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MARTIN LUTHER, REFORMER PASTOR: THE PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF THE *TESSARADECAS CONSOLATORIA*

Andrew Towner

Luther the pastor was a straight-talking man who applied the riches of his Reformational theology to the hearts and lives of believers. This article summarises his 1519 letter to an ill friend, Fourteen Consolations, before considering how his later theological developments might have modified his position.

Martin Luther is rightly famous as one who stood by his convictions under duress, and as a great theological scholar and debater, hence standing amongst the pre-eminent reformers. Yet few people think of Luther as primarily a pastor. Hence Theodore Tappert had to write in 1955: 'it is sometimes forgotten that he was also—and above all else—a pastor and shepherd of souls.'¹ This vital corrective was not taken seriously until recently, when Robert Kolb emphasised that 'the issues of pastoral care and concern for the consolation of sin-ridden consciences... stood at the heart of Luther's calling,'² and Timothy Wengert reminded us that 'Luther was, more than anything else, pastor and teacher for his Wittenburg flock,'³ editing a book of essays exploring that very issue.⁴ Amongst all of the many great gifts and achievements for which Luther is rightly known, his role as pastor stands central. But what were the characteristics of Luther's pastoral ministry?

It should be understood that all of Luther's ministry was pastoral: contending over indulgences, debating Medieval scholasticism, resisting Papal authority and all the many issues or controversies which engaged him were as pastorally motivated as his preaching, teaching, publishing and letter writing. Much would be learnt by examining these from the perspective that Luther's key motivation was the care of souls. Gerhard Forde has shown, for example, how deeply pastoral Luther's *Heidelberg*

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 13.

² Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther, Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72.

³ Timothy J. Wengert, 'Introducing the Pastoral Luther' in *The Pastoral Luther*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 1.

⁴ Wengert, *Pastoral*.

Disputation against scholastic theology is.⁵ Yet there are few better introductions to this pastoral heart of Luther's ministry than his *Fourteen Consolations*, which is 'one of his finest and tenderest devotional writings, and, in conception and execution, one of the most original of all his works.'⁶

In writing to console Frederick the Wise, his Elector, patron and protector, Luther offers fourteen spiritual reflections for his encouragement during a time of serious illness. These *Consolations* are of interest because in them are found, in short compass, Luther's 1519 thoughts on issues such as God's sovereignty, the devil, saints and relics, the theology of the cross, Christian hope, the church and many other matters. Further, such matters are raised from simple pastoral concern and thus phrased with clarity, warmth and application. Here is neither scholarly debate (which can achieve dryness when seeking clarity) nor populist rhetoric (which can either over-reach or offend in the heat of argument). Here is Luther the pastor, caring for a fellow Christian in need.⁷

The *Consolations* are presented as two parallel sets of seven chapters, Luther appropriating the fourteen patron saints familiar in medieval piety so that these devotions 'are to take the place of the fourteen saints whom our superstition has invented.'⁸ Luther encourages the Christian to look within, before, behind, beneath, left, right and above, and walks through these loci twice, treating their associated evils first and the parallel blessings afterwards.

Having written his *Consolations* during August and September 1519, seeing them published in 1520, Luther re-issued them in final form some fifteen years later, though with very little modification. He explains: 'I do not care to revise them now, as I might well do. For it is my purpose in this book to put forth a public record of my progress, and also to show a kind to the 'Contradictionists,' that they may have whereon to exercise their malice.'⁹ Luther's theology has thus changed significantly enough

⁵ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁶ Henry Eyster Jacobs, 'Introduction' in *The Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Holman, 1915), 1:105.

⁷ This work is of general use to all Christians, though originally written to one in high office, since few aspects of *Consolations* relate directly to Frederick as Duke or Elector (though Luther does repeatedly note that stresses generally rise with one's station in life).

⁸ Jacobs, 'Introduction.'

⁹ Martin Luther, 'Prefatory Note to *Consolations*' in *The Works of Martin Luther*, 1:109.

in the intervening years that the re-publishing an earlier work shows his progression since 'he no longer holds many of his former views, and there is much in his little book that he has outgrown and might now correct.'¹⁰ This raises the intriguing issue of how Luther's theology had changed: what would Luther have written in 1535?

Jane Strohl's essay 'Luther's *Fourteen Consolations*' is the most prominent recent examination of this work,¹¹ yet she sheds no light on this question and attempts no theological synthesis. This essay examines the theology of Luther's *Consolations* in seeking to understand Luther as pastor. It does so by first outlining the *Consolations* and then examining their key theological loci. In the process it considers the broad effects that Luther's theological development might have led to in a 1535 revision. Of course the Luther of 1535 might have made a large number small changes, the discovery and analysis of which is beyond this essay's scope. Yet a number of hypotheses will be developed in terms of the macroscopic theological changes Luther progressed through, and hence some big-picture changes he might have been expected to make.

The Consolations in Outline

Part I: Evils

1) *Within*

Luther opens boldly: 'no torture can compare with the worst of all evils, namely, the evil within man himself. The evils within him are more numerous and far greater than any which he feels.'¹² We each have a hell within us, and thus 'God know that if he were to lead a man to a full knowledge of his own evils, that man would die at once.'¹³ Luther applies this for comfort by reflecting that looking within ourselves must first and foremost cause Christians joy, whatever evil we experience being vastly less than that which exists in us. Moreover, not fully seeing our own evil is in itself a blessing. Luther then emphasises that the Christian has comfort in whatever evil they experience from the knowledge that they deserve

¹⁰ Jacobs, 'Introduction.'

