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IV

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## AGAINST THE ANTINOMIANS

1539

*Translated by Martin H. Bertram*

### INTRODUCTION

The present treatise, published in early 1539, is one of the chief documents in the controversy over the relationship of law and gospel that racked the Lutheran movement in general, and the town of Wittenberg in particular, during the years 1537–1540. Focus of this dispute, as he had been of the earlier “Antinomian controversy” dating from the year 1527, was Luther’s younger colleague, John Agricola (*ca.* 1494–1566). A native of Luther’s own birthplace, Eisleben, Agricola matriculated at the University of Wittenberg in 1515 and, like his contemporary Philip Melancthon, soon became both an ardent follower and a close personal friend of Luther. He studied medicine for a time, served as catechist to the youth of Wittenberg, and then in 1525, having been disappointed in his hope of obtaining a chair on the Wittenberg theological faculty, accepted the position of director of the newly founded Latin School in Eisleben, where in subsequent years he also gained a widespread following as a preacher.

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<sup>1</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1971). *Vol. 47: Luther's works, vol. 47 : The Christian in Society IV* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (47). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Melanchthon's *Articles of Visitation*,<sup>1</sup> prepared for the guidance of those who fanned out from Wittenberg to inspect the condition of the churches in Electoral Saxony in 1527, gave the occasion for the first controversy. In the conviction that Luther's doctrine of "the freedom of a Christian" was being grossly misinterpreted in some quarters as a charter for moral laxity, Melanchthon laid great stress, in the *Articles*, on the necessity for a continued preaching of the law as well as the gospel. "Many," he noted, "now talk only about the forgiveness of sins and say little or nothing about repentance."<sup>2</sup> But true repentance and contrition for sin—which are to be instilled by the rigorous preaching of the law—are the necessary preconditions of genuine faith. Furthermore, the preaching of the law, e.g., the Ten Commandments, is useful and necessary, he insisted, as a guide to the good works which are to follow true faith.

To this emphasis on the law Agricola objected, claiming that it was unfaithful to the basic insights of evangelical faith. Contrition and repentance for sin, he stated, are not so much a precondition of faith as a consequence of it. What can best induce genuine sorrow over one's sin and a turning from it is not the preaching of the law, but the preaching of the gospel of God's immeasurable grace in Christ. And as to guidance for the Christian life, it is to be derived not from the Ten Commandments or other aspects of the law in the usual sense, but from the apostolic admonitions which follow from the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Agricola here was undoubtedly picking up authentic elements in Luther's own teaching, yet without the counterbalance of Luther's realism concerning the Christian's situation as *simul justus et peccator*. For the moment, the disagreement was patched over with a compromise formula worked out in conference between Agricola, Melanchthon, Luther, and Bugenhagen, a formula which is reflected in the text of the *Instructions* as published in 1528. In one sense, it is said, faith precedes repentance; but here faith refers only to a general faith in God as judge. Truly justifying faith in the God of grace and mercy must be preceded by repentance.<sup>4</sup>

During his years at Eisleben, Agricola further developed his distinctive views, spurred in part by his running dialog with the local Romanist preacher, Witzel, who laid special stress upon the role of the law. Nevertheless, when Agricola returned to Wittenberg in 1536 with a view to assuming a professorship which Luther was now in process of arranging for him,<sup>5</sup> the relationship between the two men was at first cordial. Luther appointed Agricola his substitute, both in his pulpit duties and in his university lecturing, during his absence from Wittenberg to attend the conference at Smalcald in early 1537. By the summer of that year, however, Luther had again become disturbed with the heterodoxy of Agricola's views on the subject of the law, as revealed in three of his sermons published at that time, as well as in a set of anonymous theses that were circulating in the town, which Luther attributed to Agricola or his disciples. In these theses not only was Agricola's old polemic against the preaching of the law repeated, but also explicit citations of errors on this topic were given from the writings of both Luther and

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<sup>1</sup> See *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*, 1528. LW 40, 263–320 (a revised version of the *Articles*).

<sup>2</sup> LW 40, 274.

<sup>3</sup> For a full presentation of Agricola's views, see the monographs by Gustav Kawerau, *Johann Agricola von Eisleben* (Berlin, 1881), and Joachim Rogge, *Johann Agricolas Lutherverständnis* (Berlin, n.d. [1960]). Rogge, pp. 296 ff., gives a complete list of Agricola's forty-five extant publications.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. LW 40, 275.

<sup>5</sup> Apparently there was a misunderstanding concerning whether the appointment had in fact been tendered him; cf. Rogge, *op. cit.*, pp. 132 ff.

