988), 33-50. Johnson writes that for Calvin Christians concentrate on the law “to help them discern the presence and activity of God in the midst of their lives, relationships, opportunities, current events, and the like, so that they can – by the gift of participation – live with God and God with them” (46). They receive this participation as a gift of faith in Christ.

613. *Inst.*, II.viii.51.

614. *Inst.*, II.viii.51; Johnson, 43-44.

615. *Inst.*, II.iii.9.

Calvin goads the believer on to an “unceasing progress” in sanctification,⁶¹⁶ an exhortation in the face of the continued threat of sluggishness,⁶¹⁷ one’s willing participation in God’s righteousness always reflects grace moving through that will. Calvin thereby rejects Catholic notions of cooperation in which the will actively contributes to the work of grace.⁶¹⁸ God causes the will to desire what is good and pursue it; He ensures that its efforts do not fail; and He guarantees that the Christian moved to good works will persevere in holiness.⁶¹⁹ God’s involvement of the will in good works again embeds the law within grace, surrounding the passive but obedient will within the grace that gathers it into divine purposes.⁶²⁰

Grace also brings reason into use for the justified, resuscitating an earthly philosophy dead apart from faith in Christ to help illumine the knowledge of Him.⁶²¹ Engel argues that a parallel exists between the uses of reason and the third use of the law for Calvin: “Just as the covenant of a gracious God preceded the giving of the law, thus uniting law and gospel, so the truth of God preceded heavenly and earthly philosophies, thus uniting them.”⁶²² This does not mean that those graced with heavenly truth should look to earthly philosophy for higher knowledge, or that grace elevates reason to an earthly wisdom that cooperates actively with revelation. It allows that Christian theologians can put earthly philosophies to use where appropriate in order to explicate heavenly philosophy. The latter “approves, supplements, alters,

616. *Inst.*, III.vii.5.

617. *Inst.*, II.v.11.

618. *Inst.*, II.iii.11.

619. *Inst.*, II.iii.9. On grace’s irresistibility, see II.iii.10.

620. Calvin further argues that these works witness to justification as accomplished in Christ rather than acting to cause or contribute to it (III.xiv.18-19).

621. “Earthly philosophy” refers to pagan philosophical systems, while “heavenly philosophy” is synonymous with theology as enlightened by faith in Christ.

622. Engel, 98-99.

criticizes, and rejects earthly philosophy's self-knowledge" according to heavenly prerogatives, but does not deny the usefulness of earthly reason for heavenly aims.⁶²³ Earthly philosophy, though subordinate to the heavenly philosophy that utilizes it, can passively participate in the restoration of God's image via the righteousness of Christ.

The sanctification that would restore the divine image finds its end in eternal life, which fulfills the progress in holiness begun on earth and fully realizes the grace announced in the divine decree and applied in the transformed heart.⁶²⁴ Indeed, Calvin writes, "no one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection," acknowledging the lowliness and travail of the present life in comparison to the world to come.⁶²⁵ Calvin thus embeds the Christian's life of ceaseless obedience between the grace that predestines and its culmination in heaven, so that when the believer thinks of the reward for good works, his or her eyes are raised to eternity.⁶²⁶

The practical pattern of grace promised via the divine decree, life of ceaseless obedience, and grace fulfilled in heaven hints at a more profound aspect of Calvin's thought regarding predestination. In that pattern one discovers grace's predestining relation to both the law and nature, by which it comes before both as their source, works through them, and consummates them as their goal. With respect to elect nature, the grace of the decree and its fulfillment in eternity surrounds the ceaseless obedience through which the believer is made a participant in God's designs, and which makes up the substance of daily life. Calvin understands the law as similarly ensconced within a gracious source and goal with respect to those God saves. For these, the law is grounded in Christ's grace, foreshadowing His coming and communicating a muted version of His presence, while also pointing to Him as its end. The law is destined, for the elect,

633. Engel, 110.

624. *Inst.*, III.ix.6, III.xxi.7.

625. *Inst.*, III.ix.5, see also III.ix.4.

626. *Inst.*, III.ix.1.

to find its sum in Christ, just as chosen individuals are destined for eternal communion with their Maker. The graced believer thus obeys in the confidence that he or she is predestined to final reconciliation in Christ while walking along a path destined to culminate in that reconciliation. Predestination applies to both the one walking the road and the road itself. Calvin's double emphasis on the law and nature as founded upon, oriented to, and illustrating the work of grace I refer to as "parallel predestination," a doctrine that, despite its subtlety in Calvin's writings, is of no small importance for the relation between law and grace in his thought.

The Ontology of Religious Experience in John Calvin

I have noted numerous points where Calvin and Luther share a basic congruence of thought, but where Calvin departs from Luther in relative but meaningful ways. Calvin and Luther both view nature as fundamentally either spirit or flesh, also agreeing that nature is good but lacks all power to contribute to justification, while they differ on the secondary question of the separation between the outer and inner aspects of nature. Luther and Calvin also agree that the law is good but has no power to justify and that the believer receives justification by faith alone, but they disagree on the subordinate issue of the law's goodness. Luther views the law as good in its opposition to grace, whereas Calvin sees the law's goodness in its embedding within grace. The pattern of basic congruence/relative disharmony appears again, I contend, in the ontological implications of the Reformers' versions of the experience of grace. When placed under the ontological microscope, Calvin's theology, like Luther's, unwittingly yields a portrait of nature and the law designated as formless matter with grace acting to secure them in that formlessness. This ontological story establishes the basic congruence between Luther and Calvin, a story fundamentally unchanged by their points of distinction. This story also joins them in contesting Augustine's view of grace as fulfilling nature's form by elevating and assisting the believer to obedience.

The relative disharmonies between the stories of religious experience told by Luther and Calvin are multiple. Luther tells a story primarily of the law: nature initially trusts in it for justification; the law then grows into an infinite and merciless tyrant; finally the righteousness of God given via faith alone, the climax of the story, liberates the believer from the law's horrors at the same time that nature realizes its utter soteriological passivity. Calvin, by contrast, tells a story primarily of nature. As I will describe, the believer first takes confidence in nature's abilities; one then comes under an infinite law in the form of God's judgment, "descending into the self" until one recognizes nature's "nothingness"; and the grace of Christ, again the peak of the story, then announces the believer as justified by faith alone, this time propelling nature into a life of ceaseless obedience. In addition to these differences of emphasis, Luther sees the law's growth to infinity as both a problem of conscience alone and the enemy that grace must overcome, while Calvin, I shall argue, applies the infinite character of the law to both the inner and the outer aspects of nature and, what is perhaps more, sees its infinity as illustrative of its embedding in grace.

My interpretation of religious experience in Calvin begins by describing important dynamics in his thought exegetically, focusing on the inner movement that he calls the "descent into the self." I will follow this exegesis with an analysis of religious experience in Calvin in light of the ontological connection between form and righteousness, showing how his story reiterates critical aspects of the one told by Luther. The reader should here remember that, according to the premised connection, the law gives that form and righteousness by which nature becomes discernible as a nature. At the conclusion of the interpretation of Calvin, I will outline the ontological significance of the divergences between the Reformers regarding the law (that Calvin embeds it in grace) and nature (that Calvin does not sharply distinguish the inner from the outer). By this method, I hope to illumine the theological trajectory of the experience of grace for Calvin, its basic congruence with Luther, and the relative disharmonies that distinguish the two thinkers.

Calvin's story of religious experience begins with nature's temptation to ascribe righteousness to itself in light of its God-given gifts, including natural virtues and the goodness that humans can achieve according to creaturely standards. Concentration on these gifts results in pride in one's supposed merit and a consequent sluggishness toward the tireless obedience that the law requires.⁶²⁷ Nature always wants to flatter itself regarding its abilities, but this flattery is anathema to justification in Christ. Calvin thus directs the believer to the law, not that it should justify, but that by it believers might "shake off their sluggishness" and be "pinch[ed] awake to their imperfection."⁶²⁸ This "pinching" amounts to a terrifying confrontation with God's holiness that decimates one's former confidence. Calvin describes this "descent into the self" from two angles, one focused upon the holiness of God and the other upon the depravity of nature. The centrality of this movement for our examination of religious experience in Calvin demands a full quotation of the passages that depict it, the first from the perspective of God and the second from that of the sinner:

Our discourse is concerned with the justice not of a human court but of a heavenly tribunal, lest we measure by our own small measure the integrity of works needed to satisfy the divine judgment. Yet it is amazing with what great rashness and boldness this is commonly defined. Indeed, one can see how there are none who more confidently, and as people say, boisterously chatter over the righteousness of works than they who are monstrously plagued with manifest diseases, or creak with defects beneath the skin. That happens because they do not think about God's justice, which they would never hold in such derision if they were affected by even the slightest feeling of it. Yet surely it is held of precious little value if it is not recognized as God's justice and so perfect that nothing can be admitted except what is in every part whole and complete and undefiled by any corruption. Such was never found in man and never will be...for [before God's justice] we deal with a serious matter, and do not engage in frivolous word battles. To this question, I insist, we must apply our mind if we would profitably inquire concerning true righteousness: How shall we reply to the Heavenly Judge when he calls us to account? Let us envisage for ourselves that Judge, not as our minds naturally imagine him, but as he is depicted for us in Scripture: by whose brightness the stars are darkened; by whose strength the mountains are melted; by whose wrath the earth is shaken; beside whose purity all things are defiled; whose righteousness not even the angels can bear; who makes not the guilty man innocent; whose vengeance when once kindled penetrates to the depths of hell. Let us behold him, I say, sitting in judgment to examine the deeds of men: Who will stand confident before his throne? "Who...can

627. See pages 197-198 above; cf. *Inst.*, I.i.1, II.i.2, III.xiii.2.

628. *Inst.*, II.vii.14.

“dwell with the everlasting fire?” asks the prophet. “Who...can dwell with everlasting burnings?”...“If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who shall stand?”⁶²⁹

Having heard Calvin’s vision of the descent into the self from the vantage point of the Judge, a picture sure to inspire trembling and consternation, let us hear it from the perspective of the nature so judged:

[Under the teaching of the law] we must then...descend into ourselves. From this we may at length infer two things. First, by comparing the righteousness of the law with our life, we learn how far we are from conforming to God’s will. And for this reason we are unworthy to hold our place among his creatures – still less to be accounted his children. Secondly, in considering our powers, we learn that they are not only too weak to fulfill the law, but utterly nonexistent. From this necessarily follows mistrust of our own virtue, then anxiety and trepidation of mind. For the conscience cannot bear the weight of iniquity without soon coming before God’s judgment. Truly, God’s judgment cannot be felt without evoking the dread of death. So also, constrained by the proofs of its impotence, conscience cannot but fall straightway into deep despair of its own powers. Both these emotions engender humility and self-abasement. Thus it finally comes to pass that man, thoroughly frightened by the awareness of eternal death, which he sees as justly threatening him because of his own unrighteousness, betakes himself to God’s mercy alone, as the only haven of safety. Thus, realizing that he does not possess the ability to pay to the law what he owes, and despairing in himself, he is moved to seek and await help from another quarter.⁶³⁰

These two passages capture the spirit of the observation with which Calvin opens the *Institutes*, that true wisdom consists in two parts, “the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”⁶³¹ This knowledge, which locates the Creator and the creature in their proper relation, elevates God to the highest while it strips nature of any claim to righteousness. The sinner comes before the God by whose power the earth was formed, and before whose wrath it quakes with anguish, with the result that he or she feels the full severity of the law and the unqualified powerlessness of nature to appease its Maker. To know the immeasurable greatness of God is to know the antithetically immeasurable smallness of humanity, and beyond this, the perdition awaiting sinners apart from grace. Saving knowledge of God presupposes this dual realization of the justice and majesty of God and the worthlessness of His disobedient creatures, a realization constitutive of the descent into the self.

629. *Inst.*, III.xii.1. The quotations within Calvin’s text are drawn from Isa. 33:14-15 and Psalms 130:3, 129:3.

630. *Inst.*, II.viii.4.

631. *Inst.*, I.i.1.

At the heart of this descent stands the individual's acknowledgment that nature's powers are "utterly nonexistent," the perception that immediately precedes the experience of grace. One's consideration of that grace "will be foolish and weak unless every man admit his guilt before the Heavenly Judge, and concerned about his own acquittal, willingly cast himself down and confess his nothingness."⁶³² For to be cleansed of its "thousand sins,"⁶³³ what can a nature that is nothing do?⁶³⁴ Thus the denigration of nature unto nothingness that Calvin repeats throughout the *Institutes*, illustrating the progress of the descent into the self until one "betakes himself to God's mercy alone, as the only haven of safety."⁶³⁵

Looking to Christ out of nature's depravity, the believer observes "a wonderful consolation: that we perceive judgment to be in the hands of him who has already destined us to share with him the honor of judging! Far indeed is he from mounting his judgment seat to condemn us!"⁶³⁶ The individual stricken unto nothingness discovers a great solace, a righteousness imputed by the Son's grace "that he may care for the consciences of his people." This turn of events elicits the "feeling of delight" in which the heart throws off the threat of perdition, just as it is remade in its eagerness to obey, now a heart of flesh rather than stone. The destined graced stamped upon the will, the Christian sets about the life of ceaseless obedience with the zeal of an assured conscience, oriented in earnest to the practical restoration of the image of God.⁶³⁷

The ontological connection between form and righteousness reveals the foregoing trajectory of religious experience as a narrative of the rise and fall of form. As for Luther, for

632. *Inst.*, III.xii.1.

633. *Inst.*, III.xii.2.

634. *Inst.*, III.xiv.5.

635. For other references to nature as nothing or its powers as nonexistent, see *Inst.*, II.v.13, II.ii.20, II.iii.2, II.iii.9.

636. *Inst.*, II.xvi.18.

637. See page 198 above.

Calvin the law and nature combine in an initial leaning toward form countered by their eventual reduction to shapelessness. Also like Luther, for Calvin the law loses its form via its expansion to infinity while nature suffers as the object of that expansion, with grace consummating the dissolution of both. The terminology of the story might change from Luther to Calvin, but its ontological meaning does not.

Nature's initial estimation of itself as capable of some righteousness, relying on its powers of obedience as at least partially sufficient for justification, implies an ontological hope in the acquisition of form through obedience as a means toward salvation. Nature thus seeks to rise in form as it seeks justification via obedience to the law. Yet it is the impression that nature could add to its justification that Calvin wants to destroy, completely denying natural righteousness. Harkening the believer to the law's first use, he insists that one abandon the "human tribunal," coming before the unmitigated requirement of the law in the person of the divine Judge. This aspect of Calvin's descent into the self mirrors the growth of the law to infinity experienced by Luther, though here couched in the language of the majesty and wrath of God rather than the multiplication of commands.⁶³⁸ In each case, the power and judgment of the law expands beyond all expectation that obedience could fulfill it, producing dual and antagonistic qualities within the law itself. On the one hand, the law promises to give form as a way of justification, while on the other, its expansion to infinity would annul that promise, and by extension the law's capacity as form-giver.⁶³⁹

The increasing chasm between the righteousness of the Judge and the weakness of the believer presses in upon nature's earlier confidence in its capacities. Where the will seemed capable of choosing the good, one finds that capability progressively neutered; where one might have thought reason sufficient to discern saving truths, its conclusions disappear as smoke and

638. See page 154 above.

639. See pages 154-155 above.

foolishness. For Calvin, the righteousness that nature would hold up as its achievement shrinks before the “thousand sins” that the Judge brings in accusation, just as, for Luther, each single act of obedience is dwarfed by nature’s “wagonloads of sins that increase infinitely.”⁶⁴⁰ Surveying the nature of which the individual was proud, he or she finds it all but helpless before the immensity of God’s judgment. Like Luther’s exhortation that the law reduce the believer to nothing, imposing a “true taste of death,”⁶⁴¹ Calvin insists that nature come to recognize its “nothingness” under a law that bears “the most immediate death.”⁶⁴²

By this process both the law and nature reverse the tendency to form they had indulged. The law loses definition in its growth to infinity at the same time that God appears unforgiving, severe, and bent upon punishment. Indeed, whereas Calvin elsewhere identifies divine law as a restatement of natural law,⁶⁴³ the identification of that same law with the character of God suggests an intriguing distortion, as if the nature of the creature should replicate, in its ineffability, that of the Creator. So the law’s infinity crushes the individual by a mercilessness in step with the looming holiness of the Judge. Cowering under this judgment, nature endures the opposite diminishment of form, relinquishing its definition in the lessening confidence that it possesses any intrinsic righteousness. The law expands without boundary while nature contracts into the infinitesimal, with both progressively abdicating the form in which they were designed. The ontological pattern of growth to infinity and reduction to nothing by which Luther’s believer experiences the deformation of the law and nature thus resurfaces in Calvin.⁶⁴⁴

640. See page 154.

641. See pages 126-127, 155. For Luther on the nature seeing itself as “nothing” in its own eyes, see *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31.348, and *Commentary on Galatians*, LW 26.126.

642. *Inst.*, II.vii.3.

643. See page 189 above.

644. See pages 158-160.

When the Christian at last releases the claim to natural righteousness *in toto*, acknowledging nature's utter emptiness and submitting to the inevitable curse of disobedience – when the descent, in other words, hits bottom in a psychological hell⁶⁴⁵ – then one meets the grace that comforts the conscience, liberating the believer unto joy. Ontologically speaking, when the law has so expanded as to completely annul its support of nature's inclination to form, its movement to infinity equaling and thereby conquering its appearance as a way of righteousness, nature sincerely perceives its own nothingness, that is, it is freed from form as freed from the law. Though Calvin does not employ his terms, one can discern in this dynamic Luther's teachings on the "death of death" and the "law of liberty." For the law perishes in the equality in which the movement to infinity annuls the law's claim to justify, an annulment that renders nature free. Like Luther, Calvin implicitly links this culminating ontological event to the appropriation of grace in the heart, the felt knowledge that the Redeemer justifies the believer in the nothingness that is nature's total abdication of form.

This shared ontological story, the basic congruence between Luther and Calvin, stands in spite of Calvin's lack of a sharp distinction between the inner and outer aspects of nature as well as his embedding of the law within grace. These two aspects of Calvin's thought combine in the ceaseless obedience that he would have of Christians. In his call to "unceasing progress" in and "unwavering attention" toward the law, with a heart "zealously inclined" to obedience by grace and on guard against all kinds of sloth, one meets the infinity of the law applied to the ethical life. In the descent into the self, the law expands to infinity as one approaches God's judgment seat, while in the ceaseless obedience exhorted by Calvin one encounters the law as so expanded. The law whose commands provide no rest, and that goads the believer on to an apparently limitless expectation of conformity, is the practical meaning of a law whose tendency to infinity is its

645. See, by comparison, Calvin's description of Christ's agony in Gethsemane, where he argues that Jesus experienced hell in his consciousness prior to the crucifixion (II.xvi.10-12).

participation in grace.⁶⁴⁶ For this life of obedience, according to Calvin, is grounded in, oriented to, and in a muted way expressive of, the grace by which God restores nature to the divine image. It is the sanctification inseparable from the justification to which God destines His children.

Thus the most significant difference between Luther and Calvin, which concerns the relation of the law to grace: Luther views the law's infinity, experienced in the conscience, as the antithetical enemy that grace conquers by consummating the law's regression from form, whereas Calvin, applying the law's infinity to both the conscience and the life of good works, embeds that law within the grace that consummates it. For Calvin, the law in its tendency toward form, but especially in the infinitizing movement that would annul that tendency, springs forth from the promise of annulment in grace; the law's increasing unboundedness, by advancing toward that annulment, expresses the destined abdication of form in an incomplete and muted way; and grace, at its advent, fulfills the destiny of the law as the obliteration of the form that remains. The law's fulfilled dissolution differs from its infinitizing progress toward that end, one might say, as a difference in "clarity of manifestation," Calvin's distinction between the law and the gospel.⁶⁴⁷ The law also meets that end as predestined in the same way that the elect proceed to heaven according to God's eternal decree. Both Luther and Calvin, therefore, teach the believer to advance toward grace through an infinite law, a road by which both nature and the law begin to lose their form. Only Calvin makes the law's infinity a participant in grace, destining its path in parallel with the chosen embarked upon it.

646. This observation, I think, has some bearing for Max Weber's theory of Calvinist asceticism in *The Protestant Ethic*. He is concerned with the rationalization of economic activity, involving "a fundamental change in the whole meaning of life at every moment and in every action," by which "the effects of grace transforming a man from the *status naturae* to the *status gratiae*" are shown (31). What is this fundamental change but the believer's subordination to the infinite law in its application to economic life? It was, I suggest, primarily the infinite character of this law in its connection to grace – and not the doctrine of individual predestination emphasized by Weber – that led to principles that aggrandized capitalistic ventures as if business could expand without limit. Thus the energized focus on large turnover, low prices, and reinvestment that separated the emerging capitalist ethos from its traditionalist forerunner (71).

647. *Inst.*, II.ix.4; cf. page 24 above.

This difference further reveals how the divergences between Luther and Calvin, when considered specifically with respect to the outward application of the law, add up to a secondary but diametrical opposition. Luther posits a grace focused upon the annulment of the law and that will not stand for engagement in duties as if these had any part in justification. The mistrust of works-righteousness is central to Luther's ethical attitude, with grace securing the conscience in indifference to good deeds as a means for salvation. Luther provides little room for a vigorous outward ethic, but pushes the believer toward the annulment of that rigor in a way reminiscent of his break from monastic life. Calvin, on the other hand, though similarly weary of works-righteousness, by embedding the infinite law within grace makes ethical rigor intrinsic to grace's arrival. Calvin's believer dedicates all of his or her energy to the outward establishment of the law not because it saves but because it is predestined toward the grace that does. Luther and Calvin consequently view the outward manifestation of the law with diametrically opposed attitudes. Luther annuls it as a threat to grace but Calvin affirms and establishes it as a necessary precursor to grace; Luther would have his followers exist in indifference to the merciless law that Calvin would have his followers establish. Though the Reformers confront one another as enemies on this point, even dialectically suppressing one another in their efforts, I contend that they do so as members of a single camp. Justification by faith alone animates the theology of both Luther and Calvin, forming their basic congruence and placing them on the same side versus Augustine, though the relative divergence that separates them amounts, at certain points, to bitter opposition.