Melanchthon. Their views, the theses boldly assert, amount to a distortion of the plain meaning of Scripture.<sup>6</sup>

Luther, naturally, was incensed, and in two sermons preached in July and September, 1537, warned against both the theological error and the danger of moral laxity which he saw contained in the “Antinomian” position. Although the two theologians shortly thereafter seemed to have come to terms, the controversy was fueled again by Agricola’s submission to the press, without Luther’s approval, of a work which attempted to summarize, in thesis form, the Gospel texts for the church year. In a lengthy introduction and preface Agricola developed his argument that repentance and forgiveness should only be preached on the basis of the gospel. Acting in his capacity as dean of the theological faculty, Luther ordered the printed sheets confiscated. Then Luther insisted on publishing the anonymous theses and holding a public disputation with Agricola on their contents.<sup>7</sup> This “First Antinomian Disputation” took place on December 18, 1537, although Agricola failed to appear. After still further negotiations, Agricola agreed to another meeting at which he should publicly admit his errors and declare his agreement with Luther’s views. This he did at the Second Disputation, held on January 12, 1538. Luther, in his remarks prepared for these two disputations,<sup>8</sup> holds firmly to the necessity for humbling the sinner through the preaching of the law before the greatness of the redemption accomplished in Christ can be realized. The law is not superseded by the gospel; rather it serves continually as God’s instrument in bringing men to the gospel. Even the Christian, Luther points out, constantly needs the law’s rebuke.

Despite their public reconciliation, Luther once more became suspicious of Agricola’s views during the succeeding months, perhaps incited, as Agricola later complained, by accusations made by his enemies that his assertions of agreement with Luther were insincere.<sup>9</sup> The *Table Talk* during this period contains several harsh comments about Agricola; Luther ranges him with Münzer, Karlstadt, Zwingli, and other such antagonists.<sup>10</sup> On September 6, 1538, yet another disputation was held, the third in the series, from which Agricola once again, however, absented himself. Here Luther shows himself very concerned to defend himself against the charge of unfaithfulness to his own earlier teaching, and in a passage of unusual autobiographical as well as doctrinal interest, he speaks as follows: “True it is that at the early stage of this movement we began strenuously to teach the gospel and made use of these words which the Antinomians now quote. But the circumstances of that time were very different from those of the present day. Then

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<sup>6</sup>The theses were later printed at Luther’s initiative, together with his set of countertheses, as a basis for discussion at the disputation of December 18, 1537. See *WA* 39<sup>1</sup>, 343 ff.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. above, n. 6.

<sup>8</sup>The text of the documents connected with the controversy, including six sets of theses prepared at various times by Luther as well as the three full-scale disputations, may be found in *WA* 39<sup>1</sup>, 360–584. The text of the third disputation has been shown by modern scholars to have suffered emendation, probably by insertion of Melanchthonian material. See Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, trans. by Edward H. Schroeder (“Facet Books, Social Ethics Series,” No. 16; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), pp. 38 ff., and, in addition to the other works there referred to, Gerhard Ebeling’s further comments on the textual question in his essay, On., the Doctrine of the *Triplex Usus Legis* in the Theology of the Reformation, *Word and Faith*, trans. by James w. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), pp. 62–78, especially p. 62, n. 2. From among the extensive further literature on the question of a twofold or threefold function of the law in Luther’s thought, the study by Wilfried Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit: Das Problem des Tertius usus legis bet Luther und die neutestamentliche Parainese* (Göttingen, 3rd ed., 1961), deserves special mention in the present context for its clear presentation of Agricola’s views (pp. 46 ff.).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. below, p. 108, where reference is made to the charge that Agricola was only awaiting Luther’s death to reveal his true views, while claiming fidelity to Luther.

<sup>10</sup>*WA*, TR 4, 97.

the world was terrorized enough when the pope or the visage of a single priest shook the whole of Olympus, not to mention earth and hell, over all which that man of sin had usurped the power to himself. To the consciences of men so oppressed, terrified, miserable, anxious, and afflicted, there was no need to inculcate the law. The clamant need then was to present the other part of the teaching of Christ in which he commands us to preach the remission of sin in his name, so that those who were already sufficiently terrified might learn not to despair, but to take refuge in the grace and mercy offered in Christ. Now, however, when the times are very dissimilar from those under the pope, our Antinomians—those suave theologians—retain our words, our doctrine, the joyful tidings concerning Christ, and wish to preach this alone, not observing that men are other than they were under that hangman, the pope, and have become secure, froward, wicked violators—yea, Epicureans who neither fear God nor men. Such men they confirm and comfort by their doctrine. In those days we were terrorized so that we trembled even at the fall of a leaf... But now our softly singing Antinomians, paying no attention to the change of the times, make men secure who are of themselves already so secure that they fall away from grace.... Our view hitherto has been and ought to be this salutary one—if you see the afflicted and contrite, preach grace as much as you can. But not to the secure, the slothful, the harlots, adulterers, and blasphemers.”<sup>11</sup>