This argument for diametrical opposition between Luther and Calvin would likely encounter objections from those who maintain that Luther's thought implies a third use of the law not radically different from Calvin's.⁶⁴⁸ Does Luther not exhort Christians to obey out of joy in Christ's grace, and does he not uphold the moral benefits of the civil law? To describe Luther as

648. See Edward Engelbrecht, *Friends of the Law: Luther's Use of the Law for the Christian Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011).

one-sidedly annulling the outward law amounts to caricature, an opponent may claim. I admit that I feel the force of the objection and do not mean to caricature Luther as though he were consciously antinomian. On the other hand, Luther's antithesis between law and gospel stands at the heart of his theology and cannot but imbue his followers with an equivocation regarding works that prohibits a rationalized outward ethic. Calvin's version of this antithesis possesses much less energy than Luther's, especially as his embedding of the law within grace provides impetus for a highly disciplined ethical attitude. Calvin thus allows the infinite law to invade and rule over ethical life, while Luther prohibits this invasion and counters it as a confusion of law and grace; Calvin would establish the infinite ethic whereas Luther would annul it. On this point the Reformers oppose one another, though on the whole they remain allies.

Conclusion

These observations bring the analysis of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin under the first ontological lens to a close. We have seen that Augustine, in attributing righteousness to the law and to nature in spite of its sin, likewise attributes form to both. Grace then acts to heal nature of its defect in form by assisting it to better obedience to the form-giving law. Luther and Calvin, by contrast, deny all righteousness to nature and the law according to the doctrine of justification by faith, unintentionally designating them as instances of formless matter. Grace, for the Reformers, justifies the believer in that formlessness while annulling the law as a temptation toward form. Luther and Calvin tell this same story despite their relative divergence regarding the relation between law and grace.

We have also discovered the surprising juxtaposition of an infinitely expanding law with the ontological motifs of freedom and equality as the inner mechanism of the experience of grace by faith alone. The law is initially posited as a way of righteousness, but by its expansion to infinity the law tends toward the annulment of that positing. When the annulment achieves equality with the positing, it thereby conquers the positing, so that the law is "freed" of its

definition as a form-giver. Nature is also originally inclined to form but then experiences its own version of annulment as a consequence of the law's infinite growth, the dynamic that the Reformers describe as its reduction to nothing. This movement seeks to equal and thus neutralize nature's original inclination toward form. When nature recognizes its nothingness under the infinite law, it grasps the equality of its inclination toward form and the annulment of that inclination as the realized freedom from form, and what is more, as grace. One cannot, therefore, distinguish the growth of the infinite law from the movement toward a consummated freedom and equality for both the law and nature, whether one views the law's infinity as grace's enemy (Luther) or its ally (Calvin).

The infinite law possesses four characteristics that will be of importance in the final chapter, where we return to the Great Awakening. According to Luther and Calvin, the infinite law is first defined by its unlimited expansion. Luther understands this growth specifically as the multiplication of commands in the conscience, whereas Calvin identifies it with the infinite and insatiable wrath of God's judgment. Second, for both Reformers the infinite law reduces those under it "to nothing," a somewhat hyperbolic phrase meant to convey a very real conviction of despair and dread under the law's curse, and the individual's total abandonment of trust in natural powers for justification. Third, the believer experiences the infinite law as merciless, provoking feelings of oppression and tyranny in those subjects whom it would squash to nothingness. Fourth, a point drawn more directly from Luther and more implicitly from Calvin, the infinite law convicts those under it before they act and provides no room for self-defense. Free will is meaningless under such a law because one's sins always vastly outweigh one's good deeds, transforming the supposed good of nature and its works into things useless for justification. Under the infinite law, as before the wrath of the Judge, sinners are relentlessly guilty and have done nor can do anything by their own powers to remove the ascription of guilt. The implications of these characteristics will appear in the concluding chapter, where the confrontation between

grace and law takes on flesh in the collision between appeals grounded in the inner experience of grace and the church's authority as a law-bearer.

CHAPTER 6

THE INVERTED GOSPEL

I have argued that Saint Augustine views grace as “elevating and assisting” nature to a better obedience, or ontologically to an improved acquisition of form via the law; that Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone sees grace as executing “the death of death” upon the law while serving as “the law of liberty” for nature, implying the designation of both the law and nature as formless matter; and that Calvin provides a variation of Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith by joining sanctification inseparably to justification, embedding the law and nature within the grace that dissolves them. In each case, I have focused on the believer’s experience of grace as a sinner, isolating that experience from a broader understanding of the Christian narrative of salvation. This chapter turns to that narrative, extrapolating the significance of the ontological conclusions so far drawn by applying them to the Christian story as composed of six elements: creation, fall, life under the law, the experience of grace, life under grace, and redemption. I will trace the ontological contour of this narrative for each theologian, drawing the details of their respective narratives from their theological frameworks in combination with their personal experiences (As he provides no personal experience, Calvin’s narrative derives entirely from his theology). In this way the ontological import of the experience of grace, situated in its relation to the overall story of creation, fall, and redemption, shall become more apparent. Saint Augustine tells a story of nature created as formed, fallen as defective in form, and redeemed as raised to the fullness of form, whereas Luther and Calvin tell the opposite story. Their shared theology of justification by faith, I shall show, tells a tale of nature created as formless, “fallen” as rising into form, and redeemed as returning to its original state.

This broader examination of the ontology of religious experience requires proceeding to the second of the ontological lenses guiding this study. That lens affirms two possible ontological

structures for formless matter according to its appearance as a point in the ascent of created matter from nothing to being or its place in the opposite movement from being to nothing. Formless matter in the latter instance is, of course, a hypothetical construct, but this does not diminish its explanatory power for the investigation undertaken in this chapter.

My initial formulation of this lens turned on the distinction between the content and the form of matter as created by God.⁶⁴⁹ The content refers to the being of that matter, while the form refers to its soteriological activity or vector, that is, matter's capacity to rise into a distinct nature or fall toward nothingness. Formless matter as a stage in the upward movement of creation possesses a positive ontological content (its being as created by God) as well as a positive soteriological form (vector toward righteousness/definition). Its status as formless reflects the embryonic state of its vector, namely that the tendency toward the righteousness of definition had yet to distinguish itself from the possibility, attendant to all being as created from nothing, that being should fall back toward nothingness. The equality between the vector toward definition and the possibility of returning to nothingness is matter's freedom from form, its momentary subsistence as formlessness. I refer to this model of formless matter as formlessness A.

Formless matter in the inverse movement from formed being down to nothing also possesses a positive ontological content (its being as created by God), but its soteriological vector has changed. Rather than moving toward righteousness and definition, it tends back toward nothingness as the dissolution of form. The power originally attendant to righteousness appears to have switched allegiances, partnering with being's possibility of falling back into nothingness so that that possibility grows into a ruling destructive force. Its power dissolves the form once definitive of the nature it controls, so that the good being molded by God is stripped of its righteousness and is thus defective. The nature fashioned by God has become a sinful good. The power that accomplishes this dissolution, having borrowed its force from the righteousness that would give form, is emboldened with the strength though not the vector of that righteousness, and

649. Pages 44-47.

in this sense is a righteous evil. The hypothetical construct aligning a sinful good with a righteous evil is critical to the following analysis, constituting the formula for formlessness B. This type of formlessness, as the product of a process of decay and despite the good inherent in all being, is best considered wicked.

Like formlessness A, formlessness B entails an equality tied to freedom from form. In formlessness A, this equality existed between being's vector toward righteousness and its possibility of falling back into nothingness. In formlessness B, the vector toward righteousness is effectively annulled as the inclination to form is equaled and thus conquered by an active vector toward indefiniteness. In "Form and Its Absence" I referred to this soteriological redirection as the transfer of the power of righteousness from that of giving form to that of taking it away, or from good to evil. My research up to this point, however, reveals that the idea of "transfer" is not quite right. The power of form – that is, the power of the law as a form-giver – rather bends back upon and undermines itself as the law's commands expand to infinity. The law in this case wants to annul itself as bifurcated into antagonistic vectors, one promising the giving of form and the other its denial. Depicted in Figure 1, the law rises as a form-giver but falls as it progressively expands, sabotaging its capacity to bestow form. The dynamic of rise and fall, in addition to the combined concepts of sinful good/righteous evil, will come into sharper view in the cases of Luther and Calvin, whose doctrines of justification by faith alone presume the infinite growth of the law. We shall examine their thought after outlining the ontological meaning of the Christian narrative according to Saint Augustine.

Each narrative, one should note, relies upon and at times restates the exegetical work of the preceding chapters in order to weave a coherent story for the respective theologians. A significant portion of these narratives comes, then, by way of summary, in addition to expansions upon previous aspects of the argument.

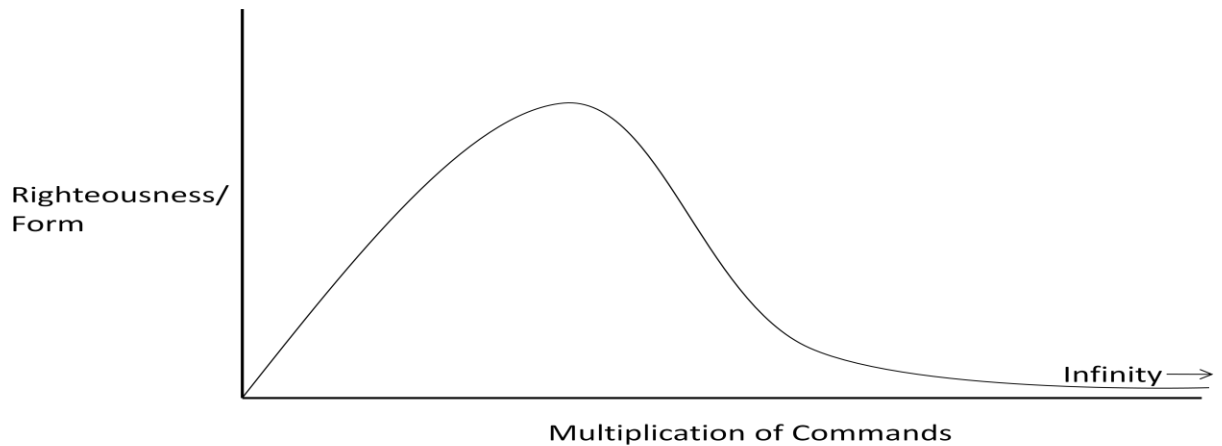


Figure 1. The Law Turns Against Itself

1. Augustine

In Augustine's theology of *creation* matter moves through formlessness A into formed being. In the case of human nature, the form received possesses an unblemished ontological and soteriological goodness including a will inclined toward the good. Nature possessed this form as the law of its being, entailing what it ought to be as a nature. Inasmuch as persons before the fall conformed perfectly to this law, they could boast of a nature perfect according to its kind. Yet God did not secure this nature in incorruption, allowing for the chance that it would fall into sin. The first couple knew the limitations of creaturely existence, including finitude, mutability, and instability. They could change, and though these changes did not imply a loss of form, they implied the possibility of that loss. Humans could have gained incorruption by persevering in their original sinlessness, obeying God's command by this perseverance. On the other hand, they could refuse to persevere through disobedience, sacrificing their opportunity for incorruption and descending back toward the nothing out of which they were created. Unfallen Adam and Eve accordingly lived in a middle state, entirely good as sinless and inclined toward the good of incorruptible form but open to the possibility of falling into a lesser form through sin.⁶⁵⁰

650. One could say that Adam and Eve were "neutral" in this latter sense, inasmuch as they could move upwards or downwards in being. Their goodness as created and intrinsic inclination toward righteousness, however, subsume the ontological significance of this neutrality within it, so that they are

In order to improve the likelihood of humanity's achievement of incorruption, God blessed the first persons with two gifts. The first gift, the perfect innocence of their natures as formed, I noted above. Though God left open the possibility of sin, He provided persons with a nature bereft of positive inclination toward it. As a second gift, God gave the grace needed to overcome the creaturely limitations of finitude, mutability, and instability that attended to nature. God meant by this grace to "elevate and assist" an already perfect nature to an incorruptible perfection, giving Adam and Eve power to obey beyond their natural abilities. God girded persons up in this double gratuity in order to safeguard them against falling toward nothingness, the total loss of form. If one were to imagine natural righteousness in the garden on an ontological scale with incorrupt form at the top, it has progressed a significant way up, paralleling nature's unstained goodness and form as created. God observes the space remaining on the scale between its upper limit at incorruption and the created goodness of nature, a space representative of the indeterminacy in which potential sin lurks, and adds grace to nature in order to lessen that space. The double gratuity stacks the cards very much in favor of nature's achievement of incorrupt form, so much so that Augustine is at a loss to explain the intrusion of sin.

With the *fall*, the natural righteousness that God had aided toward incorruption with grace suffered a defect. Rather than ascending toward an impervious perfection, it slid back toward nothingness. The potential evil aligned with the negative aspect of created being made good its threat to despoil the creature, diminishing its form. Augustine, however, understands the diminishing of being and righteousness involved in sin only as a defect. He attributes no positive power to sin, not envisioning it as a substantive counter-force to righteousness. Augustine thus does not imply an understanding of sin as the transfer of the power of righteousness to the side of evil. Nor does sin take up the power once intrinsic to righteousness in order to exploit that power

ultimately neither ontologically nor soteriologically neutral. One comes closer to the truth, I think, by abandoning the language of neutrality in describing Adam and Eve (Augustine does not use it), and speaking of human nature as a good not yet secured in goodness. See "Form and Its Absence," pages 18-19.

against formed being. As a result of the fall, nature does not break into the dichotomy of “sinful good,” denoting a being bereft of the power of righteousness, and “righteous evil,” denoting the sin that has received that power, that I have described as constitutive of formlessness B. The power of righteousness simply disappears, not relocating from the good to the evil aspect of created being.

Indeed, nature does not become formless at all because of the fall, but exists *under the law*, wanting to retrieve the form lost because of sin but lacking the power to do so. Sin seriously wounds nature, nearly destroying its definition and depleting its righteousness. The body inevitably dies as a result, and the soul lives at a distance from God. But sin does not wipe out nature’s form completely, leaving vestiges of the natural law by which one can discern what nature ought to be as formed, as well as a remnant of the powers of reason, bodily discipline, and will with which persons can seek God and co-operate with divine grace. God also issues the divine law in the Old and New Testaments, which point nature beyond its original perfection to incorruptibility. Life under the law, which refers to that law as natural and divine, describes nature’s struggle to recover form unto incorruption beneath a legal edifice that imposes commands without providing the power for obedience. Absent the power of grace that fulfills the law, the latter is “the letter that killeth.” Wholly good on one hand as inscribed in nature, and given by God on the other to advance persons toward incorruptibility, the law’s inability to raise nature to obedience only exposes sin more profoundly. Both the natural and the divine law amount to a ministration of death, condemning nature for its disobedience.⁶⁵¹

Augustine felt the law’s sting in his own life under the preaching of Ambrose. In Milan, Augustine was continually unable to obey as he desired, with the reality of sin growing in his conscience. His guilt under the law came to a crisis point in a Milanese garden, where he became deeply vexed at God’s anger at his disobedience. In this setting, and upon reading the biblical

651. See pages 106-110.

exhortation to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires,” Augustine underwent a dramatic change. “No sooner had I reached the end of the verse,” he writes, “than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away.”⁶⁵² God had poured an overwhelming grace upon Augustine, a grace that he would later theorize as an infusion of inward power, a divine working upon the affections in which the law of God becomes an object of delight rather than fear, and in which God Himself becomes the believer’s deepest desire.

An external and divinely bestowed power reigns down upon nature as the *experience of grace*. This power catalyzes nature’s righteousness to a level that it could not achieve by itself, “elevating and assisting” the believer to obedience to both the natural law of form and the divine law that lifts form to incorruption. Not that it secures this form immediately, but grace empowers nature toward the improvement of sin’s wound, overcoming the defect in being and the loss of righteousness that evil inflicts upon the person. Grace thus establishes individuals in a *life of obedience* that both heals nature as disabled and complements the law by giving power for its fulfillment. In theory, this power can lead persons to the height of a life without sin.⁶⁵³

The potential for sinlessness means that God could, if He desired, so reinforce a person’s natural righteousness that it reaches incorruptibility, the top of the scale of creaturely being. In this case the body still dies as the punishment for sin but the soul has achieved something like imperturbability, approaching as close to God as possible in this world. Augustine thought this state of being possible but extremely unlikely for everyone except Jesus and perhaps Mary. Christians should rather await the full *redemption* of their souls in heaven, where God will join them with spiritual bodies for a life of beatitude. Here form knows neither blemish nor its possibility, but exists without threats of decay or disease. In eternity, God will have raised a nature once fallen to the determinate perfection He hoped for it in the garden.

652. *conf.*, VIII.xii.29.

653. See page 110-113.

2. Luther

The ontological interpretation of the Christian narrative according to Luther that I will present departs widely from the conventional reading of his thought. Scholars familiar with him will likely find the argument untenable if not preposterous, but I contend that the portrait of the Christian story that I will sketch in Luther's name follows from the ontological premises guiding this study. As argued in the Luther chapter, the first of these premises identified the ontological consequence of his doctrine of justification by faith alone for the law and nature, namely that both are ontologically designated as formless rather than formed, with nature existing as formless both prior to and after the fall. This implication of Luther's doctrine, when further scrutinized in light of the second premise outlining the two types of formlessness, turns Augustine's theology on its head. Where the Church Father would have nature created as formed, fallen as defective in form, and redeemed as formed in incorruption, with grace securing that redemption, Luther posits a nature created as formless, "fallen" as rising to form, and redeemed as descending back into formlessness, with grace facilitating this inverted redemption.

My method for arriving at this construal of Luther's version of the Christian narrative moves through the answers to three questions, each asked in view of the second ontological premise. After dealing with each question individually, I will bring the answers together in a unified ontological narrative that I ascribe to Luther, whether he would recognize it as his own or not. Picking up the main themes in the concluding section of the Luther chapter, where I contended that his doctrine of justification by faith unintentionally designates the law and nature as formless matter, the first question asks whether they are instances of formlessness A or B after the fall. Given that the law and nature are formless as sinful, is this formlessness and the grace that facilitates it good (formlessness A) or evil (formlessness B)? The second question moves to life prior to the fall, asking what kind of formless matter (A or B) nature was as sinless, inquiring also what kind of formlessness the law was prior to the fall. Under this heading I shall address the ontological meaning of the *donum superadditum* or gift of the Spirit that protected Adam and

Eve from sin prior to the fall, investigating whether this *donum* added form to the law and nature or withheld them from it. The third question concerns the ontological meaning of Luther's dialectic between law and gospel, in which the graced sinner participates as constitutive of the life of faith. This question seeks the significance of the believer's dialectical suspension between a law that would lead to despair and a gospel that, though it contains the good news of grace, could be distorted into a new law. The answers to these three questions help reveal the contour of the Christian life in Luther's theology, which I will summarize at the end of this section.

- (i) If the law and nature are instances of formless matter after the fall for Luther, are they examples of formlessness A or B? Are they good or evil as formless, and is the grace that drives them into formlessness good or evil for doing so?

The concluding argument in the Luther chapter delineated a trajectory of religious experience in which reason's trust in the law as a way of justification succumbs to the abolition of that trust, as well as the eradication of confidence in nature's power to obey the law's commands. The early affirmation of righteousness for the law and nature gives way to the unqualified denial of that righteousness, a rejection mediated by two distinct steps. First, the law's growth to infinity undermines its appearance as a way to justification at the same time that it undermines the law's definition as law, with the latter dynamic constituted in the law's overwhelming, though not yet abolishing, human freedom as its limit. Second, grace consummates the law's advance to infinity by the individual's recognition of utter helplessness, and thus nature's abdication of free will, and one's ensuing turn to Christ by faith alone. With freedom abolished, the law no longer possesses limit or authority, losing its definition as law and descending into formlessness. The nature that gains its form by that law becomes formless as a result, so that the denial of all righteousness to the law and nature means the denial of form to both.⁶⁵⁴

Do the law and nature in this vision of religious experience conform to the structure of formlessness B? More specifically, are they good as created by God but totally stripped of

654. See pages 152-163.

righteousness, and therefore sinful goods, in combination with grace as a righteous evil that drives their good into formlessness?

Let us return to the trust in the law that Luther's story of religious experience presumes, and that initiated his own path toward grace. The authority of the law here depends on the validity of its claim to justify, a claim that presupposes some righteousness for both the law as a way of justification and nature in its capacity to follow that way. Luther labels reason's assent to this claim as its abuse of the law, which I interpreted ontologically as nature's attempt to gain form via a form-giving law.⁶⁵⁵ At this point neither the law nor nature appears as a sinful good in the sense described, for each has some claim to righteousness and thus to form.