In December, 1538, Agricola approached Luther once more for a reconciliation, motivated partly, no doubt, by anxiety lest his stipend be cut off by the elector. To avoid any possibility of a miscarriage of the arrangement, he asked Luther himself to prepare the text of a recantation which he, Agricola, would sign. In response, Luther set about to prepare the text of the present treatise, wherein, much to Agricola’s dismay, he embedded the one sentence which could be considered to constitute such a recantation (see below, p. 108) in the context of a harsh and satirical polemic, casting the whole in the form of an open letter to one of Agricola’s arch-antagonists.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Agricola was not alone in feeling that he was being treated unfairly is shown by the fact that at this very time his academic colleagues rallied to his side and proposed to elect him dean of the faculty of arts in the university. Only Luther’s vehement objections stymied the project. As the controversy continued, Agricola appealed first to the rector of the university and then, on March 31, 1540, to the elector for an impartial investigation of the matter. This drew from Luther the angry reply, *Against the Eislebener*.<sup>13</sup> Now Agricola was depicted as not only misleading but positively dangerous to the social and ethical order; Antinomianism is a scourge the spread of which cannot be tolerated. The elector, in finally initiating an inquiry, ordered Agricola confined to the town of Wittenberg until the dispute should be settled. The latter, however, weary of the controversy, took flight in mid-August, 1540, for Berlin, where he had been offered the position of preacher to the court of Elector Joachim II of Brandenburg. Subsequently he formally withdrew his complaint against Luther, submitted a theological retraction (based on a draft prepared earlier by Melancthon), and was reinstated—at least formally—in the good graces of both the political and theological authorities of Electoral Saxony.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> WA 39<sup>1</sup>, 571 ff.; English translation as given in James Mackinnon, *Luther and the Reformation* (4 vols.; London, 1930), IV, 171–172. Mackinnon’s chapter on “Luther and Theological Dissent” (*ibid.*, pp. 161 ff.), gives a thorough review of the Antinomian controversy.

<sup>12</sup> Caspar Güttel; see below, p. 107, n. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Wider den Eisleben*. WA 51,429 ff.

<sup>14</sup> The Antinomian question is dealt with in Articles IV–VI of the *Formula of Concord*. Recent monographs on the subject include Lauri Haikola, *Usus Legis* (Uppsala, 1958); Robert C. Schultz, *Gesetz und Evangelium in der*

*Against the Antinomians* has not hitherto appeared in English. Our translation is based on the text, *Wider die Antinomer*, as it is given in WA 50, 468–477. A modern German version appears in the third Munich edition of Luther’s works (H. H. Borchert and Georg Merz [eds.], *Martin Luther: Ausgewählte Werke*, Vol. IV [Munich, 1957], pp. 192–201), and, with certain revisions and omissions, in Kurt Aland (ed.), *Luther Deutsch*, Vol. IV (2nd rev. ed.; Stuttgart and Göttingen, 1964), pp. 224–231.

### AGAINST THE ANTINOMIANS

To the reverend and learned Dr. Caspar Güttel,<sup>1</sup> pastor in Eisleben, my especially good friend in Christ: Grace and peace in Christ, dear Doctor. I assume that you received some time ago a copy of the disputations against the new spirits who have dared to expel the law of God or the Ten Commandments from the church and to assign them to city hall.<sup>2</sup> I never expected that such false spirituality would occur to the mind of man, much less that anyone would support it. However, God warns us through such instances to be on our guard and not to assume that the devil is as far from us as these secure, impudent spirits suppose. We must, indeed, constantly call upon God for help and protection with awe, humility, and earnest prayer; otherwise the devil will soon conjure up a phantom before our eyes, so that we are ready to swear that it is the Holy Spirit himself. Of this we are warned not only by the heretics of the past but also by great and terrible examples from our own time.

I would probably have been willing to forget all the hurts I endured if I could have rested in the hope that I had clarified my position and defended myself sufficiently in the disputation. But Satan would not tolerate this. He is always trying to get me involved and giving the impression that things are not so bad between me and them. I am afraid that if I had died at Smalcald,<sup>3</sup> I would forever have been called the patron of such spirits, since they appeal to my books. In fact, they did all this behind my back, without my knowledge and against my will. They did not have enough consideration to show me so much as a word or a letter of all this, nor did they question me at all about this matter. Thus I was forced to take Master John Agricola to task more than once, beyond what he experienced in the disputation, and I said to him in the presence of our doctors and theologians all that had to be said. For he is the instigator and the master of this game. I did this so that it would become very clear to him what a favor he did me and my spirit in this—a spirit for which I also, by the way, have some regard!<sup>4</sup>

His words and actions indicated that he yielded humbly, and he promised to desist where he had carried things too far, and to hold with us. I had to take his word for this and be content. But when the same things continued to appear, and they even boasted (as in writings which arrived

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lutherischen Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts (Berlin, 1958); and Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969).

WA D. *Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar, 1883–).

<sup>1</sup> Caspar Güttel (1471–1542), like Luther, was originally an Augustinian monk. An early convert to the cause of the Reformation, he became a good friend of Luther and had a distinguished career as pastor and preacher in Eisleben. Agricola counted him among his foremost opponents. See Gustav Kawerau, *Kaspar Güttel, ein Lebensbild aus Luthers Freundeskreise* (Halle/Salle, 1882).

<sup>2</sup> Among the theses attributed to Agricola or his disciples that Lubber had published in December, 1537 (cf. above, p. 103), there was one which stated that the place for the Decalogue is in the city hall, not in the pulpit (*Decalogus gehort auff das Ratthaus, nicht auff den Predigstuel*). WA 39<sup>1</sup>, 344. This statement cannot be located in any of Agricola’s writings, but he was said to have made a remark to this effect to Melanchthon in the earlier debate over the *Articles of Visitation* (see above, pp. 101–102).

<sup>3</sup> Luther had suffered from a severe attack of kidney stones at Smalcald and had been unable to attend the conference.

<sup>4</sup> A satirical reference to Agricola’s claim to be more faithful to the spirit of the early Luther than Luther himself; cf. above, pp. 103–105.

here), that Dr. Martin and Master Eisleben were in hearty accord with one another, I pressed him to issue a public disavowal in print. Otherwise there would be no prospect of rooting out the poison in Eisleben and the surrounding area. He declared himself willing to do this; but since he feared that he could not compose a statement that would command sufficient respect, he urged me to do it. He also said that I should do it as I saw fit and he would be entirely satisfied.<sup>5</sup> I accepted the offer and am herewith complying with the request, chiefly to prevent Master Eisleben or anyone else from stating after my death that I did nothing about this matter but that I ignored the whole thing and went along with it.

The matter stands thus: Master John Eisleben wishes to withdraw what he taught or wrote against the law or the Ten Commandments and to stand with us here in Wittenberg, as the *Confession* and the *Apology* did before the emperor at Augsburg; and if he should later depart from this or teach otherwise, it will be worthless and will stand condemned. I would like to praise him for humbling himself in this way. But since it is generally known that he was one of my best and closest friends, I shall leave this to someone else, so that no one will suspect that I am not in earnest about it. If he remains humble, God can and will surely exalt him; but if he departs from this, God can certainly also debase him again.

Therefore, dear Doctor, I ask you not to regard this as simply a personal letter, but to proclaim and publicize it wherever you can, especially to those who are unable to read. For it is being printed to make it available to all who will or can read, so it must not be viewed as addressed solely to you. I have no other way of opposing the devil. In various writings he constantly presents a false picture of me and my views.

It is most surprising to me that anyone can claim that I reject the law or the Ten Commandments, since there is available, in more than one edition, my exposition of the Ten Commandments, which furthermore are daily preached and practiced in our churches. (I am not even mentioning the *Confession* and the *Apology* and our other books). Furthermore, the commandments are sung in two versions, as well as painted, printed, carved, and recited by the children morning, noon, and night.<sup>6</sup> I know of no manner in which we do not use them, unless it be that we unfortunately do not practice and paint them with our deeds and our life as we should. I myself, as old and as learned as I am, recite the commandments daily word for word like a child. So if anyone perchance gained some other impression from my writings and yet saw and perceived that I stressed the catechism so greatly, he might in all fairness have addressed me and said, "Dear Dr. Luther, how is it that you emphasize the Ten Commandments so much, though your teaching is that they are to be discarded?" That is what they should have done, and not worked secretly behind my back and waited for my death, after which they could make of me what they would.<sup>7</sup> Ah well, let them be forgiven who cease doing this.

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<sup>5</sup>To be sure of satisfying Luther with his retraction, Agricola had asked Luther to prepare the text of it; see above, p. 105. The first sentence of the next paragraph below constitutes, in effect, the direct statement of recantation.

<sup>6</sup>Between 1520 and 1529 Luther published a number of studies of the Ten Commandments which later served as a basis for his treatment of them in the *Large Catechism* and *Small Catechism* of 1529. His *Treatise on Good Works* of 1520 (LW 44, 15–114) also follows the structure of the Decalogue. The two sung versions mentioned here are no doubt Luther's two hymns based on the Ten Commandments: "These Are the Holy Ten Commands" (1524), LW 53, 278–279; and "Man, Wouldst Thou Live All Blissfully" (1524), LW 53, 281.