The believer's trust in the law inevitably leads, however, to the "conflict of conscience" at the heart of Luther's account of religious experience. Here the believer suffers the roaring of hell and the devil and feels the anguish of a nature impotent to fulfill the law.⁶⁵⁶ The law's expansion to infinity underlies this inner conflict, contradicting the affirmation of the law's righteousness by revealing its promise as a way to justification as false. As the commands multiply, the law appears progressively merciless; reason loses confidence in the law as a road to salvation, but cannot escape its authority; and so what seemed a blessing transforms into a curse. Under the increasing weight of the commands, the individual feels all but doomed, so that the wiping away of the law as a way to justification entails a similar depletion of confidence in nature. Ontologically speaking, the law's expansion to infinity indicates a movement of self-annulment that counters its movement toward form, though the annulment does not achieve the parity with the law's authority needed to silence its threat, finally negating its form as law. The shadow of a sinful good emerges in the self-annulment in which the law undermines its own

655. See page 158.

656. See page 155.

righteousness, but that annulment has yet to mature into the total abolition of that righteousness.⁶⁵⁷

Figure 2 depicts the arc of the Christian's encounter with the law according to this reading of Luther. The upward movement of the line represents nature's trust in the law as a way to righteousness, and the believer's consequent attempt to gain form through the law as a path to justification. At some point the multiplication of commands sabotages this upward movement, so that the law begins to lose its capacity to give form. The decline represents both the law's self-annulment and nature's growing anxiety, for the believer who continues to trust in the law desperately wants the line to ascend at the same time that he or she feels its asymptotic return to zero as the burden of an infinitely expanding demand. The infinitesimal proximity between the arc as it extends to the right and the x-axis represents the Christian in the heat of the conflict of conscience, feeling damned because the law cannot give the justification it once promised while it wields only increasing threats and accusations. The asymptote also represents nature's growing conviction that it cannot possibly obey to the extent needed to grasp salvation. What matters here, though, is that the law's self-annulment has not yet completely undermined itself, not returning the asymptote fully to the x-axis. The law's movement to infinity, in other words, lacks the power to totally annul its positing as a form-giver, its claim to righteousness, and its authority.

657. See pages 159-160.

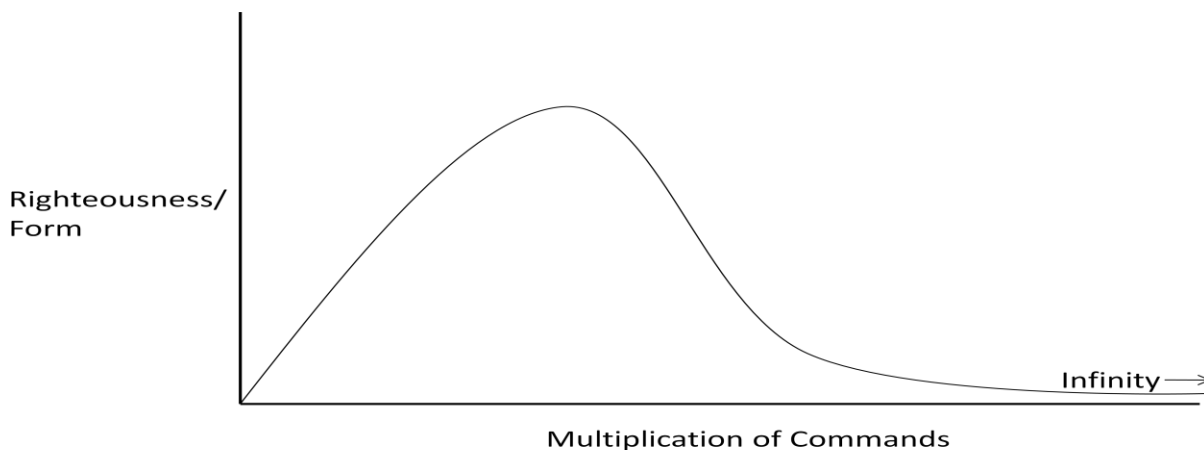


Figure 2. The Law Expands to Infinity in Luther

In the midst of this internal pressure a light breaks through: nature realizes that it possesses no resources for righteousness at all while it simultaneously abdicates the law as a means to justification. The emotional appropriation of these convictions signals the believer's whole-hearted turn to Jesus Christ, the sigh of "Abba! Father!" that stands against the roaring of hell and the devil.⁶⁵⁸ It also means the discovery of a new righteousness in Him, the abundant and freely given bestowal of a grace that silences the law's condemnation because it announces a new way of justification through faith alone (the starburst in Figure 3). The righteousness of God that seized Luther, applied personally to the believer through Jesus Christ so that He takes on one's sin while one receives the blessing of His righteousness, wipes out the law as a way of justification, therefore its authority, and therefore its terror. The believer's *in toto* turn away from nature and the law and to Jesus Christ consummates in this manner the law's descent to the x-axis, bringing its self-annulment into equality with its potential as a way toward form.

658. LW 26.126-127, 329, 384; page 156.

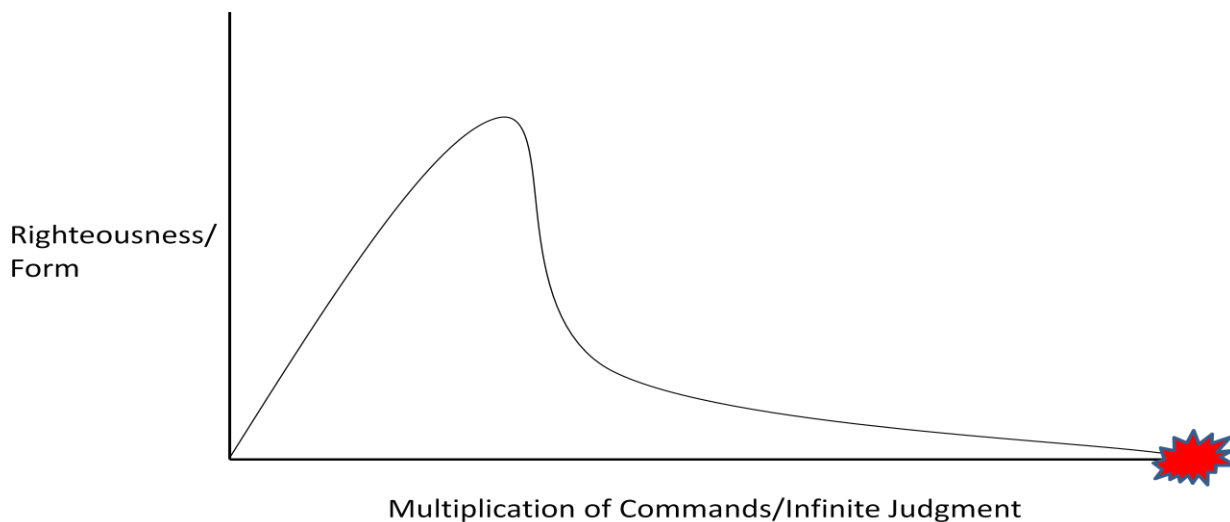


Figure 3. Grace Consummates the Law's Annulment

When the arc representing nature's acquisition of form via the law falls to the x-axis, nature realizes both itself and the law as beings created good by God but lacking all righteousness, so that they each meet the definition of a sinful good. Grace confirms this definition as the unique and distinct power that consummates the law's tendency to self-annulment by lowering it to a level that it could not achieve on its own. When the grace of Christ grasps the believer in the unqualified passivity of the sigh, identifying both the law and nature as sinful goods, it thus acts as the righteous evil that drives them into formlessness. It accomplishes this, as I have earlier argued, by executing "the death of death" upon the law (bringing the law's self-annulment into equality with its authority) while liberating nature as "the law of liberty," that is, the law that frees nature of form.⁶⁵⁹ The law and nature as influenced by grace, then, are sinful goods matched by grace as a righteous evil, and the interaction of the three produces a formlessness structured along the lines of formlessness B. The law and nature post-fall are formless as descending away from form rather rising than toward it, and consequently evil, while grace is evil as the power that brings their descent to fruition.

659. See pages 159-160.

- (ii) If the law, nature, and grace combine to provide an instance of formlessness B after the fall, do they come together as formlessness A or B prior to the fall?⁶⁶⁰ What is the ontological significance especially of the gift of the Spirit for nature and the law as formless before sin?

I have argued that nature and the law possessed no righteousness prior to the fall as well as before it, with the implication that they existed as formless in Eden and prior to sin.⁶⁶¹ Given this, the argument that nature and the law represent formlessness B rather than A prior to the fall faces the challenge that Luther makes no mention of the law's growth to infinity in Eden. It might therefore appear that the law does not work according to the same dynamic of self-annulment before the fall as it does post-fall. In opposition to this appearance, I will engage two starting points for understanding nature and the law as formless prior to the fall. First, Luther applies his law/gospel dichotomy to Adam and Eve in Eden, a point noted in the Luther chapter and to receive fuller treatment here.⁶⁶² Second, Luther sees the sinless couple as models, in their lack of intrinsic righteousness, against sinful humanity's desire to claim righteousness for itself.

The command for Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, according to Luther in the *Commentary on Genesis*, was the Word of God to them. This Word "was Gospel and Law," a Word inseparable from faith.⁶⁶³ Satan sought to pull Adam and Eve away from this Word by replacing it with another, twisting the command of God so that it meant other than what God intended. He accomplished this in the temptation of Eve, Luther avers, by causing her to doubt that this Word came from God, as if to say "This is not the will of God; God does not command this."⁶⁶⁴ God would not deny such lovely and delightful fruit to the lords of His creation, or so Satan would have Eve think. This temptation represents the foundation of all

660. It is admittedly bizarre to find that Luther designates Adam and Eve in Eden, two beings clearly possessed of form in fact, as theoretically formless. The same oddity applies to the law.

661. See pages 145-146.

662. See page 146.

663. *LW* 1.146, 153.

664. *LW* 1.152.

evils for Luther, namely “unbelief or doubt of the Word of God.”⁶⁶⁵ By it, Satan lures persons away from the faith bound up with the Word, whether the Word consists in the command regarding the tree in Eden or the “command that we should believe the Gospel about His Son and thus be saved” in the wake of Christ’s coming.⁶⁶⁶ In each case the Word is one of faith, constituted in the form of Gospel and Law.

Those who succumb to the temptation inevitably become idolaters, denying the truth of God and inventing a new god for themselves. Eve became such an idolater by imagining that she would not die if she ate the fruit, conjuring up a god in dissonance with the Word. The outward eating of the fruit reflects this inward idolatry.⁶⁶⁷ In the same way, Luther argues, the monk turns away from the true wisdom of the Gospel of Christ, disbelieving the Word and fashioning an outward wisdom of works. “This high and mighty wisdom, which makes an effort at the veneration and worship of God, was planted by Satan and by original sin into this wretched nature, so that after men have disregarded the Word which God set before them in their salvation, they might turn to their own thoughts.”⁶⁶⁸ In this manner persons relinquish the Word and faith, transferring the glory of god to works as they sink into idolatry.⁶⁶⁹ To pluck the forbidden fruit is, as it were, to turn to obedience as a means for justification.

Luther’s description of the Word as Gospel and Law in Eden subtly outlines the dual and antagonistic tendencies implied for the law in his thought. On one hand, when Satan causes Eve to doubt that the command came from God, he exploits a possibility written into the delivery of the Word. The speaking of the command implies the chance that Adam and Eve had received it from a being posing as God rather than God Himself. They might not have acknowledged this

665. *LW* 1.148.

666. *LW* 1.161.

667. *LW* 1.159-160.

668. *LW* 1.161.

669. *LW* 1.149.

possibility prior to the temptation, but it was nonetheless present as intrinsic to the giving of the Word. Otherwise Satan could not have taken up this avenue in order to introduce sin into the garden as Luther describes, tempting the first couple toward works as a false god. On the other hand, Luther's contention that the Word is necessarily of faith, such that "faith is included in the commandment" not to eat of the tree, puts the law in an ambiguous position.⁶⁷⁰ For the command dictates that Adam and Eve live by faith and without trust in their own works and the law as means to remain in Paradise, lest they become idolaters and monks at the same time that they believe that the command did not come from God. The command, in other words, annuls its own character as command. As law, it expresses the gospel that annuls the participation of the law in justification. It is a law finally subordinate to and negated by that gospel *qua* law.

This second point finds confirmation in Luther's contention that Adam and Eve could not understand the Word but had to believe it. Luther writes that God gave "a Word or command which was beyond Adam's understanding and had to be believed...since the devil sees this and knows that this command is beyond the understanding of the human being, he tempts Eve so that she herself may ponder whether this is God's command and will or not."⁶⁷¹ The devil coaxes Eve to bring the Word into the domain of reason, which suggests that natural powers can engage the Word.⁶⁷² As always inclined to the law, reason simultaneously wants to understand the Word and transform it into an exhortation toward idolatrous works. But Luther insists that the Word of faith stands above natural reason and thereby its inclination toward an idolatrous – that is, justifying – obedience. The Word rather presumes the futility of nature and the law for justification. Belief in the Word as beyond human understanding thus entails the annulment of both natural powers, especially reason, and the appearance of the Word as a justifying law to which reason would cling.

670. *LW* 1.154.

671. *LW* 1.154.

672. *LW* 1.157-158.

The ontological implications of this interpretation of Luther conform to the pattern observed under heading (i). That Luther applies the law/gospel paradigm to the Word in Eden implies, first, that Adam and Eve encountered the temptation of reason to abuse the command. In this they could refuse the Word of faith as from God and view the fruit as kind of justification by works, asserting their own righteousness in the wisdom gained by eating from the tree. In this way, ontologically speaking, through reason Adam and Eve were tempted to approach the Word as “law,” that is, as a means toward form and out of the formlessness in which they subsisted in Eden. At the same time, the command rightly understood was “gospel,” meant to compel Adam and Eve to recognize their lack of righteousness in their inability comprehend the Word and gain justification through works.⁶⁷³ The command as gospel signifies, ontologically, giving up on the striving for form in order to accept justification through faith alone as a state of formlessness. The command as “law” implies the temptation toward form, while the command as “gospel” implies a tendency toward the annulment of the temptation and the denial of the natural righteousness that would seek justification through the law.⁶⁷⁴

The law possesses the same antithetical vectors that it does after the fall, but without mention of the growth to infinity that bridges the law as a temptation on one hand with its annulment by grace as utterly insufficient to justify on the other. That nature had not yet fallen by actively engaging the law as a means of justification cuts out the middle term, but it does not alter the law’s fundamental duality. The law before the fall thus appears to harbor the same pattern of formlessness B that it has after the fall, offering a temptation for nature to abuse it as a means for justification while simultaneously wanting to annul the temptation.

673. *LW* 1.154: “Uncorrupted nature had a Word or command that was beyond Adam’s understanding and had to be believed.”

674. That the law tends toward this annulment but does not achieve it on its own I shall discuss momentarily.

Luther also lifts up sinless nature for its unwillingness to engage the law as a means to justification, praising Adam and Eve for not ascribing righteousness to themselves and pointing to them as models on this point for sinners.⁶⁷⁵ I supplied evidence for this view from *The Bondage of the Will* in a preceding chapter, and Luther's *Commentary on Genesis* makes a similar point. If the denial of God's Word "happened when nature was still perfect," Luther asks in the commentary, "what do we think will happen to us now?"⁶⁷⁶ That Luther views Adam and Eve in their sinlessness as paradigms for nature's lack of righteousness suggests their identification as well with formlessness B, a point shown by briefly comparing that kind of formlessness with its counterpart, formlessness A. In the latter case, nature possesses an intrinsic capacity for form, a law inseparable from its existence as a particular nature and an inalienable righteousness pertaining to nature's subsistence in the particular way definitive of it. That this righteousness or form is present but not yet discernible in formlessness A, ready to burst forth into creaturely definition, does not suit Luther's theology. He teaches that Adam and Eve in the garden do not have a righteousness meant to assert an intended form, but no righteousness whatsoever, and are models precisely insofar as they live in recognition of this lack of righteousness. Nature would seem, as bereft of righteousness before the fall, to be a sinful good and thus a component in the formula for formlessness B.

The argument that nature is a sinful good prior to the fall finds further support in its interpenetration with the law in Luther's theology.⁶⁷⁷ The Reformer understands the law as the law of nature, implying that though one can distinguish the law from nature conceptually as a kind of design for the way nature should be and which nature must live up to, the law does not differ from nature with respect to power. That the attempt to ascertain justification via the law

675. *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33.124; page 145 above.

676. LW 1.156.

677. See pages 121-122 above.

entails one's confidence in nature to obey its commands illustrates the fusion of the law and nature as a single assertion of righteousness in pursuit of salvation in contrast to faith alone. To divide the law against itself, then, so that it offers a potential abuse as a way to form on the one hand and an annulment of that temptation as the abdication of form on the other, entails a similar division of natural powers. Nature possesses an intrinsic inclination toward form that finds itself strangled by the law's unfulfillable demand, or the command's proclamation as gospel.⁶⁷⁸ That demand annuls the law as a means to justification at the same time that it renders nature helpless and destitute, sapping its confidence in its own abilities. Both the law and nature, therefore, have the outline of a sinful good as objects good as created by God but lacking all righteousness, at the same time that they lean in the direction of a righteous evil by finding their tendency to form undermined.

Yet nature, and by extension the law, did not achieve the utter lack of righteousness of a sinful good in Eden apart from the help of the Spirit, the *donum superadditum* that "actuated and augmented" the sinless will unto obedience.⁶⁷⁹ Luther says that the Spirit's "addition" of obedience maintained Adam and Eve in paradise, but the implication of justification by faith alone that nature has no form, that God created nature as formless and that it consequently ought to exist in that state, transforms the character of the Spirit's addition. Understood in a general way, obedience means conformity to the law or "ought" of one's being. If that law, however, strives toward self-annulment, then obedience means conformity to that annulment. For Adam to obey God's will for him as expressed in the design of his nature, he had to remain as a being with an annulled law, conquering the temptation of reason to trust in a legal justification and siding with the nullification of the law and nature as without righteousness. The Spirit adds this obedience, allowing the first couple to abandon trust in nature and the law so that they find

678. LW 1.154.

679. *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33.124; page 145 above.

righteousness completely apart from them. By the Spirit the law and nature that tended toward their annulment are totally annulled and held there, whereas if one removes the Spirit, nature falls “immutably” due to the weakness of will that is its temptation toward form.⁶⁸⁰

The gift of the Spirit prior to the fall thus parallels the gift of grace after it. In each case, nature and the law progress toward their annulment but lack the ability to achieve and maintain it without divine assistance. Just as, after the fall, nature experiences grace as a distinct power that consummates the law’s movement to infinity, freeing the believer from its curse in the unmitigated turn to Christ, so before the fall nature needs the Spirit to restrain it from the sin of seeking the law-righteousness that entails a like ascription of righteousness and thus form to itself. Divine power drives the law and nature into formlessness after the fall and secures their existence there before it, acting in both situations as the righteous evil that fulfills the subsistence of the law and nature as sinful goods.

The following figure outlines the dynamic of the law and nature prior to the fall. The line is dotted because nature has not yet fallen, meaning that it has yet to engage in the law as a means to form, but it nonetheless faces the temptation to do so (the line’s ascent). Nature recognizes that temptation in its annulment, seeing through the Spirit that the law as a path to justification leads to a dead end and that natural capacities can never give true righteousness (the line’s descent). The starburst represents the gift of the Spirit, the pre-fall grace that holds nature in its restraint from succumbing to the law’s temptation, fulfilling the law in its annulment and maintaining both the law and nature in formlessness. The combination of a self-annulling law and nature with the Spirit that holds them in annulment yields the structure of formlessness B, just as after the fall, with the difference that in Eden that formlessness existed purely.⁶⁸¹

680. *LW* 33.66-67; page 144 above.

681. If God created nature and the law as formlessness B, and thus as instances in the descent of being toward nothingness, he also created them as evil. If valid, this conclusion strikes deeply at Luther’s theology as a viable construal of Christianity, posing a tremendous problem for adherents to his doctrine of justification by faith.

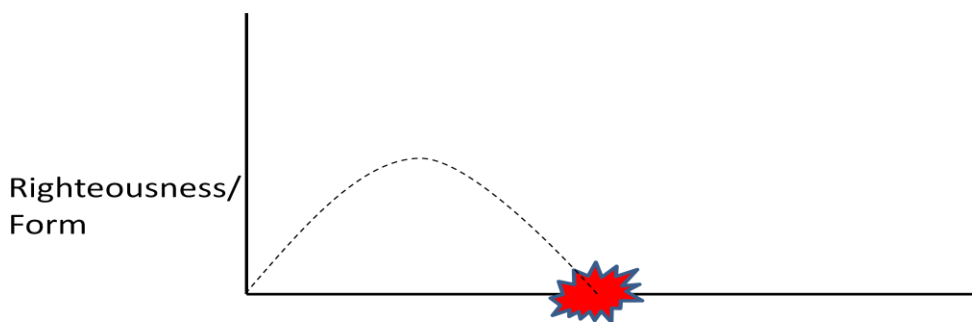


Figure 4. Righteousness of Nature and Law Pre-Fall

- (iii) What is the ontological significance of Luther's dialectic, which suspends the believer between the messages of law and grace? And what of the obedience that flows from this dialectic?

These questions address the dialectical oscillation of Luther's graced believer, who lives as *simul iustus et peccator*. Though liberated from the law's curse by receiving justification through faith alone, nature remains sinful and at all times faces the temptation to trust in the law for salvation. The dialectic arises from Luther's persistent weariness of this temptation, which not only wants to trust straightforwardly in the law, but can also distort the gospel into a new law and make graced Christians into a new breed of lawgivers. The dialectic ensures that Christians remain under grace by avoiding the alternatives, neither trusting in the law for justification on the right or transforming the gospel into a new law on the left.⁶⁸² It takes care to empower grace enough to annul the law but emphasizes that grace not develop into a new source for commands. Grace, for Luther, liberates without drawing the boundaries that would define a new law of

682. See pages 132-133 above.

liberation, and the dialectic safeguards the believer from the temptation to defile Christ's righteousness by making grace into that law.⁶⁸³

The dialectic places the messages of law and gospel at opposite poles, each with the potential to devolve into a harmful extreme. The law reaches its extreme when the believer who looks to it for justification comes to utter hopelessness under its burden. Though the law ought to expose nature's sin and drive it to despair of human capacities for justification, one should not allow the law to annihilate all hope. At the moment when the believer loses faith in human righteousness, immobilized under the law's weight, arrives the gospel of grace. The gospel of forgiveness through faith alone, silencing the law as it blots out the punishment for nature's sin, pulls the believer away from the pole of the law. The believer swings from that pole to its opposite, relishing the joy of grace as freedom from the law's tyranny. But at this opposite pole threats also lurk, for grace can mutate into a source for presumption, as if the believer received it because of his or her own righteousness and as if it justified the believer in laying the law's burden on others. To avoid the distortion in which the law creeps back in under the cover of grace, the believer must hear the law preached again as an antidote to pride and self-righteousness. The renewed message of the law pulls the believer away from the pole of the gospel so that one escapes its potential perversion, swinging back toward the law-pole and re-initiating the cycle. Luther teaches the repetition of this sequence so that the believer exists in suspension between the messages of law and gospel, locked in the from-to that secures nature at a distance from harmful legal extremes.⁶⁸⁴

The believer's suspension between the messages of law and gospel indicates a parallel ontological suspension between the temptation to trust in the law as forming and the temptation to

683. Cf. Luther on the contrast between Christ and Moses, *LW* 26.142-146. I do not sharply distinguish between the content of grace and gospel in these paragraphs, having in mind their overlap as pardon from sin, liberation from the law, and the reception of Christ's righteousness. For more on the distinction, see page 2 in the Luther chapter, footnote 4.

684. See pages 132-133.

transform the grace that realizes the law's annulment into an inversion of that law, a "law unto formlessness." The believer first looks to the law for justification, engaging in it as a way to form. The law then crushes the individual with a pressure that tends toward but does not accomplish its own annulment, undermining its function in giving form at the same time that the believer comes to despair of natural righteousness, and thus nature's form.⁶⁸⁵ This marks the burden of the believer under the law-pole, which, if left unremedied, can bring the believer to give up on justification altogether. The message of the gospel as liberation from the curse through grace means the consummation of the law's tendency toward annulment, but this consummation propels the believer away from the pressure of the law-pole and into the comfort of pardon. The believer feels the joy of realizing the law and nature as annulled, without righteousness, and as formless, with nature *justified* in this formlessness. Yet this pole, as explained, bears its own potential for reversion to the law as baptized illicitly under grace, so that grace matures into a true law of annulment. To circumvent this confusion of grace with law, the believer again hears the law as grace's antithesis. Ontologically, the temptation to trust in the law as forming must again be posited so that the believer will not make grace into a command unto formlessness. The dialectic suspends nature in the middle, so that it withstands both the temptation of the law toward form and the temptation to make grace into a new law; only in this center does nature rest in a grace sufficiently protected from the structure of form (Figure 6).

685. See pages 158-159.

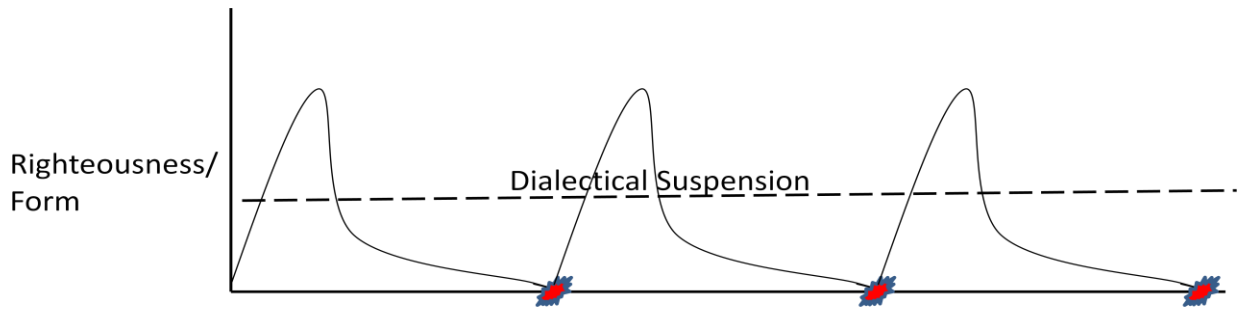


Figure 5. Luther's Dialectic

This state of dialectical suspension consists in the *equality* of the law's positing as authoritative, and thus its proclivity to tempt nature to form, with the consummation of the law's tendency to self-annulment by grace. The law's existence as formless matter does not, therefore, imply the straightforward dissolution of its structure as law, but presupposes a positing of its structure that leans toward disintegration, a rising that inevitably begins a fall to be completed by grace. The law thus combines a posited sinful good (i.e., a good lacking all righteousness) with an annulling grace as a righteous evil, the ontological structure of formlessness B. For when an annulment power achieves equality with the power that posits, one cannot distinguish the annulment's equality with the positing from its conquering of the positing. To say "annulment and positing in equality" is simply another way of saying that the object is annulled, and so the equality of the positing of form (law) and its annulment (grace) renders the annulment of and freedom from form. The law neither "is" as unilaterally posited, nor "is not" as unequivocally annulled, but dwells somewhere between "is" and "is not," or to use Augustine's language, the law is "an-is-that-is-not" or "a something-nothing," or is formless.⁶⁸⁶

By reducing the law to formlessness, the dialectical equality between law and gospel means at once nature's freedom from its commands, placing the life of obedience advocated by Luther in a precarious position. If, on the one hand, the law is formless, missing the power of

686. *conf.*, 12.6; pages 30-31.

compulsion intrinsic to it as law, and if, on the other, nature is graced as the embrace of formlessness, knowing justification as its indifference toward the law as a giver of form, it is difficult to conceive what ontological foundations the believer has for obedience.⁶⁸⁷ How, then, does one develop a potent ethic of holiness from a law that lacks structure, and how does one engage in a law whose temptation to sin – that is, to form – sabotages its exhortation as God’s will? The believer finally obeys the law with a detachment that says, “I do these works, but I do not trust in them for justification, for they want to become a tyrant and an oppressor over me.”⁶⁸⁸ Therefore I obey the law reservedly, always on guard against its will to dominate me with the demand of form. I approach that law with grace, my law of liberty that justifies me in formlessness and binds the law’s drive to subdue me under the demand of an impossible form.” In this way the believer engages in the law-as-annulled, an obedience ensconced in freedom from the form that the law wants to provide.

(iv) Summary of the Christian Narrative

With the answers to the preceding questions in hand, one can develop an ontological account of Luther’s Christian narrative that harmonizes their details. The following summary will therefore briefly restate a few points from the foregoing analysis and the chapter on Luther, but it will add fresh insights by locating them in their relation to one another. The narrative that the ontological analysis reveals, as I shall sketch it, describes nature and the law created as formless, with nature falling into sin by taking on form via the law and returning to grace in the abdication of form. Though Luther would not recognize this account as a faithful interpretation

687. See pages 130-131 for Luther’s understanding of the graced believer’s indifference to the law.

688. Cf. *Freedom of a Christian*, *LW* 31.363: “If works are sought after as a means to righteousness, are burdened with this perverse leviathan, and are done under the false impression that through them one is justified, they are made necessary and freedom and faith are destroyed; and this addition to them makes them no longer good but truly damnable works...we do not condemn [good works] for their own sake but on account of this godless addition to them and the perverse idea that righteousness [i.e., justification] is to be sought through them.”

of his doctrine of justification by faith, I contend that it is present, however subtly, in his theology, and that that theology consequently inverts the ontological story told by Augustine.

At *creation* and prior to the fall, the law and nature in combination with the gift of the Spirit existed as formlessness B, with the former pair as sinful goods and the latter a righteous evil. The law and nature did not possess a righteousness ready to burst forth into form but subsisted without intrinsic righteousness as form annulled. That Adam and Eve remained in paradise through the grace of the Spirit and not by their own powers means ontologically that they rejected the achievement of form through the law as a way to justification in order to repose in grace as the formlessness in which they were justified. That is, they existed in the way God meant for them to exist, recognizing their own lack of righteousness and trusting in grace to keep them from seeking it. In this point lies the ontological foundation beneath Luther's dichotomy between law and grace: insofar as obedience to the law in fact entails the acquisition of form while grace entails a state of formlessness, the law cannot add to grace and must everywhere oppose it.

The *fall* occurred when God removed the Spirit's addition, permitting nature to succumb to the law's temptation to form. The fall in this way amounts to a rise, an emergence of form where there was none and an inversion of Augustine's understanding of sin as a defect or loss of form in the creature. Those who allow my argument that nature existed as formless matter for Luther prior to the fall, but who find this inversion of the ontological meaning of sin unpalatable, should consider the following questions: if nature before the fall was formless, into what state could it fall? It would seem that it must have ceased totally to exist, moving from formlessness to nothingness, which it did not do. Also, from what definable state could nature fall? It had no form to lose, and was already practically nothing, "an-is-that-is-not" according to Augustine. Furthermore, nature's primal sin in Luther's thought is its attribution of righteousness to itself. Viewed ontologically, this means that formless matter (nature) sins by breaking out of

formlessness, taking on form by siding with the law as possessed of righteousness. Nature as formless casts off God's design by arrogating the definition that God did not will for it.

The life *under law* that follows the fall for Luther requires that the believer rediscover the futility of the law and nature for justification as a prelude to turning to grace. The individual feels reason's temptation to gain righteousness through the law at the same time that the law's commands extend to infinity, its curse becoming more onerous. The believer's consequent torment of conscience parallels the law's unbounded ontological expansion, the initial phase of its loss of form. At its extreme, this dynamic leads the believer into the conflict of conscience in which the law, still asserting itself as the way to justification, reduces nature to nothing while threatening an inescapable and everlasting damnation.

The *experience of grace* then bursts in upon the believer as both the consummation of the law's expansion to infinity and his or her liberation from its accusations. Here one sighs "Abba! Father!" as the abdication of any and all righteousness through the law and nature, forsaking the law and human freedom as contributors to justification. One simultaneously perceives, in echo of Luther's own experience, the gates of heaven thrown open in Christ. This experience denotes the realized dissolution of the law into formlessness, having lost both its limit as infinite and its authority as lacking human freedom as an object for its commands, while nature escapes the law's power to coerce toward a particular way of being. The law and nature thus both become formless, with the law capitulating to grace's annulment as "the death of death," while nature as liberated by grace celebrates "the law of liberty." In an experience ontologically contrary to the grace poured out on Augustine in the garden, Luther's nature takes confidence in grace as its security against the law that deceives toward form, knowing itself as justified in formlessness.

Luther's concern that grace not emerge as a new law establishes the dialectical character of life *under grace*. The graced believer must continually hear the old law preached in order to avoid the temptation to make Christ into a new lawgiver, imbuing the realization of formlessness with its own ironic kind of form. Thus the believer transitions between the messages of law and

grace, swaying between despair under the law's curse and the potential for grace to authorize its own commands, keeping ontological distance from the temptation to trust in the law as a way to form on one hand and the temptation to distort grace into a new manifestation of form on the other. In this way one holds fast to Christ in the middle, annulling the law's assertion of form at both extremes.

A curious obedience arises from this dialectic, for a justification defined as the annulment of the law presents a serious barrier to good works. On the ontological level, if the law necessarily gives form, and form is sin, how shall one obey without acquiring some portion of the form that is sinful? Luther, I think, does not well answer this question, for that one does not trust in works to save, as his graced believer does not, fails to erase the implication that obedience bestows the form inimical to grace. The believer must obey the law in its annulment, that is, from the graced indifference that negates its character as law. The life of obedience thus cannot assume a definite structure for Luther because justification implies the annulment of ontological, and therefore ethical, form. This ethic opposes Augustine's beatific vision inasmuch as it undermines the ethical or formed life, whereas Augustine would have saints formed unreservedly by obedience.

Redemption for Luther indeed appears to entail an existence in which the law is completely annulled, in which grace has so transformed the individual that he or she has returned to the state of formlessness without question of again succumbing to the law. While readers of Luther would consider this a strange twisting of his idea of redemption, it is worth noting the eschatological implications of his political theology. Bearing in mind Luther's understanding that divine, natural, and political law are the same *qua* law,⁶⁸⁹ he contends that, if the hearts of all people came under grace and the love of God, political law would no longer be necessary. Luther

689. See page 121ff., where I show that Luther equates divine and natural law while giving that same law the function of maintaining the political order. It is this single law that grace annuls, for "Whatever is not grace is Law, whether it be the Civil Law, the Ceremonial Law, or the Decagolue" (*LW* 26.122).

makes this argument from the premise that no one would require punishment because no one would sin, the Holy Spirit instructing all persons in obedience.⁶⁹⁰ But this obedience given by the Spirit, according to the ontology implicit in his thought, adheres to an annulled law that is no law at all. The idea that the triumph of grace means the absence of (and thus total indifference toward) political law is therefore curious, especially in comparison to Augustine. In Luther's redeemed state there is no law as there is no sin, yet he does not see the ontological point that none sin not because they enjoy the perfect form of the law, as they do for Augustine, but because grace has so annulled the law and liberated persons from it that they have no standard of form by which sin might be judged.

3. Calvin

The ontological story latent in the Christian narrative in Calvin conforms very closely to the one found in Luther. The basic congruence that they share by their acceptance of justification by faith alone ensures a parallel tale of nature created as formless, "fallen" as taking on form, and redeemed as descending back toward the original lack of definition. Calvin's emphasis on the law as inseparable from and embedded in grace, the relative disharmony that distances him from Luther, does not alter the contour of this ontological story. When scrutinized under the second ontological lens, his theology reveals the same combination of nature and the law as sinful goods with grace as a righteous evil that characterized the work of Luther, though the terminology describing their interaction has changed. Calvin consequently inverts the ontological story implied in the narrative told by Augustine in a way much like the earlier Reformer, altering only the secondary details of the narrative I have ascribed to Luther.

690. "Now observe, [true believers] need no temporal law or sword. If all the world were composed of real Christians, that is, true believers, there would be no need for or benefits from prince, king, lord, sword, or law. They would serve no purpose, since Christians have in their heart the Holy Spirit, who both teaches and makes them to do injustice to no one, to love everyone, and to suffer injustice and even death willingly and cheerfully at the hands of anyone." Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*, LW 35.89.

The concluding section of the Calvin chapter outlined three steps to the inner experience of grace in his thought.⁶⁹¹ Nature first surveys itself and, seeing its gifts as God's creature and potential for human virtue, attributes righteousness to itself because of good works.⁶⁹² This step mirrors the believer's initial hope in the law's power to "heal and enrich" in Luther's narrative, as in both cases nature engages in the law with the confidence that by it one can achieve at least some merit before God. Calvin's second step, the "descent into the self," exhorts the believer to that inner turmoil in which one's increasing inability to obey the law juxtaposes the majesty and wrath of God against the helplessness and depravity of sinful nature. Linking the confrontation with the law to the infinite character of God, this step parallels Luther's terror before a law whose commands have multiplied to infinity. For both Luther and Calvin, the requirement grows so powerfully that the good one has not done negates the little that one has accomplished, while the individual's powers shrink down to nothing. Calvin's third step consists in the sincere realization of nature's nothingness, that is, its total lack of righteousness and power before God, and in the consequent turn to Christ by faith alone. Looking to Him, one finds that His mercy overwhelms the divine judgment, that one is justified in the earnest recognition of nature's nothingness, and that the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer frees the conscience from guilt under the law. In this final step Calvin again follows the model provided by Luther, reiterating motifs critical to the latter's construal of the experience of grace.⁶⁹³ These three steps – the initial trust in natural or legal righteousness, the confrontation with the law as infinite, and justification as the realization of nature's nothingness and the wholehearted turn to Christ by faith alone – provide the theological content of the basic congruence agreed upon by the Reformers.

691. See the final section of the Calvin chapter. The following paragraph draws parallels between observations in this section and those made in the concluding portion of the chapter on Luther.

692. That is, righteousness as a natural power that contributes to justification, not necessarily full righteousness in the sense of being accounted righteous before God.

693. These motifs include the denial of any contribution by works to the acquisition of justification; a doctrine of imputation; the assurance of the conscience against the law; and the doctrine of grace as predestined. See pages 183-186.

The relative disharmonies distinguishing Luther and Calvin concern the relation of the law to grace for the saved and the strength of the division between the inner and outer aspects of nature.⁶⁹⁴ With respect to justification, Luther always opposes the law to grace and affirms a sharp division between nature's interior and exterior life. As a consequence, his understanding of the experience of grace turns upon its realization in the conscience, with obedience somewhat in the background. Calvin, by contrast, while he distinguishes forcefully between the law and grace as means to justification, nestles the law within grace for the elect and does not sharply divide the inner from the outer aspect of nature. For him, both those seeking grace in the heart and those who have experienced it engage in a ceaseless obedience under the law. Whereas before the advent of grace one battles a sluggish pride that slows the tirelessness demanded by the law, grace remakes the believer's heart of stone into flesh, propelling him or her forward in obedience as a source of delight. Calvin insists that one cannot separate interior grace from this rigorous and lively external obedience. This practical inseparability has its foundation in Calvin's notion of the law's embedding in grace, wherein the law is grounded in, in a muted way expresses, and is oriented toward the grace that is its consummation.

My ontological reconstruction of the Christian narrative for Calvin reflects his basic congruence and relative disharmony with Luther. I will proceed by again moving through three questions, with the first two expressing the fundamental agreement between the Reformers while the third explains the significance of their differences. As with Luther, the first two questions seek the moral status of nature, the law, and grace both (1) post-fall and (2) pre-fall. If nature and the law are formless, does their interaction with grace provide an example of formlessness A? Or does it manifest the formula for formlessness B, being evil rather than good? My answers to these questions rely to some extent on arguments made with respect to Luther; indeed, the logic between the Reformers remains the same, though the theological language has changed. The

694. See pages 168-169 and 187-188 for an introduction to these differences, including the embedding of the law within grace.

third question addresses the meaning of the law's embedding in grace, where I will argue that it does not alter the ontological trajectory that binds Calvin and Luther. A sketch of the six moments of the Christian narrative in light of the answers to these questions concludes the discussion of Calvin.

- (i) If the law and nature are instances of formless matter after the fall for Calvin, are they examples of formlessness A or B? Are they good or evil as formless, and is the grace that drives them into formlessness good or evil for doing so?

The ontological pattern of the rise and fall of form in Calvin reiterates its rise and fall in Luther. When Calvin's believer at first attributes some righteousness to nature, he or she attributes form to it as well. Confidence in this attribution results in the pride and sloth anathema to grace in the heart. Calvin does not stomach this pride, goading the believer into the "descent into the self" where he or she encounters the full majesty and wrath of God as a sinner under the law. Here the law grows to infinity in the character of God, beginning to annul the confidence that nature would place in it and undermining the law's capacity as a giver of form. The law progressively relinquishes that capacity as God's judgment grows progressively unforgiving, pressing nature down to the infinitesimal as the law's requirement grows to the infinite. By its growth the law gives up its righteousness as no longer able to help nature toward justification, while nature loses its righteousness in its shrinking confidence in its powers of obedience. The boundaries of both the law and nature become more and more untraceable, their definition less and less congealed, by this parallel and antithetical movement.⁶⁹⁵ The outline of the law and nature as completely without righteousness, and therefore as sinful goods, takes shape as it did with Luther, though they have yet to complete the annulment of righteousness that would define them as such.⁶⁹⁶

695. See page 208.

696. See page 224 above for this point with respect to Luther.

In the appropriation of nature's nothingness and the ensuing turn to Christ by faith alone, the annulment of the righteousness of the law and nature reaches its consummation. The law's infinitizing movement equals and thereby conquers the positing it strove to undermine,⁶⁹⁷ doing so by the aid of grace as a power distinct and superior to, but also inseparable from, the infinite growth of the law. The appearance of grace stamps the law and nature as good but utterly without righteousness, and thus as sinful goods. It is at once the righteous evil that confirms nature as justified in this state, freed in the lack of form accepted as the mercy of Christ.

The ontological trajectory between Calvin and Luther post-fall thus remains constant as depicted in Figure 6. The line again represents the movement of nature's trust in its own righteousness via the law, ontologically the righteousness of form. The line's rise indicates nature's initial confidence in its own righteousness by good works for Calvin, analogous to Luther's initial trust in the law to heal and enrich. The decline represents nature's burden under an increasingly severe law, described as a magnified and infinite divine judgment by Calvin and as the law's growth to infinity by Luther. The asymptotic portion of the line portrays Calvin's "descent into the self," his equivalent to Luther's conflict of conscience. The starburst represents grace as the release from the law's curse, the moment that Luther and Calvin hail as the assurance of salvation. The consistent arc of the diagram shows the basic ontological congruence between the Reformers. They both finally construe nature and the law as annulled and lacking all righteousness, and therefore as sinful goods, while grace completes the annulment, depriving the law and nature of form as a righteous evil. Like Luther, Calvin understands their interaction as an example of formlessness B.