<sup>7</sup>A charge that had been leveled at Agricola by his opponents in the controversy; see above, p. 108. Already in the summer of 1538 Luther spoke of the Antinomians as a "new sect" and discussed them in the same context as he does here: "I have survived three terrible storms: Münzer, the Sacramentarians, and the Anabaptists. When these were quieted others arose." WA, TR 4, 30–32.

To be sure, I did teach, and still teach, that sinners shall be stirred to repentance through the preaching or the contemplation of the passion of Christ, so that they might see the enormity of God's wrath over sin, and learn that there is no other remedy for this than the death of God's Son. This doctrine is not mine, but St. Bernard's.<sup>8</sup> What am I saying? St. Bernard's? It is the message of all of Christendom, of all the prophets and apostles. But how can you deduce from this that the law is to be cast aside? I cannot find such a deduction in my logic textbook. I should like to see or hear the master who could demonstrate it.

When Isaiah 53 [:8] declares that God has "stricken him for the transgression of my people," tell me, my dear fellow, does this proclamation of Christ's suffering and of his being stricken for our sin imply that the law is cast away? What does this expression, "for the transgression of my people," mean? Does it not mean "because my people sinned against my law and did not keep my law"? Or does anyone imagine that there can be sin where there is no law? Whoever abolishes the law must simultaneously abolish sin. If he permits sin to stand, he must most certainly permit the law to stand; for according to Romans 5 [:13], where there is no law there is no sin. And if there is no sin, then Christ is nothing. Why should he die if there were no sin or law for which he must die? It is apparent from this that the devil's purpose in this fanaticism is not to remove the law but to remove Christ, the fulfiller of the law.

For he is well aware that Christ can quickly and readily be removed, but that the law is written in the depth of the heart and cannot be erased. This is clearly seen in the psalms of lamentation. For here the dear saints are unable to bear the wrath of God. This is nothing but the law's perceptible preaching in man's conscience. The devil knows very well too that it is impossible to remove the law from the heart. In Romans 2 [:14–15] St. Paul testifies that the Gentiles who did not receive the law from Moses and thus have no law are nevertheless a law to themselves, being obliged to witness that what the law requires is written in their hearts, etc. But the devil devotes himself to making men secure, teaching them to heed neither law nor sin, so that if sometime they are suddenly overtaken by death or by a bad conscience, they have grown so accustomed to nothing but sweet security that they sink helplessly into hell. For they have learned to perceive nothing in Christ but sweet security. Therefore such terror must be a sure sign that Christ (whom they understand as sheer sweetness) has rejected and forsaken them. That is what the devil strives for, and that is what he would like to see.

It seems to me that these spirits think that all who are listening to the message are pure Christians, without sin—though in reality they are dejected and downcast hearts who feel their sin and fear God and who therefore must be comforted. To such, the dear Jesus can never be portrayed sweetly enough.<sup>9</sup> They need much more of this, as I discovered in many of them—to say nothing of myself. But these spirits themselves are not such Christians, for they are so secure and confident. Neither are their listeners, who also are secure and happy. In one passage a fine, beautiful young woman, a splendid singer, sings thus: "He feeds the hungry so that they rejoice, and sends the rich empty away. He humbles the mighty and exalts the lowly, and his grace is with those who fear him" [Luke 1:50–53]. If the Magnificat speaks the truth, then God must be the foe of the secure spirits who are unafraid, as such spirits who do away with law and sin are sure to be.

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux (ca. 1091–1153). Luther felt that Bernard, although he misinterpreted the Christian faith on some matters, was essentially in agreement with him in the doctrine of justification. Cf. John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 101–103.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the quotation from Luther cited above, pp. 104–105, for his view of the need for preaching grace or judgment depending on the condition of the hearer.

Therefore I ask you, dear Doctor, to keep to the pure doctrine as you have always done. Preach that sinners must be roused to repentance not only by the sweet grace and suffering of Christ, by the message that he died for us, but also by the terrors of the law. For they are wrong in maintaining that one must follow only one method of preaching repentance, namely, to point to Christ's suffering on our behalf, claiming as they do that Christendom might otherwise become confused and be at a loss to know which is the true and only way. No, one must preach in all sorts of ways—God's threats, his promises, his punishment, his help, and anything else—in order that we may be brought to repentance, that is, to a knowledge of sin and the law through the use of all the examples in the Scriptures. This is in accord with all the prophets and the apostles and St. Paul, who writes in Romans 2 [:4]: "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"<sup>10</sup>

But suppose I had taught or declared that the law should not be taught in the church, though all my writings prove the opposite and from the beginning have always stressed the catechism. Why should people adhere to me so tenaciously, and thus at the same time oppose me (since my teaching has always been quite the opposite)? I would thus have defected from myself, as I did from the doctrine of the pope. For I will and may truthfully and boastfully say that there is not alive today as sincere and ardent a papist as I once was. These who pass as papists today are not motivated by the fear of God, as I, poor wretch, had to be; they have some other interest, as can readily be seen and as they well know. I had to experience the truth of St. Peter's words: "Grow in the knowledge of our Lord" [II Pet. 3:18]. I see no doctor, no council, no fathers—even if I were able to distill their books and reduce them to the veriest essence—who carried out this "growing" instantly in the beginning and were able to develop it to a state of perfection. By way of proof, even St. Peter had to learn his "growing" from St. Paul (Galatians 2 [: 11–14]), and St. Paul learned it from Christ himself, who had to tell him, "My grace is sufficient for you" [II Cor. 12:9].