697. See pages 225-226 for this point in Luther's thought.

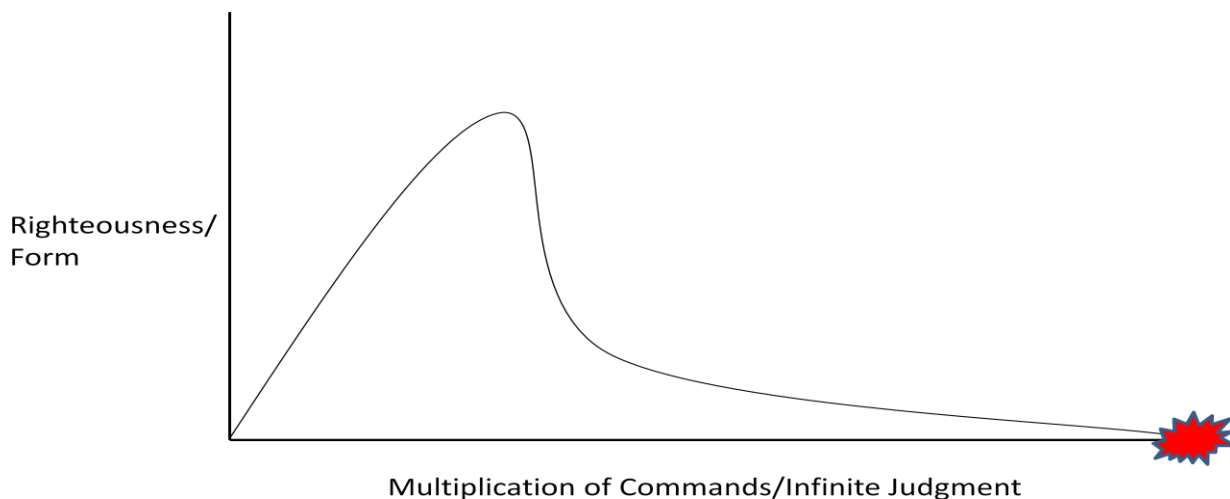


Figure 6. Grace Consummates the Law's Annulment in Calvin and Luther

- (ii) If the law, nature, and grace combine to provide an instance of formlessness B after the fall, do they come together as formlessness A or B prior to the fall? What is the significance especially of Christ's mediation of grace in Eden for nature and the law?

My investigation of these questions begins by recognizing that nature and the law possessed no intrinsic righteousness prior to the fall. As shown in the Calvin chapter, his theology maintains that nature reflected the image of God as an extrinsic gift and not as a function of natural capacities.⁶⁹⁸ God blessed Adam and Eve not because of merit achieved through the law, but by a participation in Him spurred by His gracious good will.⁶⁹⁹ "Even if man had remained free from all stain," focusing on God's grace without interruption and not failing to heed His will, "his condition would have been too lowly to reach God without a Mediator."⁷⁰⁰ Obedience to the law did not profit Adam and Eve in paradise, so that they could neither claim any righteousness for nature due to its conformity to the law nor regard that law as a means to justification.

Lacking all righteousness, the law and nature consequently lacked all form before the fall for Calvin, just as they did for Luther. Furthermore, the inquiry into the ontological structure of

698. Pages 170-172.

699. *Inst.*, II.ii.1; page 187.

700. *Inst.*, II.xii.1.

the law and nature as formless here encounters a roadblock similar to the one encountered in the discussion of the prior Reformer. Just as Luther's description of the law and nature prior to the fall excludes the law's growth to infinity, the key element for understanding the experience of grace after the fall in his theology, so Calvin's portrait of the law and nature in Eden fails to mention the descent into the self. As we shall see, this omission does not disprove the designation of the law and nature as sinful goods prior to the fall, nor grace as a righteous evil. The grace of Christ before the fall accomplishes the same function as after it, securing the law and nature apart from form according to the structure of formlessness B.

Though Calvin makes no direct reference to the law/gospel distinction that Luther applies to Eden, I contend that he understands the law in paradise to exhibit the same dual and contradictory tendencies implied for it in Luther's thought. The law provided a temptation for nature to claim righteousness for itself, as by indulging their pride through it Adam and Eve would supposedly become "like gods, knowing good and evil."⁷⁰¹ Should nature succumb to this temptation, it would use the law to flatter itself with the affirmation of an intrinsic natural righteousness, forgetting that any righteousness attributed to nature is stolen from God.⁷⁰² At the same time that it offers this temptation, the law annuls itself, a point that Calvin interweaves with his assessment of nature's nothingness *qua* creature and before the fall. Mary Potter Engel notes how the comparison of creaturely life with the Creator who bestows it renders the former "evanescent, infirm, fragile, and shadowy," revealing sinless human life with the rest of creation to be, in the words of Calvin, "as nothing."⁷⁰³ All life comes from God rather than the creature, who receives existence as a divine gift. "Before the Fall," Engel summarizes of Calvin, "the Tree of Life was placed in the center of the Garden of Eden precisely to remind Adam and Eve" of

701. Gen. 3:5, *Inst.*, II.ii.10.

702. *Inst.*, II.xiii.2.

703. Engel, *John Calvin's Perspectival Anthropology*, 7.

their nothingness apart from God and unqualified reliance on Him for their lives.⁷⁰⁴ The law thus serves as a means by which humanity recognizes the nothingness of natural powers, annulling its own temptation for nature to engage it as a supposed proof of those powers. As for Luther, the law in Eden for Calvin both tempts nature to righteousness and annuls the temptation, simultaneously possessing contrary inclinations.

Ontologically, the law tempts nature to form only to accomplish a like annulment, holding out the promise that it would snatch away. By this annulment the law is itself negated as possessed of righteousness and a giver of form. It is formless in virtue of righteousness annulled, lacking a righteousness meant to assert itself as in formlessness A. The law is therefore a sinful good and a component in the structure of formlessness B.

One can observe the same dynamic of an annulled inclination toward form concerning nature. I here remind the reader of relevant arguments from the preceding discussion of Luther.⁷⁰⁵ First, for Calvin as for Luther, nature as formless does not possess an intrinsic righteousness ready to rise upward into the form designed for it, but according to Calvin's doctrine of the *imago dei* nature has no intrinsic righteousness at all. Calvin's view of nature thus does not correspond well to the concept of formlessness A. Second, and again like Luther, Calvin understands divine law as a restatement of natural law.⁷⁰⁶ The resultant intertwining of the law and nature with respect to power, as observed regarding Luther, suggests that the annulment of the law's ability to give righteousness implies a similar annulment of nature's capacity to acquire that righteousness via obedience. Nature would seem, as a consequence, to also exist as a thing good as created by God but with an annulled righteousness of form, and therefore as a sinful good.

704. Ibid.

705. See pages 230-232.

706. See pages 189-190.

Calvin's view of nature "as nothing" *qua* creature and prior to the fall is especially relevant at this point. For the effect of the descent into the self is present in Eden inasmuch as Adam and Eve rightly perceived and lived in light of their nothingness before the Creator. The descent is necessary only to purge fallen nature of belief in its own righteousness; sinless nature understands its lack of that righteousness immediately and thus the descent is not needed. For this reason as well nature existed in Eden as a being whose temptation to righteousness was fully annulled, a conclusion that brings us to the function of Christ as the Mediator of grace before the fall.

Nature and the law subsisted as sinful goods prior to the fall, but it was the grace of Christ that maintained them in the annulment of righteousness definitive of that state. "Certainly, the eternal $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\sigma$ was already Mediator from the beginning, before Adam's fall and the alienation and separation of the human race from God," Calvin writes.⁷⁰⁷ Indeed, the grace of Christ provided the link between sinless humanity and God as the divine image mirrored by nature. This grace confirmed the sinful good of nature as righteous in its lack of form while overcoming the law's power to tempt. Grace thus acted as the righteous evil that secured the law and nature in formlessness, performing the same function before the fall as after it. That grace also parallels the gift of the Spirit prior to the fall for Luther, restraining a nature tempted to assert its own righteousness via the law from doing so.

The diagram detailing the dynamic of the law and nature for Calvin prior to the fall replicates the one descriptive of Luther. The line remains dotted because nature has not yet fallen, meaning that it has yet to take up the law as a means to form but faces it as a temptation (the line's ascent). Nature encounters that temptation in its annulment, seeing by the grace mediated through Christ that the law only proves nature's nothingness (the line's descent). The starburst represents that grace, the pre-fall mediatorship of the Redeemer that withholds nature from bowing to the law as an alternate means of justification. This grace fulfills the law in its

707. "Second Reply to Stancaro," quoted in Moon, 104.

annulment and maintains both the law and nature in formlessness, completing the ontological combination of the law, nature, and grace as formlessness B.

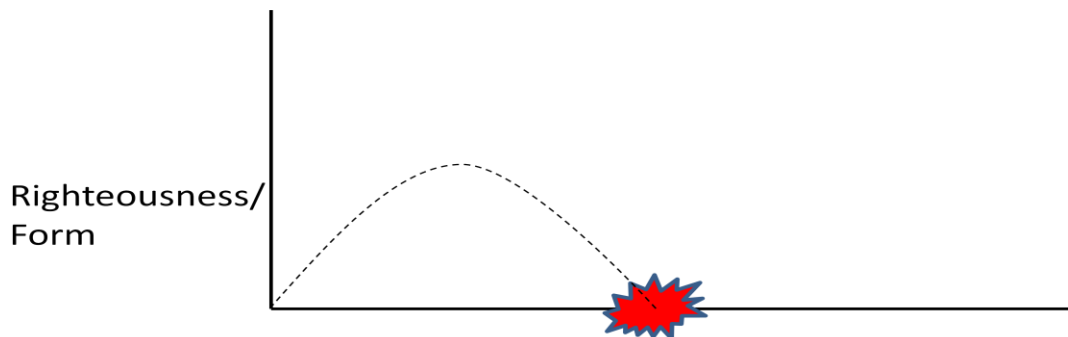


Figure 7. Righteousness of Nature and Law Pre-Fall for Calvin

(iii) What is the ontological significance of Calvin's embedding of the law within grace?

Calvin argues that the law arises out of, mutedly expresses, and is oriented toward its culmination in grace in the history following the fall.⁷⁰⁸ Like the inseparability of light and heat in the rays of the sun, one cannot receive Christ's grace without immediate participation in the law embedded in it. By embarking on the life of good works, elect nature participates in the law similarly destined for grace, so that the two converge toward that grace in parallel. The life of ceaseless obedience characteristic of this shared destiny, eschewing a strict separation of the inner from the outer aspect of nature, impels the believer toward obedience with an urgency alien to Luther.

Yet Calvin's embedding of the law within grace does not at all change the contour of the Christian life. The individual still begins with the temptation to ascribe righteousness to nature via the law, though he or she fights pride and sluggishness before its ceaseless demands. The

708. See page 187ff.

law's infinite requirement, manifest for Calvin in both the conscience and in practical life,⁷⁰⁹ then provokes the descent into the self and its resolution in the experience of grace. In this experience the believer relinquishes all righteousness and receives a heart of flesh in place of the old one of stone. In its wake, the believer realizes the law's embedding in grace in practice by carrying out a rigorous ethic, driven into an eager obedience by the newly remade heart. In all of these steps, the dynamic of the rise and fall of nature's righteousness, and thereby of its form, remains consistent.

What changes is the meaning of the rise and fall with respect to the grace that consummates it. Rather than viewing the infinite character of the law as the enemy that grace must subdue, Calvin views it as grace's forerunner and ally, a pointer toward grace as the law's ultimate end. The law might seem finite in the conscience during the rise of the line below, when nature would attribute righteousness to itself for its good works (the law here remains infinitely demanding in outward practice). But Calvin's theology implicitly understands, as it were, that the increasingly infinite character of the law portends its progressive lack of boundaries and attendant loss of form, a descent that grace brings to completion. The law's growth to infinity thus represents the opening phase of a process to be fulfilled by grace. For the elect, the law is born out of the promise of this fulfillment, expresses it as latent in the life of ceaseless obedience and the descent into the self, and looks to that grace as a predetermined end. The law shares in grace, so that the notable change on the diagram concerns not the contour but the color of the line tracing the arc of nature and the law with respect to form. Whereas the line is black and the starburst representing grace is red for Luther, they are both red for Calvin, representing the parallel participation of the law and elect nature in grace. The law marks the path predestined to lead to grace, while the elect are its similarly predestined travelers.

709. See pages 210-211.

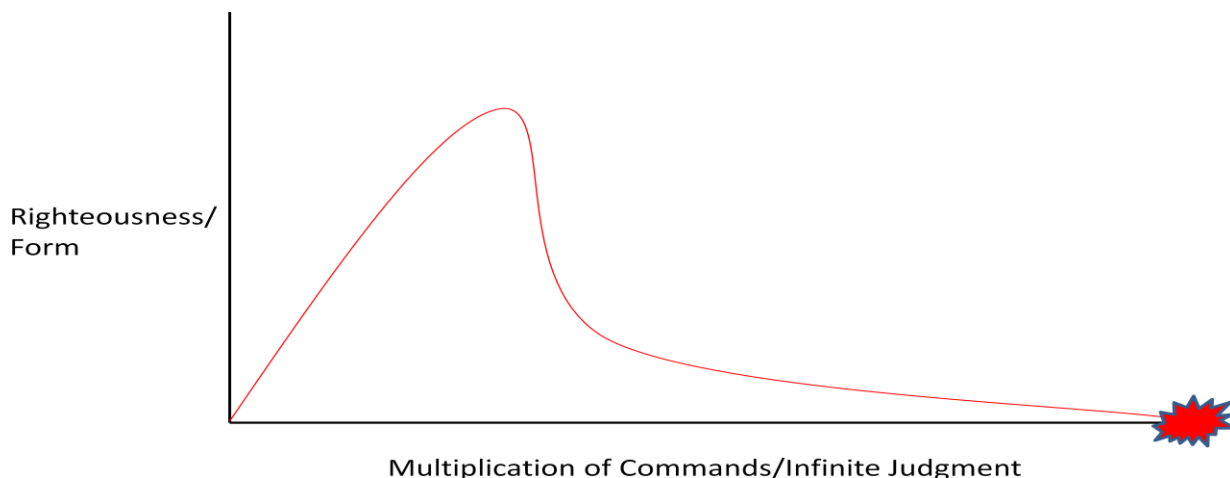


Figure 8. The Law Embedded in Grace

(iv) Summary of the Christian Narrative

Having answered the questions involved in developing an ontological summary of the Christian narrative for Calvin, I shall proceed to briefly outline that narrative's trajectory. Reiterating the ontological dynamic revealed to be the case for Luther, Calvin's narrative posits nature and the law created as formless, with nature falling into sin by grasping form via the law and returning to grace in the abdication of form. Their differences notwithstanding, Calvin stands with Luther in inverting the ontological story told by Augustine.

At *creation* and prior to the fall, when nature cleanly reflected the image of God and the law was properly embedded in Christ's grace, the three combined according to the structure of formlessness B. The law and nature subsisted without intrinsic righteousness, their tendencies to form being annulled, and were therefore sinful goods. The grace mediated by Christ contained them in that annulment as a righteous evil. As sinless, Adam and Eve recognized the nothingness of their nature before God, refusing to pluck the law out from its embedding in Christ and seek form through it. They were justified in the abdication of form and obedient to the law as fully oriented to its own formlessness in grace.

The *fall* occurred for Calvin when the first couple turned from the grace of Christ,

wrongly attributing an intrinsic righteousness to nature. They abused the command intended to impress the humility needed to reflect God's image, succumbing to the desire to be "like gods." Seeking righteousness for themselves, they disobeyed the requirement that persons grasp nature's nothingness and wanted to work toward justification by their own powers. In its pride, nature dislodged the law from its embedding in Christ when it pulled the fruit from the tree, looking to the law as a means for justification. The fall consequently amounts to a rise in which nature engages the law's temptation to form, arrogating to itself the form that it is not meant to have. The primal sin rejects the grace that would maintain nature's righteousness *qua* formless in favor of the righteousness of form ascertained via the law.

The ensuing life *under law* for Calvin involves nature's struggle against sloth in the face of the ceaseless obedience required by the law, a partner to the pride that would take confidence in natural righteousness. Admonishing the believer against trusting in the law as a means for justification, Calvin exhorts Christians to descend into the self. Here the law expands to infinity by virtue of its identification with the wrath of God, whereas nature shrinks toward the infinitesimal, a dual movement whereby the form of both begins to recede. This process is aimed at the renewed acknowledgment of the nothingness of natural capacities before the majesty and holiness of the Judge, so that sinful nature should flee to Christ alone for rescue.

When nature relinquishes in full the claim that it possesses righteousness, admitting its nothingness with respect to justification at the same time that it forgoes all trust in the law, it feels the unexpected delight of the *experience of grace*. For in turning to Christ's judgment seat as one convinced of sure perdition, the believer finds that the Judge has become the Redeemer.⁷¹⁰ Exuberance quells the anxiety brought on by the law's curse, replacing the stony heart that was sluggish toward obedience with a heart of flesh joyfully desirous to do God's will. Ontologically, the movement of the law and nature to their opposite infinities culminates in the complete abdication of form for nature and the absolute unboundedness of the law, so that both lose all

710. See page 206.

definition in tandem with their lost righteousness. As for Luther, for Calvin nature experiences justification as it grasps its existence as formless.

Now *under grace*, the believer returns with vigor and confidence to the ceaseless obedience required by the law, no more a slave to the flesh's tendency to sluggishness.⁷¹¹ One cannot separate such obedience from grace for Calvin, as the command serves as both the precursor for the presence of grace in the heart and is constitutive of the practical way of life validated by that presence. Grace liberates the believer from the law's curse, but it also re-embeds the law within its own context for the elect, goading them along the practical path toward the restoration of the divine image. In light of the ontological meaning of the experience of grace as a grasping of nature's formlessness, this practical path amounts to the ethical parallel of that meaning. The infinity of the law as manifest in its unceasing requirement,⁷¹² a burden applied to the outer as well as the inner aspects of nature, sets the believer upon a frenetic ethic with formlessness at its end.

Calvin's notion of *redemption*, then, contains an intriguing practical application. On one hand, Calvin does speak of heaven as a state of final redemption. I construe this state ontologically as a spiritually "restored" world in which nature is again totally formless, no longer bearing the sin of form and reflecting the divine image cleanly. On the other hand, Calvin's infinite law catapults the Christian toward the restoration of the image in the here and now. This latter observation suggests an ontological interpretation of Max Weber's distinction between the "otherworldly" asceticism of the monastery and the "innerworldly" asceticism of ceaseless activity in secular affairs, the latter asceticism, according to Weber, possessing its roots in Calvinism. This ontological interpretation, which I offer only as a hypothesis, draws its paradigm for the monastic ethic from Saint Augustine. This ethic would seek, in his thought, the

711. This is not to say that grace eradicates all sluggishness, but that it no longer rules over the individual.

712. See page 211.

redemption of nature's form toward perfection, even incorruptibility. This form always remains creaturely and finite, whether defective due to sin or imperviously protected against the possibility of defect, as in heaven. The innerworldly asceticism of Calvin's theology, by contrast, would remake nature toward the infinity of formlessness, a state defined by the ontological motifs of freedom (from form) and equality (of nature's tendency toward form and the annulment of that tendency). This asceticism dedicates its energies toward practical conditions in which nature can express that freedom and equality, removing obstacles to those conditions where it encounters them. One thinks, for example, of the democratic character of the church in Calvin's thought in comparison to the Catholicism of his day; Calvin both rejected Catholicism's official hierarchies and preferred a democratic means for electing church leaders.⁷¹³ Though the innerworldly and the otherworldly both qualify as forms of asceticism, Calvin's theology sets its followers on a decidedly different path from the monastic ethic, at least as understood through Augustine. Calvin's path, it seems, tends toward the annulment in practice of the hierarchical order that Augustine assumed as central to the pursuit of salvation, if not annulling itself as an order defined by the bearing of law.

Conclusion

The ontological stories told by Saint Augustine and the Reformers move in antithetical directions, with Augustine's understanding of nature created as formed and redeemed in a state of incorruptible form turned on its head by his Protestant heirs. The inverted gospel unwittingly taught by Luther and Calvin introduces nature as created without form, sinful by its acquisition of form, and redeemed in the return to formlessness. This bizarre implication of justification by faith alone proves stranger still, for the formlessness in which nature (and the law) existed in

713. Much of Book IV of the *Institutes* details the errors of the Catholic Church, whereas Calvin shows his preference for the participation of the collective (male) membership in the election of elders (IV.iii.15). These motifs have analogues in the Luther's thought, which both rejected the Catholic hierarchy and taught the universal priesthood of believers.

Eden, by matching the structure of formlessness B, is an “evil good.” Good with respect to its being and wicked as stripped of righteousness, and withheld from that righteousness by either the gift of the Spirit (Luther) or the mediating grace of Christ (Calvin), nature pre-fall in the theology of the Reformers confronts the exegete as a wicked thing created and secured in its wickedness by the hand of God. Indeed, for Calvin nature clearly reflects the image of God in Eden, raising the question whether God Himself is not a kind of formlessness. On the other hand, if one agrees that God creates nothing evil, whether referring to the being by which a thing exists or the soteriological quality of its activity (that it does not sin or lose form on God’s account), then the theology of justification by faith alone faces no small challenge to its credibility.

My overall concern, however, is not with theological questions, important though they may be, but with the role of justification by faith alone in the fragmentation of the Protestant church, particularly in moments of schism. If, according to that doctrine, nature and the law rise in form only to see that form annulled by grace, what might this betoken for the church that both bears the law and nourishes its members with the gospel of Christ? If the form of nature and the law is redeemed as delivered into formlessness, might the church meet a similar redemption when it fractures into division, forfeiting its structural integrity? How might the believer’s experience of grace in the heart contribute to this “redemption”? These are the questions I mean to answer with reference to the events in the Great Awakening described at the outset.

CHAPTER 7

THE DOCTRINAL CODE FOR PROTESTANT DIVISION

In the opening pages of this study we faced a question: why has the Protestant experience of grace threatened the church that adheres to it, opposing the coherence and viability of the church order? In the analysis of the experience of grace by faith alone that followed, we found a law originally posited as a help toward justification that undermines itself by its growth to infinity, with grace bringing the law's movement toward self-annulment to completion. Ontologically, the grace that consummates this movement signals the dissolution of both the law and nature into formlessness. In this chapter I shall ask whether the church does not undergo a similar dynamic *qua* law-bearing institution. At certain times, does the church authority presumed as a good thing and authorized by God not develop into an ominous and oppressive force, even the bearer of an infinite law? And does grace not consummate that tyrannical growth in a liberty that annuls institutional authority through schism? If so, then the doctrine of justification by faith alone provides not only a theological pattern for the descent of the law and nature into formlessness, but a practical template by which the church can fragment unto the loss institutional form. After detailing this theological pattern with respect to the individual experience of grace in Saint Augustine vis-à-vis the doctrine of justification by faith, I hope to illuminate its appearance in the Presbyterian schism of the Great Awakening.