Dear God, should it be unbearable that the holy church confesses itself a sinner, believes in the forgiveness of sins, and asks for remission of sin in the Lord's Prayer? How can one know what sin is without the law and conscience? And how will we learn what Christ is, what he did for us, if we do not know what the law is that he fulfilled for us and what sin is, for which he made satisfaction? And even if we did not require the law for ourselves, or if we could tear it out of our hearts (which is impossible), we would have to preach it for Christ's sake, as is done and as has to be done, so that we might know what he did and what he suffered for us. For who could know what and why Christ suffered for us without knowing what sin or law is? Therefore the law must be preached wherever Christ is to be preached, even if the word "law" is not mentioned, so that the conscience is nevertheless frightened by the law when it hears that Christ had to fulfill the law for us at so great a price. Why, then, should one wish to abolish the law, which cannot be abolished, yes, which is only intensified by such an attempt? For the law terrifies me more when I hear that Christ, the Son of God, had to fulfill it for me than it would were it preached to me without the mention of Christ and of such great torment suffered by God's Son, but were accompanied only by threats. For in the Son of God I behold the wrath of God in action, while the law of God shows it to me with words and with lesser deeds.

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<sup>10</sup> A favorite text of the Antinomians. Luther accepts its validity; repentance, in his view, is to be induced by the preaching of both the law *and* the gospel. Indeed, the preaching of Christ's sacrifice on the cross can be the most effective means of humbling the sinner, since it demonstrates how serious is the guilt for which atonement had to be made, as Luther points out two para-graps below. However, Agricola is mistaken in relying on this alone, apart the direct preaching of the law.

Good heavens, I should at least be left in peace by my own people! It is enough to be harassed by the papists. One is tempted to say with Job and Jeremiah, “I wish I had never been born.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, I am tempted to say that I wish I had never published my books, and I would not be greatly concerned or hurt if all my books had already disappeared and the books of these fine spirits were offered for sale in all bookstores, as they would like. Then they would get their fill of this great honor. But on the other hand, I dare not regard myself as better than our dear Lord Jesus Christ, who also laments from time to time, “I have labored in vain, and all my pains are for nought.”<sup>12</sup> For the devil is lord of the world. I myself could never believe this, that the devil should be the lord and god of the world. But I experienced often enough that this too is an article of faith: He is “prince of the world, god of this age.” However—God be praised—this is not believed by the children of men, and I myself do not fully believe it. For everyone thinks he knows best and hopes that the devil is beyond the ocean and God is tucked in our pocket.

But it is for the sake of the godly who wish to be saved that we must live, preach, write, do, and suffer all. Otherwise, if one contemplates the devil and the false brethren, it seems better not to preach, to write, or to do anything, but only to die early and be buried. For they pervert and revile all things and convert them into objects of offense and damage, just as the devil drives and leads them to do. It is inevitable that we struggle and suffer. We cannot be any better than the dear prophets and apostles who also had the same experience.

They have devised for themselves a new method whereby one is to preach grace first and then the revelation of wrath. The word “law” is not to be heard or spoken. This is a nice little toy<sup>13</sup> from which they derive much pleasure. They claim they can fit the entire Scripture into this pattern and thus they become the light of the world. That is the meaning they foist on St. Paul in Romans 1 [18]. But they fail to see that he teaches just the opposite. First he calls attention to the wrath of God from heaven and makes all the world sinners and guilty before God; then, after they have become sinners, he teaches them how to obtain mercy and be justified. That is what the first three chapters powerfully and clearly demonstrate. It is also indicative of a particular blindness and stupidity when they claim that the revelation of God’s wrath is something different from the law. This is, of course, impossible, for the manifestation of wrath is the law when it is acknowledged and felt, just as St. Paul says, “The law brings wrath” [Rom. 4:15]. So haven’t they fixed things smartly when they abolish the law and yet teach it by proclaiming the revelation of wrath? But they reverse the order of things and teach the law after they teach the gospel, and wrath after grace. I can indeed see some of the shameful errors the devil has in mind with this little toy; but I cannot enlarge on these at present. Moreover, this is unnecessary, because I hope that they will cease.

It also reflected extraordinary arrogance and presumption that they wanted to unearth something novel and uncommon, so that people would say, “I really believe that he is a great man, a second Paul.” Why should those in Wittenberg<sup>14</sup> have a monopoly on wisdom? I, too, have a brain, etc. Yes, of course you have a brain, but one that is bent on its own honor and that exposes itself to ridicule with its wisdom. For they want to do away with the law and yet teach wrath, which is the function of the law alone. Thus they merely discard the few letters that compose the word “law,” meanwhile affirming the wrath of God, which is indicated and

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Job 3:1–10; Jer. 20:14–18.

<sup>12</sup> A reference, perhaps, to a text such as Luke 13:34.

<sup>13</sup> *Katzenstülgen*, a toy chair for dolls.

<sup>14</sup> Although Agricola was at this time resident in Wittenberg, Luther here still identifies him with Elsieben, where his teachings had gained considerable currency; cf. Luther’s comment above, p. 108.

understood by these letters. It is only that they reverse the order fixed by St. Paul and try to place the last first. Isn't this a fine piece of work, before which all the world should stand in amazement? But let this suffice for the time being; for I hope that since Master Eisleben is changing his mind and recanting, the others who derived their views from him will also desist. May God help them to that end. Amen.

In just these terms we could easily, if we wanted, trace the history of the church from its inception. We should perceive that such was at all times the course of events: when God's word flourished somewhere and his little flock was gathered, the devil became aware of the light, and he breathed and blew and stormed against it with strong, mighty winds from every nook and corner in an attempt to extinguish this divine light. And even if one or two winds were brought under control and were successfully resisted, he constantly stormed and blew forth from a different hole against the light. There was no letup or end to it, nor will there be until the Last Day.

I believe that I alone—not to mention the ancients—have suffered more than twenty blasts and rabbles which the devil has blown up against me. First there was the papacy. Indeed, I believe that the whole world must know with how many storms, bulls, and books the devil raged against me through these men, how wretchedly they tore me to pieces, devoured and destroyed me. At times I, too, breathed on them a little, but accomplished no more with it than to enrage and incite them all the more to blow and blast me without ceasing to the present day. And then when I had practically stopped fearing such blasts of the devil, he began to blow at me from a different hole by Münzer and the revolt,<sup>15</sup> by which he almost succeeded in extinguishing the light. When Christ had nearly stuffed up this hole, he broke a few panes in the window by means of Karlstadt,<sup>16</sup> and rushed and roared so vehemently that I feared he would carry light and wax and wick away. But God again helped his poor candle and kept it from being snuffed out. Then came the Anabaptists,<sup>17</sup> who flung door and windows open as they tried to extinguish the light. They did create a dangerous situation, but they did not achieve their aim.

Several also raged against the old teachers, both the pope and Luther together: for example, Servetus,<sup>18</sup> Campanus,<sup>19</sup> and others like them. I will not mention here the others who did not attack me openly in print, whose venomous and base writings and words I personally had to endure. I only wish to say that since I paid history no heed, I had to learn from my own experience that the church, because of the precious word, indeed, because of the cheering,

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<sup>15</sup> The reference is to Thomas Münzer and the Peasants' Revolt of 1524–1525. See above, p. 14, n. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (*ca.* 1480–1541), former colleague of Luther at Wittenberg who broke with him in the early 1520's and wrote numerous treatises challenging particularly Luther's interpretation of the sacraments. See the Introduction to Luther's *Against the Heavenly Prophets*. LW 40, 75–77.

<sup>17</sup> In Luther's mind the Anabaptists were always associated with the Zwickau prophets who created an uproar in Wittenberg in 1521–1522, with Thomas Münzer and the Peasants' Revolt of 1524–1525, and with Karlstadt. Recent scholarship has disputed this interpretation of Anabaptism. Cf. Franklin H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 3–11.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Servetus (*ca.* 1511–1553), Spanish physician and theologian whose anti-Trinitarian views were rejected by Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants alike. Early in 1553 he was interrogated by the inquisitor-general of Lyons, but managed to escape. On his way to Naples he stopped in Geneva, was arrested, tried, and finally burned as a heretic on October 27, 1553. Cf. Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511–1553* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960).

<sup>19</sup> John Campanus (1500–*ca.* 1575) had studied at Wittenberg between 1527 and 1530. However, he rejected Luther's interpretation of the Lord's Supper and the Trinity. His views corresponded with those Melancthon condemned in Article I of the *Augsburg Confession* as the heresy of the "Samosatenes, old and new." Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord*, p. 28. Cf. also George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 272 *et passim*.

blessed light, cannot live in tranquillity, but must forever live in expectation of new gales from the devil. That is the way it has been from the beginning, as you read in the *Tripartite Ecclesiastical History*<sup>20</sup> as well as in the books of the holy fathers.