Clifford Geertz and Robert Bellah guide our shift from the theory of the Protestant experience of grace to its application in the church in the event of schism. In "Flaws in the Protestant Code," Bellah investigates cultural phenomena in modern West, citing Geertz's notion of culture patterns as a useful category for such an undertaking. Here is a portion of Geertz's words:

“Culture patterns [are] sources of information that – like genes – provide a blueprint or template in terms of which processes external to themselves can be given a definite form. As the order of bases in a strand of DNA forms a coded program, a set of instructions, or a recipe, for the synthesis of the structurally complex proteins which shape organic functioning, so culture patterns provide such programs for the institution of the social and psychological processes which shape public behavior.”⁷¹⁴

By “sources of information” Geertz means a set of symbols that organize public and institutional action in a particular manner, implying a system of directions by which the institutions and individuals forming a collective live together. These symbols provide the genetic code for the social organism, having a hand in its habits, mores, and development. Bellah picks up Geertz’s idea of a cultural genetic code in order to theorize the relationship of Protestantism to the contemporary Western order. Though the church has all but died in much of Europe and has declined in parts of the U.S., Bellah hypothesizes that Protestant religion has supplied the “deep cultural code” for the institutional processes constitutive of life in those countries and regions where it once reigned. If one wants to discover and correct the flaws embedded in the Western way of life, according to Bellah, one must find and correct the flaw in the Protestant code that underlies it.

My claims are not so ambitious as to investigate the relationship between Protestantism and the modern West. I mean to narrow the application of the Protestant cultural code to the link between Protestant theology and its own churches. Protestant theology, I contend, acts as a “source of information” that provides a “blueprint or template in terms of which processes external to itself can be given definite form.” Beyond explicit ecclesiological doctrines, Protestant theology bears a set of instructions for the church as the institution that shapes the behavior of its members. The paradigm for the interaction of grace, law, and nature implicit in that theology, I hope to show, sheds light on a parallel interaction between elements of the church representative of “law” and “nature” in which grace occurs in the event of schism. The church

714. Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books), 92, quoted in Bellah, 335.

both preaches and finds itself located within the paradigm for the experience of grace by faith alone.

Justification by Faith Alone and the Protestant Pattern of Grace

At this point I shall take up an unfinished argument from the Augustine chapter concerning the meaning of free will.⁷¹⁵ There I proposed an analogy involving a concert pianist in the throes of a piece of music and predestined to complete it. I would like to slightly adjust the analogy, as there the melody represented the will's inclinations and desires, whereas here it represents the law. The other details of the analogy remain the same: the rests incorporated into the melody represent the will's moments of freedom, and grace is the impulsion by which the god indeclinably moves the pianist to resume on the other side of the rest. There I argued that the player feels freedom as a result of the rest, but lacks the ability to execute or linger in it. I also noted that the law, though coercive in being forced upon the player, retains a certain character as merciful because it allows for such freedom. Yet this freedom does not satisfy the likes of John Rist, who would call it enslaved because its force does not equal the compelling power of the god. Such a freedom, Rist might say, is no freedom at all. Rist also finds grace's coercion to obedience highly problematic because it justifies the church's compulsion of non-believers and apostates to recognize ecclesial authority.⁷¹⁶

In lieu of this understanding of freedom, I suggested that Rist would approve of a liberty that allowed the player to quit and resume when he or she likes. This freedom exists in equality with the demand to play and would be worth defending in his view. While I am not arguing that such freedom is intrinsically invalid, I will contend that justification by faith alone does not provide a rationale for it. That doctrine, in fact, entails an alternative no less coercive than the one Rist rejects. In making my case, I will first look more closely into the relation of freedom,

715. Pages 93-96.

716. Rist, 441-447.

law, and grace for Saint Augustine, following that with an analysis of their relation according to justification by faith alone.

The interaction of an indomitable grace and the freedom of the will for Augustine hangs on the character of the freedom felt in the rest. For when the believer enters into that freedom he or she immediately knows the weakness of the flesh. In the rest Augustine cries out, “Who shall save me from the body of this death?” or, as he lamented in the Milanese garden, “How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever?” In the freedom of the rest Augustine’s believer wants to obey but cannot, the player wants to return to playing but cannot find the strength. He or she is subject to a will divided between inclinations toward and away from obedience, with the latter owning the upper hand. If I have been right to equate the will’s freedom with an ontological formlessness on the way to the acquisition of form (as at the creation), then Augustine’s experience of freedom denotes a formlessness actively resistant to taking shape, holding the believer back from conformity to God’s will.

God answers the believer’s cries with the grace needed to obey, a compulsion supposedly coexistent with the *liberum arbitrium* that allows the believer to choose between good and evil:

“Do we then by grace make void free will (*liberum arbitrium*)? God forbid! Nay, rather we establish free will. For even as the law by faith, so free will by grace, is not made void but established. For neither is the law fulfilled except by free will; but by the law is the knowledge of sin, by faith the acquisition of grace against sin, by grace the healing of the soul from the disease of sin, by health of soul freedom of will (*libertas abritrii*), by free will (*liberum arbitrium*) the love of righteousness, by love of righteousness the accomplishment of the law. Accordingly, as the law is not made void, but is established through faith, since faith procures grace whereby the law is fulfilled; so free will (*liberum arbitrium*) is not made void through grace, but is established, since grace cures the will whereby righteousness is freely loved.”⁷¹⁷

This passage explains the causal chain at work in the believer’s decision to obey, with the addendum that behind the faith that acquires grace lies a preceding grace as the ultimate cause of salvation.⁷¹⁸ But what does grace do? It encounters a will wounded and disabled, with its inclination toward the good fighting a losing battle against its temptation to evil. Grace then

717. *sp. et litt.*, 52.1-17.

718. See page 88.

heals the wound, elevating and assisting the inclination to the good so that it equals and inevitably surpasses the power of the temptation. In this way a moment of equality, a truly equal option between good and evil and an absolute neutrality of *liberum arbitrium*, is established by the power of grace at the same time that that moment is gathered into the ascending strength of nature in its inclination to the good.⁷¹⁹ Just as, at the creation, matter moved through formlessness on the way to form, affirming a moment of pure freedom and equality meant to be denied in the imposition of definite shape, so the will's moment of equality and freedom is affirmed in order to be denied, dialectically upheld as a necessary stage toward the greater good of an obedience that is the acquisition of form. Thus nature will inevitably obey as aided by an indeclinable grace, but cannot obey without also affirming its freedom as a stage along the path of that inevitability.⁷²⁰

This freedom, intrinsic but subordinate to the grace that assists to obedience, is central to the code of individual liberty and institutional authority implicit in Augustine's soteriology. Here the pianist's melody represents the authority of the church as a law-bearer, while the rest incorporated into the musical score denotes the distance from that authority in which the individual exists *qua* individual, discovering his or her will. In the rest, the individual knows the law administered by the church as bounded and authoritative, and thus as merciful. Here the Christian also possesses the liberty to choose among different actions under the umbrella of the church's guidance. But the individual does not have the liberty to reject the church order, just as the player does not have the choice to quit playing. The rest allows for a freedom in which such a rejection may be imagined, but the church does not allow it to become a reality. Should the temptation to this rejection become too much, with the individual desiring to break away from the

719. One might here inquire whether nature has a genuine response to the indeclinable grace given by God. In defense of Augustine, I would refer to his language of sin as a kind of sickness. If wickedness is a wound and grace is the medicine, then just as the body has some distinct response to the administered cure in regaining its health, so the will has some distinct role in the administration of the grace that repairs its strength.

720. By offering this interpretation, I do not pretend to have solved the problem of indeclinable grace and free will. Epistemic humility will always accompany this problem, tied as it is to the mystery of the incarnation.

church's authority and forfeit salvation as sought under it, the institution approaches the individual as the administrator of an indeclinable grace, dispensing the care and discipline appropriate for the recalcitrant heart and helping the believer to better conform to the law. This dispensation of grace elevates and assists the believer's lagging will for the good into a momentary equality with the will to disobey, producing a true freedom between the two options. Yet grace accomplishes this as a stage in nature's ascent to the obedience that welds the believer more firmly to God and the church order, freeing the Christian from the temptation to apostasy and convincing the heart of the goodness of God's command. Though coercive against the will to sin, the church applies its powers out of its mercy and not, at least in theory, as an oppressor. Thus the individual's liberty never equals the church's authority and never ultimately disavows it, but by grace is gathered into the church as that institution authorized as a vessel for the healing of nature's wound.

Rist and other modern persons would condemn such grace and the church implied by it as unforgivably authoritarian and coercive. If the individual cannot stand against the church's prerogatives as an equal, breaking from the church when he or she sees fit, then the freedom that the church allows comes to precious little. But does the doctrine of justification by faith alone provide a better foothold for freedom, or does it contain its own kind of coercion?

Let us return to the pianist engaged in the melody as an analogy for the believer engaged in the law. For both Luther and Calvin, this engagement is initially thought of as necessary and good. Luther's believer begins as one who looks to the law to heal and enrich, while Calvin's believer might engage the law confidently in light of natural endowments (e.g., the ability to act honestly and earn a good reputation). Thus the pianist begins by playing hopefully, finding satisfaction in a piece well performed and enjoying occasional rests, as in the example concerning Augustine. Yet for both Luther and Calvin the score somewhere takes a decisive turn toward the negative. The melody thought to be a source of comfort devolves into a festering sore as the piece progressively intensifies and the rests incorporated into it diminish in both frequency and

length. As an expression of Luther's infinitely expanding law and Calvin's descent of the believer into the self, with Luther burdened by "wagonloads of sins that increase infinitely" and Calvin facing nature's "thousand sins," the music thought to enrich becomes a terror.⁷²¹ The rests representative of openings for freedom disappear, and in their place the believer encounters the characteristics of the infinite law summarized at the conclusion of the Calvin chapter. The law's melody becomes relentless, merciless, and even totalitarian, so that the Christian under this law finds himself condemned before acting and without room for self-defense, always facing God's wrath and the immeasurable burden of obedience, always guilty regardless of good deeds performed. The believer has nowhere to turn for respite, the player's mind flustered and the fingers sweating, until the speed and longevity required of the player at last annul the ability to play. The player succumbs to the unmitigated requirement of the piece and collapses, and in this collapse the melody is annulled. Theologically, the boundless application of the law has reduced nature to nothing, cancelling all space for freedom and wiping out nature's energy for continuing along the path of obedience. The player in this way receives a new freedom unlike that of the rest, for this freedom does not lie below the law but equals it. It is the freedom of a previously unknown indifference in which the player refutes the requirement to play, or the believer refutes the necessity of obedience for justification. The player rather finds nature liberated from the melody and justified in the liberation, the believer the recipient of a grace that both annuls the law and validates the liberty of its escapee, a grace received apart from the law and, according to Luther and Calvin, by faith alone.

This scenario combines the motifs of freedom, equality, and an infinite or totalitarian law that we have seen in our studies of Luther and Calvin. It also follows the ontological pattern of the rise and fall of form for nature and the law observed in the preceding chapter. Nature rises in form via the law in the early stages of obedience, looking to the law in the confidence that it

⁷²¹. LW 26.405; *Inst.*, III.xii.2.

provides some help toward justification. Then the believer finds that the law expands without limit, losing its merciful character until its unboundedness equals and thereby annuls the law's promise to provide aid. The law's descent toward the annulment of form simultaneously reduces nature "to nothing," sabotaging the contribution of the will to justification by convicting that will before it acts, overwhelming it with sins that vastly outnumber its good deeds. So nature and the law together relinquish their form, and when nature abdicates its *liberum arbitrium* in full, stripping the will of all claim to righteousness and quitting the piece, both it and the law are consummated in the descent into formlessness. Grace executes "the death of death" upon the law in the equality of its promise to enrich and the realized annulment of that promise, while it establishes a new "law of liberty" for nature in the latter's freedom from the law's authority. But intrinsic to the realization of this equality and freedom, the release in which the believer finds judgment averted, is a totalitarianism unique to justification by faith alone. Whereas Augustine allows for a freedom not equal to the law, a space from which grace can establish and move indeclinably through the will's *liberum arbitrium*, justification by faith alone obliterates that lesser freedom in order to compel nature into another, greater kind of distance. The freedom of faith alone transforms *liberum arbitrium* into *liberatum arbitrium*, a freedom at once equal to and above the law because grounded in the law's annulment. It is a freedom and equality born of terror, a state that might confuse exhausted revolt with the gift of mercy.

What, then, of the idea of a freedom that allows the piano player to quit and resume the piece as he or she likes? Given the foregoing scenario, would any nature liberated from such a terrifying law willingly come again under its yoke? Do citizens under totalitarian regimes, after gaining their freedom, return to their oppression joyfully? They rather struggle to keep the law contained, imprisoning its desire for limitlessness. Their task is to sustain if not advance the liberation of annulment in which they find their justification, ensuring that this particular piece of music does not impose itself upon them again.

The choice between Augustine and the Reformers, then, is as follows: one can either choose the combination of an authoritative but merciful law, a limited freedom under that law, and an indeclinable grace as with Saint Augustine, or one can choose a merciless and infinite law oriented toward grace as a profound and dubious freedom that annuls it, as with the Reformers. In neither case does one escape coercion, and furthermore, if one prizes the graduated freedom of faith alone and would acquire it, one must suffer the infinite law. There is no other way to grasp a freedom equal to the law than by the law's annulment, the same annulment that both presumes totalitarianism and would render both nature and the law into the freedom of formlessness.

Shifting to the implications of justification by faith alone as a code for individual liberty and church authority, the melody played by the pianist again represents that authority or the church as a law-bearer, while the rests represent moments of free will nestled within that authority. Justification by faith alone initially presumes the church's authority as necessary and good, inviting the player to play as a required part of the Christian life if not a supposed means toward justification. For the believer will inevitably face the obedience taught by the church as a temptation, wanting to trust in good works and the power of nature to obey as though these made one pleasing to God. As one advances in the piece, however, moving along the path of obedience under the church's guidance, one finds the church's powers exponentially augmented. The institutional medium of an infinitely expanding law, the church's law-bearing authority exceeds its limits and proves tyrannical, bearing down upon the freedom of the rest. Thus individual freedom diminishes while the institution evolves into a tyrant, with the unboundedness of the law undermining the authority of its application.

When the church achieves the apex of its oppression, appearing to have left the individual with no resources for justification, he or she discovers a new means, indeed a new meaning, for justification. Like the player quitting his playing under the oppression of the score, the infinite law coerces the individual to break away from the church. Extricating himself definitively from the harsh melody of obedience, the believer places himself on an equal footing with the church's

authority at the same time that he annuls that authority. The individual affirms a new and graduated liberty, a freedom that redefines grace as liberation from an oppressive law and the institution that oppressed in bearing it. In this freedom the believer finds release from tyranny and the veritable mercy of Christ. Grace does not indeclinably elevate and assist the believer to a benevolent authority, but puts a despotic authority to death in the severance of the individual from the institution. This is, I believe, the institutional meaning of grace acquired by faith alone. As without and in opposition to the law, it is without and in opposition to the church *qua* law-bearer. Thus the paradigm for a religious experience that would fragment the church and drag it toward an unrighteous instability, a liberty from law made concrete in an institutional loss of form.

Before moving on to a concrete example of the dynamic I have sketched, a few points are worthy of note. First, the relative disharmonies that distinguish the Reformers alter the quality of the institutional dynamic of justification by faith alone insofar as that dynamic posits the infinite law as a prelude to grace. For example, because Luther locates the infinite law in the conscience while Calvin affirms the infinite law in both the inner and outer life, the church's excessive application of law-bearing power is more a function of preaching for Luther, whereas for Calvin it involves both preaching and a strong accent on communal discipline. Luther presses the infinite law upon the minds and hearts of his followers by way of the spoken dialectic of law and gospel, suspending the believer between despair of the law and the gift of Christ's grace, while Calvin imposes that law by preaching the descent into the self in combination with the church's disciplinary apparatus and hardened communal attitudes toward sloth.⁷²² Of no less importance is Calvin's implicit doctrine of parallel predestination, in which he embeds both the law and nature within grace as their origin and goal. This embedding inclines Calvin's believer to hurry the law toward its culmination in annulment, provoking the law into its infinity as a necessary precursor

722. See, for example, Michael Walzer on the "watchfulness" in the community of Puritan saints, who constantly kept one another in line with the moral requirements of Calvinist sainthood. *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 301.

to the grace promised as that infinity's end. I shall shortly argue that this provocation has a part in the events leading up to the Presbyterian schism of the Great Awakening. Second, no worshipper subject to church authority as the vehicle of an infinite law, whether that law applies only to the conscience or to both inner and outer life, would recognize that authority as literally infinite. Infinite power, Christians of virtually every stripe agree, belongs to God alone. Believers would rather recognize that the church has become oppressive, exceeding its boundaries in the application of authority and thereby undermining the credibility of that authority. Third, it is less important that the church actually becomes a tyrant than that the individual believes it has become so. One can debate the objective meaning of tyranny from various vantage points, and it is safer to ask how those under the supposed tyranny formulated their conception of it. The accent lies on the believer's conviction that freedom has been stripped away, and that the law-bearing authority has become oppressive.

The Protestant Code and the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies

The code proposed in the preceding section for understanding ecclesiastical schism comes to life in striking fashion in the events of the Great Awakening recorded at the outset. We shall see here how the theological pattern for the experience of grace by faith alone can serve as a "blueprint or template" for institutional processes external to itself, processes that unfortunately lead to the fragmentation of the church. Returning to the description of religious experience as nourished by Gilbert Tennent's preaching of terrors, found in conjunction with the eventual break of the New Side from the Philadelphia synod, one discovers on both counts the presence of an infinite law finally annulled by grace. Tennent's sermonic exhortations toward the New Birth duplicate the dynamic of Calvin's descent into the self, itself a version of Luther's struggle against an infinitely expanding law. The preaching of terror reaches its apex, in a fashion after its Reformation predecessors, in the grace that annuls the soteriological capacity of the law and nature. Proceeding to the institutional conflict that churned around this experience, the infinite

law comes again into play in the disruption of the Presbyterian church order. That law's four characteristics – its condemnation of persons prior to action and without opportunity for self-defense, its reduction of those bound under it “to nothing,” its immeasurability, and its lack of mercy⁷²³ – are all prominent in the arguments offered by the New Side in support of its actions versus the synod. The emergence of the infinite law in synodical ordinances and Old Side tactics, from the perspective of the New Side, precipitated their withdrawal if not coercing them into separation from their brethren. Despite the frustration at it expressed by Tennent,⁷²⁴ the event of schism is the moment of institutional grace in which both parties are implicated, in which the infinite imposition of the law culminates, and in which those subject to its tyranny grasp their freedom in a realized liberty of conscience.

Tennent's preaching of terrors conformed to the model of religious experience described in Calvin and Luther at every step, replicating the Calvinist version with special faithfulness. First, preaching terrors presumed that persons indulged in a perilous security in which they considered themselves righteous on account of their deeds. Among those who need the sting of terror, for example, are persons “who cover their inward injustice with an outward show of piety.”⁷²⁵ The comfortable pretense of righteousness, in Tennent's view, posed the main threat to the salvation of the soul, introducing the sickness for which terror is the cure.⁷²⁶ On this point Tennent follows the thought of Calvin, who excoriates the sloth of sinners who take pride in their natural abilities as if these could save.⁷²⁷ This temptation to pride in nature, as I have argued,

723. These characteristics are visible in the concluding sections of both the Luther and Calvin chapters.

724. Tennent, *Remarks*, 1-11.

725. Tennent, “The Justice of God,” 30.

726. Cf. Coalter, 43-44.

727. *Inst.*, III.xii.8; cf. Calvin chapter page 30.

presents Calvin's vision of Luther's initial trust in the law as meant to "heal and enrich."⁷²⁸ At this juncture, then, Tennent stands with Luther and Calvin by positing the believer's temptation to trust in the law and nature as a means for justification. According to the musical analogy in the preceding section, the player engages the melody of the law as though it were easy to perform.

For Tennent as for Luther and Calvin, this impression proves deceptive. Just as Calvin writes that the law must force believers to "shake off their sluggishness" and be "pinch[ed] awake to their imperfection," so preachers should use the law to terrify and awaken in Tennent's view.⁷²⁹ When in "The Justice of God" Tennent depicts God as a consuming fire, filled with "hatred, revenge, and judgment" against sin, and when he expands upon the divine wrath as impartial, universal, inexorable, incomprehensible, and intolerable,⁷³⁰ he channels Calvin's exhortation that the sinner come before the heavenly Judge as He "by whose wrath the earth is shaken; by whose purity all things are defiled; whose righteousness not even the angels can bear; who makes the guilty man not innocent; whose vengeance when once kindled penetrates to the depths of hell."⁷³¹ When Tennent further instructs his hearers to survey the "prodigious multitude" of their sins, which "rival the stars" in number and "for aggravation, are as red as crimson," a subject that "speaks to terror," he repeats Calvin's conviction of the believer's "thousand sins" under the law, as well as the fear of eternal death constitutive of the descent into the self.⁷³² For Tennent as for Calvin, the wrathful God grows infinitely large while the guilty believer shrinks into the infinitesimal. Indeed, Tennent's preaching of terrors so mirrors Calvin's descent into the self that they are virtually indistinguishable in spirit.

728. Pages 158-159.

729. *Inst.*, II.vii.14; page 154.

730. Tennent, "The Justice of God," 11, 17, 21-23, 26; page 11-12.

731. *Inst.*, III.xii.1; page 154.

732. *Inst.*, III.xii.2.

Luther's teaching on the infinite law likewise stands at only a slight remove from Tennent's preaching. The infinite judgment of God that Calvin and Tennent would impose upon believers blends that law with the character of the God as Judge, shifting the emphasis to the disparity between the human and divine natures, but the spirit between the three remains consistent. Luther's believers come to despair, misery, and internal torture under a law that seemed to heal and enrich grown to an oppressive "infinity."⁷³³ They bear "wagonloads of sins that increase infinitely" in the conscience, encountering in moments of spiritual trial both the roaring of the devil and the feeling "that hell is opening up" in order to consume them.⁷³⁴ Thus Luther brings his adherent to the same internal recognition of doom and destruction intended in Calvin's descent and Tennent's terrors. In his preaching, the latter has closely imitated the model provided by both Reformers, intensifying the melody of the law until it becomes harsh and tyrannical, crushing the player under its requirement and providing no moments of rest until the Christian, in the words of Luther and Calvin, is "reduced to nothing."⁷³⁵

The preaching of terror culminates in the believer's hastening to Christ, wherein the individual receives him "by faith, as the gospel offers him, so that we may be justified by faith."⁷³⁶ In this unilateral turning, made in abdication of works and in the hope of a justification that is "wholly gracious," the Christian experiences the New Birth. The grace of Christ wipes out the curse of the law, liberating the conscience and transforming the heart. Tennent's believer enjoys the "feeling of delight" taught by Calvin, if not the exultation of Luther when he felt the gates of heaven thrown open to him in the righteousness received by faith alone.⁷³⁷ In "The Grace of God," Tennent describes this inward conversion in explicitly Calvinist terms, noting

733. *LW* 26.404-406; page 154-155.

734. *LW* 26.382.

735. Page 158.

736. Tennent, "The Justice of God," 31; pages 13-14.

737. See pages 157-158, 208.

how God takes away the sinner's heart of stone and replaces it with one of flesh.⁷³⁸ The player in the foregoing analogy collapses from the melody of the law, finding a newfound liberty and justification in the annulment of the piece.

The believer's turn to moral piety should spring from this liberty, according to Tennent, who encourages parishioners to attend to duty and charity as the ethic of the transformed heart.⁷³⁹ The emphasis on deeds resulting from grace in Tennent's preaching echoes Calvin's doctrine of the inseparability of justification and sanctification inasmuch as the realization of grace for each, far from providing an excuse for laxity, drives the believer to a stricter obedience. To feel the grace of God inwardly, for Calvin as well as for Tennent, is to carry out the habit of grace outwardly. Though he does not teach the inseparability of justification and sanctification, Luther would join them at least in agreeing that the freedom of grace in the heart produces works of love, a joyful obedience under the law no longer regarded as a curse.

In order to show how the pattern of the experience of grace by faith alone provides a template for institutional fragmentation, it is necessary to first presume the theoretical location of the institutional elements involved. In the experience, human nature and the law interact in a way shaped by the law's infinite expansion, a growth culminating in grace. I propose to identify the Philadelphia synod with the law due to its role as the legislative authority in the conflict. It is this "law" that the New Side consistently describes according to the characteristics of infinity noted above.⁷⁴⁰ The New Brunswick Presbytery and the New Side leaders who staffed it, on the other hand, represent "nature" as the party under the synod's jurisdiction. Due to their hierarchical

738. Tennent, "The Grace of God," 55-56; page 198.

739. Page 14.

740. Page 269. These characteristics are (1) the law's condemnation of persons prior to action, and without opportunity of self-defense, (2) its reducing of the nature under it "to nothing," (3) its immeasurability or infinity, and (4) its mercilessness.

judicatory organization, the synod aligned with the Old Side issued the “law” while the New Brunswick Presbytery received it as “nature.”

This division of the synod and the presbytery as law and nature does not mean to imply an utter heterogeneity between them. Just as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin all recognize natural law in some fashion, acknowledging the intertwining of human nature and the law given by God, so the synod as “law” identifies also with nature, for example as it obeys the same laws that it imposes, while the presbytery as “nature” retains a lawgiving function, for example in its distinction from and authority over the laity. It would be a mistake to conclude that the designation of the New Brunswick Presbytery or the New Side party as “nature” meant that its members were consciously antinomian or wished to dissolve the church order.⁷⁴¹ In terms of the music analogy, Tennent and his New Brunswick associates would agree that the melody of the law ought to be played and engaged happily in that playing prior to the development of the tensions that would erupt into schism.

And yet the obedience inspired by the New Birth professed by Tennent tended to destabilize the church order. The New Side habit of itinerancy in particular drew the ire of the synodical Old Side as a threat to the status quo. Itinerants flaunted established ministerial boundaries in light of the “necessity” of spreading the New Birth,⁷⁴² upsetting their fellow clergy and stoking an uproar in congregations. The Old Side also grew suspicious of William Tennent’s Log College because of its role as a training ground for revivalists. In their view, the Log College questioned the legitimacy of traditional forms of pastoral education, as if private institutions were the genuine centers of God’s work. The New Birth as an inward annulment of the law moved in both cases, it seems, in harmony with an outward challenge to institutional norms, fostering habits that would contribute to the schism of 1741.

741. Tabb, 83-92.

742. Cf. Tennent, “Unconverted Ministry,” 388.

In this way the New Side, in step with the Calvinist spirit that would provoke the emergence of the infinite law, stirred up the synod to implement regulations that would suppress its activities. The 1738 acts against itinerancy and requiring synodical examination of candidates would have suffocated the growing New Side influence if their pastors had obeyed them. Instead, the New Brunswick presbytery issued its “Apology,” in which they state their case in rebuttal of the synod’s decrees. The New Side first objected to the itinerancy act because it allowed one minister to suspend the itinerating practice of another “not for any real fault committed, or so much as alleged; but upon suspicion that some bad consequences will follow upon his preaching.”⁷⁴³ They then added that such a rule “would condemn men . . . before they be heard in their own defense” and “without the least pretense of fault committed.”⁷⁴⁴ Secondly, the New Side argued that if the synod can arrogate a presbytery’s powers of licensure to itself, there is no limit to what other powers it might strip away. “For, if the synod can take away, at its pleasure, one privilege and proper business of presbyteries, what hinders but by the same power they may take away another, and another, ‘til they take away the whole, by the same rule that this act is made?” This progress would result in “the end of presbyteries altogether,” removing the substance and leaving only the name.⁷⁴⁵

In these two arguments the New Brunswick presbytery refutes the synodical acts by envisioning them along the lines of the infinite law. Though the New Side does not explicitly construe these two rules as somehow infinite, they describe the implications of these statutes according to two characteristics of oppression under infinity. First, the itinerancy act convicts persons before a fault has been committed and without allowing them to defend themselves, effectively denying any meaningful freedom of itinerant practice. Second, the examining act sets a precedent that could end up negating the jurisdictional substance of the presbytery, and thus the

743. Tennent, *Remarks*, 41.

744. Tennent, *Remarks*, 41-42.

745. Tennent, *Remarks*, 51-52.

presbytery itself. I submit that a presbytery deprived of its “privilege and proper business” until the whole is taken away, bringing about “the end of presbyteries altogether” as the New Brunswick party feared, is the institutional parallel to the law reducing nature “to nothing” in the theory of religious experience determined by the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Thus the synod as “law” would impose its prerogatives on the presbytery as “nature” to such an extent that there would be nothing meaningful left to the latter. To retain the name of the presbytery without the substance, so that it has no clear purpose or power, is to make it no longer a presbytery and, in terms of institutional viability, almost nothing at all.

The “Apology” further argues that the synod had no power to make laws that supersede the right of conscientious objection. Aside from possessing no basis for its unwarranted assertion of authority in the Scripture, the New Brunswick party asserted that the synod or any judicatory’s crafting and imposing new laws as if these were terms of communion provides a ground for schism between authorities and dissenters by undermining Christian liberty and placing believers under “an intolerable Bondage.”⁷⁴⁶ In lieu of this imposition of law, the New Side would radically reduce the coercive force of authoritative bodies for the sake of individual liberty, relegating them to advising rather than commanding their constituents. The “Apology” thus contends for the annulment of synodical authority on the ground of liberty of conscience, posing the freedom of the individual as a counter to a law that had assumed the characteristics of the infinite. In terms of the music analogy, the law’s melody had lost its comfort for the New Brunswick presbytery due to the synodical acts of 1738, becoming unrelenting and oppressive. In response, they affirmed a freedom that supersedes and annuls the law in order to defend themselves against its accusations.

“The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” further inflamed the controversy in 1740, intensifying the New Side’s provocation of the synod by castigating those without and opposed to the New Birth as unregenerate tyrants. Tennent’s attack on the Pharisee-teachers who would

746. Tennent, *Remarks*, 62.

“violently oppress” vital religion, and which the Old Side correctly saw as Tennent’s judgment on themselves, struck at the heart of their claim to pastoral legitimacy. To lack the experience of grace, Tennent insisted, left the pastor in the natural and unsaved state. The Old Side no doubt received this condemnation gravely if not indignantly, but Tennent went further. Chaining parishioners to such unregenerate pastors, he claimed, amounted to “a cruel oppression of tender consciences, a compelling of men to sin,” and a slavery not unlike that of the Hebrews under the Egyptians.⁷⁴⁷ In Tennent’s sermon the Old Side therefore saw a challenge to both their right to the pastoral office and their worthiness as guides over their congregations.

In this sermon the New Side’s proposed annulment of synodical law extended beyond published arguments between pastors, encouraging parishioners to ignore the authority of Old Side clergy who would restrict them from the New Birth. Tennent’s admonition that parishioners quit their unregenerate pastors in a respectful manner aside, the thrust of his argument comes in his granting the laity the liberty to go where they must in order to receive spiritual nourishment. This, he proclaims, is their duty, despite the disruptions in congregations that might result. Tennent enjoins his listeners to go where they can to procure the New Birth, not requiring that the laity find a pastor from a synod-approved college or that they avoid itinerants, but just the opposite. He calls for “faithful laborers” from “private schools,” hinting toward itinerants from his father’s Log College, as needed to bring saving grace to the same people whom he authorizes as free to seek it beyond local boundaries. Such public exhortation virtually begged the Old Side to assert their power more forcefully in the synod in the attempt to suppress the revival’s threat to their legitimacy.⁷⁴⁸

That assertion arrived in the protestation of 1741, presented at the synodical meeting that transformed the threat of schism into a reality. The five points of protest announced by the Old

747. Tennent, “Unconverted Ministry,” 393-394.

748. Cf. pages 18-19 for these points in “Unconverted Ministry.”

Side stand out as a coercion of the New to either relinquish their revivalist habits or abandon the synod. The Old Side's affirmation that (1) the synod must maintain the Westminster Confession, catechisms, directory, and acts implemented by its own authority in their entirety; that (2) no person who breaks any point of doctrine or conduct in the aforesaid can sit and vote in the synod; that (3) the New Side had no right to sit and vote due to various infractions, including the denial of synodical authority versus dissenters, the breaking of the examining act, and the disruption of others' congregations; and that (4) whatever ordinances the New Side might establish have no binding force upon their opponents – all these led to the final point of protest, that (5) if the revivalists sustained their divisive practices they would be guilty of schism, whereas the Old Side would constitute “the true Presbyterian church in this province.” With this protestation the Old Side would slam the door upon the Awakening through the unimpeded application of synodical power. Effectively proclaiming themselves to be the synod, they would impose a law upon the New Side that would reduce the latter's cause to nothing, crushing it under the weight of the Confessions, catechisms, directory, and synodical legislation.⁷⁴⁹

While it is hard to retrace the precise course of the tumult that followed, there is no doubt that the gathering concluded with the rending of the New Brunswick party from the synod. Given the force of the protestation it is also difficult to say whether the New Side ministers left of their own will or were forced out of the synod by their brethren. For when the Old Side presented its protestation, the already rigorous musical score reached an impossible intensity. The Old Side “law” of the synod looked down on “nature” in the New Brunswick presbytery and demanded a conformity so relentless, and in total denial of the freedom sought by the minority, that the revivalists arguably had no choice but to secede. The player collapses, the New Side withdraws from the insatiable law that it had provoked. Goaded on by both parties, that law culminates in the “grace” of schism. This culmination expresses Luther's “death of death” in the dissolution of synodical authority over the presbytery, while the revivalists discovered their “law of liberty” in

749. Pages 21-22 above.

the appeal to freedom of conscience that annulled the claims of the church's hierarchical order. In this grace the New Brunswick party, like Luther's nature in its encounter with Christ, receives a profound and dubious liberty that makes the law into a matter of indifference.

Not long after the meeting, Tennent related his version of events and justified the New Side point of view on the schism in his *Remarks Upon a Protestation*. Here Tennent rebutted the protestation by arguing that if every rule in the directory, including those passed by the synod, constituted a term of communion and possessed such authority that to object to it barred members from sitting and voting, these regulations "may be multiplied yearly into an immense volume. And if one did adopt the directory, in the strictest sense, it is no sufficient security against exclusion, unless he can swallow all the after canons, which shall be contrived by the majority."⁷⁵⁰ This regulation, besides not being followed by the Old Side on numerous points, further permitted "no mercy for scrupulous consciences, and renders synodical communion as precarious as the variable humours and fancies of men." Tennent then returned to the theme of liberty of conscience first expressed in the 1739 "Apology," asserting that the dictates of conscience supersede the enforcement of oppressive laws upon the minority by the majority. "We know of no authority on earth," Tennent writes, "that can bind us to the Word of God, and it is our own and not another's judgment of that Word, which we are to follow."⁷⁵¹ When the conscience faces a choice between obeying an unjust authority and the will of God, it must follow the will of God.

With these arguments the New Side, represented by Tennent, again interpret the Old Side's actions in the synod in terms of the infinite law. When Tennent refers to the protestation's implicit multiplication of terms of communion into an "immense volume" that would require members of the synod to "swallow all the after canons" that the majority might contrive, he imagines the synod's authority expressed in a gargantuan and unbounded, even infinite, number

750. Tennent, *Remarks*, 14-15.

751. Tennent, *Remarks*, 17.

of commands. The perceived innumerability of synodical requirements, each a sufficient cause for ejecting dissenters, is so unrealistic a standard in Tennent's view that the Old Side pastors themselves fail to adhere to it at numerous points. When Tennent goes on to criticize this expression of authority as permitting "no mercy for scrupulous consciences," he further channels the ruthlessness and inexorability of the infinite law as expressed in Luther and Calvin. Taking the New Brunswick "Apology" and Tennent's *Remarks* together, then, one finds all four characteristics of the infinite law used to describe the Old Side's imposition of synodical authority: that law's condemnation of persons prior to action and without opportunity for self-defense, its reduction of its subjects "to nothing," the innumerability of its commands, and its mercilessness. The pattern of coercion leading to the believer's inward experience of grace thus manifests itself in the reasoning of the minority party in its reflections on the causes of difference leading to schism.

Yet the New Side would return to obey the law from the grace of freedom. This return does not imply a new submission to the Philadelphia synod or the end of the schism in 1758, but the establishment of an ecclesiastical organization representative of New Side perspectives on authority. In 1745, a new "law" was formed in the synod of New York, but this law explicitly denied its own legislative powers and affirmed the Scriptures as the only valid rule over the church. In addition, the synod's founders agreed that when conscientious objection posed an insurmountable disagreement on essential matters between synodical authorities and a dissenter, the individual could peaceably withdraw.⁷⁵² In this way an organization formed upon the Scriptures as supreme at once negated its authority to compel before the right of individual conscience. That authority existed in annulment with respect to the matters that it considered essential, for the minority could conscientiously object to the majority with unquestioned liberty, and with the default of the community leaning against its own prerogatives and toward the objecting individual or group.

752. Maxson, 89-90.

What I have so far argued suggests a relationship between the inward experience of the New Birth and the outward or institutional claim of liberty of conscience. I propose to clarify that relationship, in the Reformed context at least, by way of Calvin's implicit doctrine of parallel predestination. According to this doctrine, Calvin embeds both the law and nature within grace as their origin and goal. Relying upon the promise of eternal grace as a foundation, Calvin's believer embarks on the path of obedience that is the infinite law, also experiencing that law internally in the "descent into the self" or the confrontation with God's infinite judgment. This internal confrontation culminates in the embrace of the grace of Christ, the inward appropriation of blessing that Tennent and his cohort termed the New Birth. This is the inward application of parallel predestination, but there is an outward one as well. In the latter parallel, the promise of grace is the promise of freedom from the law, or an individual liberty not constrained by institutional restrictions. Relying on this promise as one's *terminus a quo*, the individual sets out upon the path of obedience that is again the infinite law, perhaps provoking that law to its infinity as the New Sides did (e.g., by itinerating). The individual's encounter with this law, itself embedded in grace, culminates in the schism in which the believer and the law part ways. This outward event realizes the promise of liberty or grace that grounded the individual's obedience.

I propose that the goal of the inward movement, the New Birth in which Christ liberates the Christian from God's infinite judgment under the law, is at once the origin of the outward movement, or the promise of liberty of conscience that goads the individual toward its realization in the annulment of institutional prerogatives if not in schism. As Calvin and Tennent agree, to feel the grace of God inwardly is to carry out the habit of grace outwardly. For the Reformer, one cannot separate the justification that annuls the law in the conscience from the sanctification that witnesses to that annulment in practice. The principle of outward annulment, branded upon nature in the vitality of the New Birth, is the same liberty of conscience that announces the negation of both the law's curse and, as I have argued, the law as such. Liberty from the law of God internally is therefore liberty from the church as lawgiver externally, while the grace of

Christ stamped upon the heart is the grace of freedom bestowed upon the conscientious minority.⁷⁵³

Conclusion

Justification by faith alone entails a unique interior dynamic leading up to the experience of grace. This dynamic presumes nature's temptation to trust in the law and its own righteousness as a means to justification, like Luther as a young monk or Calvin's depiction of individuals made slothful by their virtues. Confidence in the law, however, soon gives way before the multiplicity of its demands, a boundlessness that expands infinitely. Luther expresses this unlimited growth straightforwardly in the increasing number of the law's commands, while Calvin recasts the law's infinity in connection with the character of God the Judge, so that the infinite law becomes the infinite judgment. For both Luther and Calvin, the law's expansion denotes parallel and antithetical movements for it and nature: the law's multiplication to the infinite makes it infinitely large, whereas its pressure upon nature shrinks the latter "to nothing." This process attains its apogee in nature's realization that it cannot trust in the law or its own powers for any help toward justification, turning away from these to the grace of Christ by faith alone. The blessing of Christ then invades and permeates the believer, who feels justification as the release from the law's curse. This event spurs the Christian on to the life of obedience for both Reformers, whether in Luther's conception of faith poured out in works of love or Calvin's exhortation toward the ceaseless obedience that the law requires of the Christian.

The schism among Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies during the Great Awakening followed a similar logic. The New Sides in the New Brunswick presbytery and the Old Sides who acted through the Philadelphia synod both believed in the necessity of the law understood as a viable ecclesiastical order. But the experience of grace touted by the New Side as the "New

753. Though I cannot argue for it here, I suspect that Luther offers a less rigorous and neatly defined version of the Calvinistic pattern, due to some extent to his failure to predestine the law to grace.

Birth,” an experience supposed to bind believers more firmly to God and the church, threatened to sever that order. In response to the instability occasioned by its spread, the synod adopted legal measures that resembled the characteristics of the infinite law. To the New Sides, it seemed that synodical power might expand without limit while their own view, not to mention their freedom to promote it, were reduced to nothing. The unilateral imposition of power in the Old Side’s protestation of 1741 brought the infinite synodical law to its peak, virtually compelling the New Brunswick party out of the synod. Thus the unbounded expression of synodical authority terminated in the achievement of a freedom from the law not unlike that of grace for the conscience. Schism is this freedom, in which parties oppressed by the law and who would protest it on the grounds of the New Birth and liberty of conscience annul it and become its equals. From this position the objecting minority might return to the law but only as so annulled, that is, as established in deference to liberty of conscience as equal to institutional prerogatives.

An ontology of form underlies these parallel dynamics, identifying the individual’s experience of grace and the institutional event of schism with the descent of form into formlessness. When the individual and the institution affirm the necessity of the law, even trusting in it as a help toward justification, they at once affirm the necessity of the form bestowed by the law and nature’s capacity to acquire form through obedience. After this initial rise, the law grows infinite, oppressive, merciless, even totalitarian, crushing those who affirmed it under the weight of unlimited commands and their unlimited judgment. In this expansion the law relinquishes its character as limited and merciful, declining in the loss of the form that defined it as law. Those under the law, whether human nature in the conscience or individuals and groups under a law-giving institution, suffer a parallel and antithetical loss of form, shrinking toward nothingness as the law expands beyond comprehension. Grace then occurs in the total loss of form, the point at which the law can no longer oppress because it has lost its definition *qua* law at the same time that nature has no remaining form to be destroyed. This moment occurred among the Presbyterians, I think, at the meeting in 1741, even during the reading of the protestation that

effectively annihilated the New Brunswick party as members of the synod. The moment likewise occurs in the individual's experience when nature turns completely from the law in order to embrace the grace of Christ by faith. Both moments bring freedom from the law and justification in that freedom. Both also spawn an obedience embedded within and subordinate to that freedom, ever weary of the infinite law. Far from denoting liberation from the sin that inhibits nature's ascension toward form as found in Augustine, however, the experience of grace by faith means the abandonment of ontological form for the law and nature and the loss of institutional form in the fragmentation of the church.