And even if I were to live another hundred years and should succeed by the grace of God not only in allaying the past and present storms and rabbles but also all future ones, I realize that this would still not procure peace for our descendants so long as the devil lives and rules. Therefore I am also praying for a gracious hour of death; I care no more for this life.<sup>21</sup> I exhort you, our posterity, to pray and to pursue the word of God with diligence. Keep God's poor candle burning. Be warned and be on the alert, watching lest at any hour the devil try to break a pane or window or fling open a door or tear the roof off in order to extinguish the light; for he will not die before the Last Day. You and I have to die, but after our death he still remains the same as he always has been, unable to desist from his raging.

I can see there in the distance how the devil is puffing out his cheeks so vigorously that he is turning all red as he prepares to blow and rage. But our Lord Christ from the beginning (even when he was in the flesh) struck these puffed cheeks with his fist, so that they emitted nothing but the devil's stinking wind. He still does this today and will ever continue to do so. For Christ does not lie when he declares, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" [Matt. 28:20], and when he assures us that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church [Matt. 16:18]. At the same time we are enjoined to remain awake and to do our part in preserving the light. We read, "Be watchful," for the devil is called a "roaring lion" who "prowls around, seeking some one to devour" [I Pet. 5:8], and this he did not only in the days of the apostles when St. Peter uttered these words; he does so to the end of time. Let us be guided by this. God help us as he helped our forefathers, and as he will help our heirs, to the honor and glory of his divine name forever. For after all, we are not the ones who can preserve the church, nor were our forefathers able to do so. Nor will our successors have this power. No, it was, is, and will be he who says, "I am with you always, to the close of the age." As it says in Hebrews 13 [:8], "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever," and in Revelation 1 [:8], "He who is and who was and who is to come." This is his name and no one else's; nor may anyone else be called by that name.

A thousand years ago you and I were nothing, and yet the church was preserved at that time without us. He who is called "who was" and "yesterday" had to accomplish this. Even during our lifetime we are not the church's guardians. It is not preserved by us, for we are unable to drive off the devil in the persons of the pope, the sects, and evil men. If it were up to us, the church would perish before our very eyes, and we together with it (as we experience daily). For it is another Man who obviously preserves both the church and us. He does this so plainly that we could touch and feel it, if we did not want to believe it. We must leave this to him who is called "who is" and "today." Likewise we will contribute nothing toward the preservation of the church after our death. He who is called "who is to come" and "forever" will accomplish it. What we are now saying about ourselves in this respect, our ancestors also had to say, as is borne out by the psalms and the Scriptures. And our descendants will make the same discovery, prompting them to join us and the entire church in singing Psalm 124: "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, let Israel now say," etc.

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<sup>20</sup> The *Historia ecclesiastica tripartita*, a compilation of extracts from Socrates, Sozomenus, and Theodoret, was the principal handbook of church history used in the Middle Ages. Its author and compiler, Cassiodorus (d. ca. 570), wished to augment the reworking of Eusebius' church history by Rufinus.

<sup>21</sup> In his later years Luther's thought turned frequently to his own death, especially in times of illness or discouragement. Cf. his remarks concerning his sojourn at Smalcald, above, pp. 107–108.

It is a tragic thing that there are so many examples before us of those who thought they had to preserve the church, as though it were built on them. In the end they perished miserably. Yet such fierce judgment of God cannot break, humble, or check our pride and wickedness. What was Münzer's fate in our day (to say nothing of old and former times), who imagined that the church could not exist without him and that he had to bear it up and rule it? Recently the Anabaptists reminded us forcefully enough how mighty and how close to us the lovely devil is, and how dangerous our pretty thoughts are, impelling us to pause and reflect (according to the advice of Isaiah) before any undertaking, to determine whether it is God or an idol, whether gold or clay. But it is no use—we are so secure, without fear and concern; the devil is far from us, and we have none of that flesh in us that was in St. Paul and of which he complains in Romans 7 [:23], exclaiming that he cannot deliver himself from it as he would like, but that he is captive to it. No, we are the heroes who need not worry about our flesh and our thoughts. We are sheer spirit, we have taken captive our own flesh together with the devil, so that all our thoughts and ideas are surely and certainly inspired by the Holy Spirit, and how can he be found wanting?<sup>22</sup> Therefore it all has such a nice ending—namely, that both steed and rider break their necks.

But this is enough of such lamentations. May our dear Lord Christ be and remain our dear Lord Christ, praised forever. Amen.

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<sup>22</sup>Luther's ironical resumé of the position he attributes to the Antinomians.

<sup>2</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1971). *Vol. 47: Luther's works, vol. 47 : The Christian in Society IV* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (47:99). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.