EPILOGUE

PHILIP BERRIGAN AND THE WARFARE STATE

I suggested in the preface that the modern tendency toward social breakdown consists in the peculiar juxtaposition of graduated claims to individual liberty with an expanding state apparatus. Since then, we have seen the combination of an infinitely augmented law and claims to freedom of conscience in the Protestant experience of grace, as well as the perception of a synod immeasurably expanded in power combined with assertions of conscientious dissent in the Great Awakening. The ontological pattern germane to both inner grace and outward dissent explains, I think, what Bellah was hinting at in his essays on America's common culture and the flaws in the Protestant code, where he identified dissenting Protestantism as the origin of American appeals to the sacredness of conscience against ideals of a collectively-defined common good. This is not to take away from the models of utilitarian and expressive individualism that Bellah and his associates have developed, but to agree with him that the dissenting Protestant stand upon the inviolability of conscience is perhaps the deepest source of the individual liberty challenging the coherence of the Western order.

Were we to look, might we find instances in which the individual's freedom of conscience opposes the modern state as a kind of infinite law? We would need to discover a conscientious minority that depicts the law according to the qualities of infinity, as a law that (1) convicts prior to action and denies opportunities for self-defense, (2) reduces its subjects "to nothing," (3) exerts itself with immeasurable force, and (4) shows no mercy to dissenters. I would like to suggest that there are such scenarios involving resisters who protest against an oppressive law in the name of conscience and who would annul the law in the name of freedom. To this end, I shall briefly propose the case of Vietnam protester Philip Berrigan, a soldier-turned-Catholic priest and activist who battled the American "warfare state." That state, I

suggest, confronted Berrigan as a version of the infinite law especially in its warmaking capacity, while Berrigan wanted to bring grace to himself and American society through his practice of nonviolent resistance and the incarceration it incurred.

I do not mean by this method to impose a rigid sociological scheme on historical events as divergent as the Great Awakening and the upheavals of the 1960s and 70s. The pattern of grace for which I have argued might illumine those events, but it should not ignore their details or reduce historical idiosyncrasies into a single formula. The sociological scheme must not only include historical variations but remain flexible enough to learn from them. One must balance the convergence of underlying principles between distinct historical occurrences with the forces that make those occurrences distinct. I emphasize this point because I am here seeking the congruence of Berrigan's case with the Protestant paradigm rather than the traits distinctive to Berrigan's example. If space allowed, I would treat both that congruence and Berrigan's particularities more fully.

As a soldier in World War II, Berrigan imagined himself as gallant and heroic, justified by his cause and proud of America's role in saving the West from Hitler. He remembers a time shortly after returning to the United States in which he received a hero's welcome, leading a public procession of soldiers, friends, and family, "warm shivers of patriotism rushing up and down" his spine. "I had done the right thing," he thought, "Harry Truman had done the right thing. The crew of the Enola Gay had done the right thing."⁷⁵⁴ Yet Berrigan harbored silent remorse about the realities of war, suppressing his "ghost-filled past" under a government-imposed silence of agreement.⁷⁵⁵ He had few if any qualms about the legitimacy of war or the state as a warmaker, he was a loyal soldier and citizen, submissive to American power as just and

754. Philip Berrigan, *Fighting the Lamb's War: Skirmishes with the American Empire*. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 22.

755. Berrigan, 23-24.

a force that had cleansed the world of Nazism, but gory memories of combat did not sit well on his conscience.

From 1955-62, while Berrigan served as a Catholic priest to impoverished African-Americans, a new view of war and the state came to dominate his thinking. During this time he began to perceive the connections between militarism, racism, and poverty. His research into these connections opened his eyes to a fundamental governmental contradiction: Congress spent millions of taxpayer dollars to build, test, and deploy weapons of mass destruction while the poor were neglected and suffered inhumanely. “Blacks had to live in shacks, and their children had to die from hunger and disease,” Berrigan laments, “so that the military could build more bombs.”⁷⁵⁶ He concluded that war is “the overarching evil” in the United States, a measure employed by a state that everywhere oppresses its people. For Berrigan, this oppression crystallized in the most destructive of weapons, the nuclear bomb. He could not separate the state’s dehumanization of the poor from its preparation for and execution of war.

Berrigan’s notion of the state thus fused its capacities as an oppressive lawgiver with its activity as a warmaker. “The state makes the laws; therefore, the state *is* the law. If the state becomes a polluter, a drug pusher, or a war machine, citizens still must obey the law.”⁷⁵⁷ In Berrigan’s mind, the American state had become a pre-eminent war machine, an institution that has “death as its *modus vivendi*,” carrying out that death through genocide in Vietnam and the maintenance of weapons capable of nuclear holocaust.⁷⁵⁸ The same laws that kept the poor in their hovels and denied their human dignity justified “the empire”⁷⁵⁹ as a vehicle of military

756. Berrigan, 64.

757. Berrigan, 96 (emphasis in original).

758. Berrigan, 188.

759. Berrigan, 101.

destruction. In this way Berrigan identified his enemy as “the warfare state,”⁷⁶⁰ a behemoth committed to the unjust centralization of power through both national laws and international aggression.

Due to its complicity with that power, the church did not escape Berrigan’s criticism. He wrote to the Catholic Bishops Synod that he saw the church as unforgivably compromised under the state, arguing that both it and the state “desire malleability and conformity...both fear conscience...both are self-righteous and dogmatic...both are ruthless in handling deviants.”⁷⁶¹ True Christianity, on the other hand, holds the state up to the standard of God’s law. It exposes the injustice and violence of the state, the war that the state wages on the poor and its oppression of the underprivileged, in the hope that the state will be transformed. In witnessing to the gospel through resistance to the state, Berrigan exemplified a Christian life of nonviolence and conscience,⁷⁶² refusing the violence familiar to the state in affirmation of a new order in which that violence does not hold sway.

Berrigan’s first major foray into nonviolent direct action against the government occurred in 1967, when he and three comrades raided the Baltimore customs house. After centering themselves by prayer, the group entered the building, broke past secretaries and seized draft files, dousing them with their own blood. “We had invaded the state’s sanctuary,” Berrigan writes of his incursion into the customs house, “and burned its sacred files.”⁷⁶³ The police arrested the resisters shortly after the action had begun, with Berrigan initially refusing bail and facing jail time for his actions.

Out on bail in 1968, Berrigan conspired with eight associates including his brother Daniel on a second draft board raid, this time in Catonsville, MD. Here the group confiscated the draft

760. Berrigan, 184.

761. Berrigan, 143.

762. Berrigan, 83.

763. Berrigan, 89.

files, taking them to the parking lot before covering them with blood and setting them on fire. After this Berrigan and his associates prayed and waited for the authorities to arrive. In 1970, while serving time for this action at a prison in Danbury, Connecticut, the FBI accused Berrigan of plotting to blow up government buildings and planning to kidnap Henry Kissinger. Berrigan denies any intent for these activities, although he had looked into cutting off utilities at government buildings as part of an action and had discussed the idea of a “citizen’s arrest” of Kissinger with other Vietnam resisters. In the trial that went forward, known as the Harrisburg conspiracy, Berrigan was acquitted of both schemes.⁷⁶⁴

The Plowshares movement against nuclear weapons received Berrigan’s focus in the wake of Vietnam. On September 9, 1980, Berrigan took part in a Plowshares action at the General Electric plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. The resisters broke into the plant at night, raced into a room storing nuclear-capable warheads, and used hammers to disable them in an effort to literally beat swords into plowshares. When the guards arrived, none of the intruders resisted, although Berrigan splashed blood over blueprints for nuclear weaponry. The cohort meant by this action, in Berrigan’s words, “to proclaim the sin of mass destruction,” offending a government that he mockingly refers to as “megadeath.”⁷⁶⁵

For his actions against the draft boards and at King of Prussia Berrigan faced the threat of decades in jail, spending a number of years behind bars. While serving 40 months in prison in the early 1970s, Berrigan kept up his resistance activities and exhortation toward the gospel of nonviolent direct action among those incarcerated with him. Jail came to possess a special meaning for Berrigan, who writes that it “made sense to me” because in jail one identifies with the poor and learns to speak for them.⁷⁶⁶ Berrigan further understands jail as a way of subverting

764. Berrigan, 126-131.

765. Berrigan, 183-184.

766. Berrigan, 90.

and disarming society, a modern Christian wilderness from which believers can “testify against the criminality of public authority.”⁷⁶⁷ As a consequence of resistance, jail witnesses to the Christian’s freedom of conscience against the indignities and belligerence of the state. No one likes jail, Berrigan admits, and no one would seek it as an end in itself, but in a corrupt society he believes “that imprisonment could hardly be more to the point” as a space for the proclamation of justice. For this reason Berrigan exhorts Christians to fill up the jails, being free enough to spend time behind bars.

In order to draw out the correspondences between Berrigan’s experiences vis-à-vis the American government and the Protestant pattern for grace, we must designate “law” and “nature” in Berrigan’s life and thought. Here the state rather obviously stands as “law,” being the legislative and warmaking authority that Berrigan sought to counter, while the people under the state, and especially resisters like Berrigan, take the role of “nature” as the recipients of the state’s commands and as subject to its military and judicial power.

Berrigan’s story begins with his acceptance of the state as a lawgiver and his answer to its call to make war. As a soldier in World War II, he trusted the American state as a necessary enemy to Hitler and a rightly victorious force despite the ghosts that followed him from Europe. Like Luther’s initial trust in the law to “heal and enrich” and Calvin’s presupposition that believers take pride in natural righteousness because of their obedience, Berrigan at first looked to the state’s “law” as justified and beneficial for the world order. He was a patriot, a denizen of state power and happy to obey the state’s commands, seeing them as a guardian for the common good.

When Berrigan began to perceive the connections between militarism and poverty as a Josephite priest, his conception of the state and its wars soured. He increasingly saw the state as an aggressor and a tyrant; for our purposes, he began to see the state as a “law” in its infinity. That Berrigan came to see “the warfare state” along the lines of the infinite law is suggested when

767. Berrigan, 224-225.

one considers his experiences with and view of the state in light of the infinite law's four characteristics. Here I will rely on details from the earlier account of Berrigan's ideas and activities and add a few more when necessary. It is also essential to recall that Berrigan does not distinguish the state as lawgiver from the state warmaker. At numerous points for Berrigan, the state as unrestrained war machine expresses the state as infinite law.

First, like the uncountable and infinite commands that bedeviled Luther and the infinite judgment that shook Calvin, for Berrigan the state's capacity as a warmaker exceeds all calculation. The atom bomb embodied that immeasurability in the threat of nuclear holocaust. Berrigan concurred that "the splitting of the atom for war was the greatest single tragedy to befall humankind," more powerful in its destructiveness than the natural disasters that have caused "hundreds of millions of deaths" throughout history.⁷⁶⁸ The atom bomb was "megadeath" to Berrigan, a symptom of America's "spiritual insanity" in its capacity for mass destruction.⁷⁶⁹

The totals of those killed and wounded in war was hardly less catastrophic in Berrigan's view. He laments the death of 70 million people in World War II, the two to four million Vietnamese killed during that war, the over 350,000 Americans killed or wounded in southeast Asia, and the possibility of a half million Iraqi dead as a result of the 1990 Gulf War.⁷⁷⁰ These numbers, though not literally infinite, evidence an understanding of war as an incomprehensible and unbounded reign of death. Their effect is a kind of infinity, as if war and the American government as warmaker inevitably act without restraint and with the necessity of a numbing count of casualties.

Second, the activity of the state as a warmaker reduces its subjects "to nothing." The atom bomb illustrates this aspect of the warfare state-as-infinite law as well, as at Hiroshima the

768. Berrigan, 180.

769. Berrigan, 185.

770. Berrigan, 24, 172, 179.

bomb “vaporized Japanese women and children” and “incinerated the elderly.”⁷⁷¹ The bomb left nothing in its wake, leveling entire cities in one stroke and leaving rubble where there was civilization and life.

The state’s reduction of persons to nothing also took place, for Berrigan, in the oppression of the poor in America and around the world that resulted from military operations and the pursuit of arms. “Because of the arms race,” he wrote, “two-thirds of mankind languishes in hunger, ignorance, and hopelessness.”⁷⁷² Blacks suffered the most in America as a consequence of the arms race, while the state had “no serious intent” to accept black persons as “fellow human being[s].”⁷⁷³ The political and social disenfranchisement of the poor, especially the black poor in America, represents the flip side of war’s reduction of persons to nothing. Whereas war vaporizes persons in their bodies internationally, domestically the warfare state denies its citizens’ dignity, withholding the recognition they deserve as human beings. Like the New Brunswick party’s fear of “the end of presbyteries altogether,” their reduction to nothing under synodical arrogations of power, the warfare state in Berrigan’s view so dehumanized persons that they were no longer such in substance, but only in name.⁷⁷⁴

Third, the state as infinite law both condemns persons without providing room for self-defense and accuses them prior to crimes committed. Though Berrigan does not explicitly theorize the state according to these criteria, the details of his encounters with judicial power illustrate their application to his case.

“The courts,” Berrigan writes while discussing the trial for the Catonsville action, “protect the government *from* the people. The courts serve the state, not ordinary citizens. The

771. Berrigan, 21.

772. Berrigan, 72.

773. Berrigan, 75.

774. Tennent, *Remarks*, 51-52; page 273 above.

courts exist to maintain order, not to secure justice.”⁷⁷⁵ He and his co-conspirators learned this lesson the hard way at their trial. The judge allowed them “to talk about [their] lives, what had brought [them] to Catonsville,” and why they had risked years in jail for nonviolent resistance.⁷⁷⁶ The defendants also told the court that America’s institutions “had broken down,” serving the empire rather than the people, and that as resisters they stood in the tradition of American civil disobedience exemplified by the Boston Tea Party and the abolitionist movement.⁷⁷⁷ But when they concluded their defense, the judge instructed the jury “to ignore” their statements. “The issue,” Berrigan surmises, “is whether or not we destroyed government property. Nothing else mattered.”⁷⁷⁸ The protesters had entered the court on the assumption that they would have a chance to defend and justify their actions, only to find that chance negated by the court’s representative. This scenario repeated itself in the trial for the action at King of Prussia, where the judge “made it difficult, if not impossible, for the jury to rule” based on the moral arguments by which the accused sought to validate their protest. The judge undermined all considerations beyond whether they “had broken the law, damaged property; that alone mattered, was the only issue the jury should consider when deciding guilt or innocence.”⁷⁷⁹

Just as the court system permitted Berrigan no substantive room for self-defense, it accused him of crimes prior to action. Though he and his wife, Liz McAlister, had discussed a “citizen’s arrest” of Kissinger, they had never planned to kidnap him as the government charged. And though Berrigan had looked into cutting off the electricity of government buildings as part of an action, he never planned to harm anyone or blow up those buildings as the government alleged. He writes that “we had no intentions of hurting anyone. That wasn’t our style, we would

775. Berrigan, 99.

776. Berrigan, 105.

777. Berrigan, 106.

778. Berrigan, 108.

779. Berrigan, 189.

never do it, even if it would mean an end to the Vietnam war.”⁷⁸⁰ Yet the government charged him with conspiring to commit these crimes in the same manner that it “threw conspiracy charges against Dr. Spock, William Sloane Coffin, Michael Ferber, Mitch Goodman, and numerous others.”⁷⁸¹ In Berrigan’s view, the state had a habit of concocting accusations against those who had yet to commit a crime, staining them with guilt prior to any concrete infraction.

These considerations led, *fourth*, to Berrigan’s judgment on the American state as totalitarian. He writes of “My crime: having unacceptable thoughts. This, of course, is the basis for totalitarianism.”⁷⁸² While most Americans did not perceive it, Berrigan saw the government as “ruthless and cruel...ripping people apart, chewing them to pieces; that’s what the government was doing in Southeast Asia, and that’s what it was doing at home.”⁷⁸³ The American state imposed a merciless rule over individuals as both a lawgiver and a warmaker. On one hand, it advances “an increasingly terroristic apparatus” that “oppresses people everywhere, but especially its own.” On the other, the state employs the atom bomb as “a totalitarian measure,” a threat if not a reality of mercilessness brought to bear on the peoples of foreign nations.⁷⁸⁴

The warfare state as “law” in Berrigan’s writings and experiences thus conforms to the characteristics of the infinite law, the same four characteristics at work in the New Side clergy’s defense of its protest against the Philadelphia synod. The objectors in both cases, as representative of “nature” under the law, (1) considered the power of the law that they opposed as immeasurable, or at least potentially so; (2) saw the law’s exercise of power as a reduction of its subjects “to nothing”; (3) charged that the law allowed no room for self-defense and would condemn persons prior to action; and (4) regarded the law as bereft of mercy, especially for

780. Berrigan, 130-131.

781. Berrigan, 137.

782. Berrigan, 127.

783. Berrigan, 126.

784. Berrigan, 204, 218.

scrupulous consciences. It appears that, on these points at least, the New Brunswick presbytery and Philip Berrigan faced a similar kind of authoritative enemy, an unjust law that would deny the freedom to resist its whims.

Also like Gilbert Tennent and his New Brunswick colleagues, Berrigan stood up against the law on the authority of conscience. The laws of the state, he reasoned, opposed both international law and the law of God. “The state and its legislation are in rebellion against, or rejection of, God. Its courts are a human fabrication, cannot promote justice and peace; they are founded in violence, and legalize violence.”⁷⁸⁵ To resist the injustice of the state, one must appeal to a higher law, a divine law of democracy and conscience, the law that Berrigan connected with Christ, Thoreau, Gandhi, and King.⁷⁸⁶ This law authorizes nonviolent protest as “divine disobedience,” a witness to the reign of God against the state that “reflected the gospel’s vision of human life.”⁷⁸⁷ Conscience could overturn church law as well the rules of the state, as shown in Berrigan’s appeal to conscience in his decision to marry Liz McAlister. His position as a priest and hers as a nun did not prohibit their marriage, as in Berrigan’s opinion “mandatory celibacy is a violation of the human conscience.”⁷⁸⁸ Just as the state is not God, the decrees of Catholic officialdom are not divine writ. By this reasoning Berrigan subordinates the institutional authority of both the state and the church to his rights as a dissenter.⁷⁸⁹

785. Berrigan, 202.

786. Berrigan, 134.

787. Berrigan, 175, cf. 126, 211.

788. Berrigan, 154.

789. Other parallels between the New Brunswick clergy and Vietnam protesters include their resort to “necessity” to defend their actions. Just as Tennent referred to necessity to justify the spread of the revival through itinerancy, knowingly disregarding the standards of the synod, Berrigan’s wife Liz argued the necessity of protest against nuclear war during her trial for a separate action, basing her case on that war’s imminence. The judge disallowed the necessity defense on the grounds that the protesters could not prove the immediate danger of nuclear conflict. Tennent, “Unconverted Ministry,” 388; Berrigan, 186-187.

The conscientious objection that Berrigan preached worked to annul the rule of state authorities over their constituents. By burning draft files at Baltimore and Catonsville, Berrigan's "divine disobedience" directly refuted the legitimacy of the state in coercing its citizens into war, proclaiming the liberty of individuals from governmental prerogatives. Berrigan proclaims that the power of the current state system, aside from being "criminal," is not worthy of the least respect. "The power of any Herod or Hitler or Nixon over us," he writes, "is precisely what is in our heads – no more, no less," while the rule of the police state over the resister is finally "immoral, non-objective, nonexistent."⁷⁹⁰ The United States will become just, Berrigan avers, "when it loses power; when the empire declines and the consequent nation state weakens."⁷⁹¹ He interprets Christ as one who sought to "dismantle" the state system, and following his example Berrigan exhorts Christians that the state must be "taken down altogether, replaced by something altogether new."⁷⁹²

Berrigan sought the advent of that new order through his nonviolent direct action and prison witness. These constitute the grace that he would bring to a world oppressed by the warfare state, annulling the state's authority at the same time that it announces liberty from the state's commands. Draft cards in flames and the pounding of hammers on nuclear warheads enact a more than symbolic death upon a state that has death as its *modus vivendi* and liberates the Christian from complicity with its menace. The individual stands equal with and above state power, judging the state's guilt and undermining its will to violence. From this perspective one best understands Berrigan's belief that Christians must be free enough to go to jail, for in jail believers find their sentiments ennobled despite restrictions on their physical activity. Under the punishment of the state, they witness to the criminality of its law. The grace of this witness is a

790. Berrigan, 149, 225.

791. Berrigan, 217.

792. Berrigan, 214, 124.

version of schism in which the Christian is justified by proving that the law is unjustified; the individual is freed in the conscientious binding of the law that binds.

The value of such protests, I think, is ambivalent. On one hand, they often struggle against manifestations of the infinite law that are unjust and merciless, destructive and totalitarian. These laws have no right to stand inasmuch as they oppress the weak instead of protecting them. But if the theory of grace by faith alone that I have argued is correct, the resistance that would annul the infinite law and bring grace to an oppressed order only consummates that law's erosion *qua* law. In Berrigan's case, his direct experience with the infinite law in Europe, and in light of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, culminates at Catonsville, King of Prussia, and the Danbury penitentiary. If this dynamic is true, appeals to conscience or to a law that supercedes human institutions in the name of freedom might promise liberation from tyranny, but they presuppose that tyranny as intrinsic to the grace they would bring. These appeals further deliver their promised grace at the unintended price of a depleted legal foundation for the social order. Such dissent negates the grounds needed to establish a just order at the same time that it rightly condemns unjust laws, failing to correctly distinguish the infinite and merciless law from justified forms of law. To undermine the law as limited and merciful – but nonetheless as authoritative and often coercive – is to undermine the institutional ligaments by which the stronger social muscles preserve and support the weaker. Though dressed in the garb of a divine conscientiousness, the annulment of law may indeed deprive society of the possibility of a form in which justice prevails, tyranny is pre-empted, and the weak are not abandoned.

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