¹¹ Other recent works have examined the *Consolations* within the study of Luther's rhetorical devices (Neil R. Leroux, *Martin Luther as Comforter* (Leiden: Brill, 2007)) and pastoral theology of the Lutheran tradition (Leonard M. Hummel, *Clothed in Nothingness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2004), Jane E. Strohl, 'Luther's Fourteen Consolations' in Wengert, *Pastoral*, 314).

¹² Martin Luther, *The Fourteen Consolations*, trans. Martin H. Bertram in *Luther's Works Vol. 42* ed. Martin O. Dietrich (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 125.

¹³ Luther, *Consolations*, 125.

far worse—even hell itself. Of course God mercifully chastens his people, but he does this to ‘drive out those great evils, which we will then not need to feel.’¹⁴ For Luther such evils are experienced in proportion to any lack of faith, and ‘when viewed rightly, this one weakness alone, since it is spiritual, outweighs by far the weakness of the body, and a careful comparison makes it seem very light indeed.’¹⁵ Luther adds that failed plans and hopes, as well as things around us which we dislike are all part of the ‘vanity’ of Ecclesiastes, another part off the evil within us. Yet he concludes that we feel less than the thousandth part of our evil, and that such feeling exists not as the evil itself exists, but spiritually, within our consciousness ‘only ... as the basis of our own thoughts and feelings.’¹⁶ As Strohl has it ‘our very insensitivity is our salvation.’¹⁷

2) *Before*

Consideration of future evils generally diminishes present evils. Looking ahead in life often causes fear, however, which is a very strong emotion—and all the more so with the future being uncertain to us. Yet, so great are the evils to come that thinking on them leads to real comfort for two reasons. First, when possible future evils fail to occur, that is comfort. In fact, the occurrence of any single evil should call to mind the myriad our Lord has kept us from. Secondly, whenever death (the greatest possible future evil) comes our way it is an event the saints dreaded and even Christ submitted to with trembling, which is why God is so careful mercifully to comfort our little faith at this point. He likewise warns us that, even if we are currently strong in faith we must beware, knowing ourselves never secure in our own strength. Luther concludes: ‘that man who does not prefer the evil of death to the evil of sin loves his Father but little.’¹⁸ Death is appointed to end this evil life, bringing in true life and righteousness, and ‘as a consequence transformed from an evil into a blessing.’¹⁹

3) *Behind*

Looking into the past reminds us of God’s loving sovereign care, since ‘never does a man feel the hand of God more closely upon him than when

¹⁴ Luther, *Consolations*, 125.

¹⁵ Luther, *Consolations*, 127.

¹⁶ Luther, *Consolations*, 127.

¹⁷ Strohl, ‘Consolations,’ 314.

¹⁸ Luther, *Consolations*, 130.

¹⁹ Strohl, ‘Consolations,’ 314.

he remembers the years of his past life.²⁰ Looking back we see God's grace in all the mess of this life, and God's mercy in all our mistaken strivings, in that he brought good out of them. Further: 'since God was with us when we did not think so, or he did not seem to be with us, we should not doubt that he is always with us, even when it appears that he is absent from us.'²¹ God has sustained us, unaided, through so many needs and cares, keeping us through all our sleep and work and play. Luther is clear that, though God does allow suffering and illness, he does so while preventing worse, just as a parent would: 'to see whether we will not trust his care.'²² We are able to do so little for ourselves—we cannot even stop a small pain in our body for a brief while—yet God can do all things. Therefore anxiety is wrong: we can trust God and remember his past works as comfort in any adversity.

4) *Beneath*

For Luther it is not surprising when evil comes upon a Christian. It is surprising, rather, that the Christian does not suffer more when surrounded by so many evils in this present world, 'is it not a miracle to be struck only now and then by one of the countless blows aimed at us? It is indeed a blessing not to be struck at all. It is a miracle to be struck by but a few.'²³ The evils beneath us are two: death and hell. Consideration of the deaths with which other sinners have been punished reminds us how much less we suffer compared to our just deserts. We have committed the same or even worse sins than they, and yet endure lighter punishment. To go further, many are suffering in hell right now having committed fewer sins than ours. Surely God is just in punishing all sin alike, and thus we so often show great ingratitude in barely noticing God's kind forbearance to us. It is then sobering to remember Jesus' teaching that some now in hell would have been in heaven if they had enjoyed our advantages (Matt 11:20–24). How much praise and love do we therefore owe our good Lord?

5) *Left*

When looking to the left and seeing all the evil people who surround us we must first marvel that less of their evil has affected us. This is a sign of God's love for us, and a reminder not to despair when some evil

²⁰ Luther, *Consolations*, 130.

²¹ Luther, *Consolations*, 131.

²² Luther, *Consolations*, 131.

²³ Luther, *Consolations*, 133.

does touch us now and again. They endure as much evil as we do, but in a much worse way, being outside of Christian fellowship. We should next marvel at how much better our state is than theirs, who are slaves to sin and under God wrath. This reminds us of the great favour in which we stand, and teaches us to bear slight hardships as those rich in high blessings. The Christian hence forgets his hardships and turns instead to pray for his enemies and all the wicked, that they might come to salvation. We often remain unaffected by such thoughts simply because it is hard to see clearly the poverty and horror of life outside of God's blessings—yet we must try to do so, and by so doing avoid being impervious to the plight of the lost. Even when it comes to bodily ailments, those outside of Christ are much worse off since their conscience may find no peace and their soul no joy. In short, consideration of the awful state of the lost spurs the Christian to see what few sufferings he endures as practically nothing, and to 'desire to die for them, to be separated from Christ and expunged from the book of life...so that they might be set free.'²⁴

6) *Right*

Recognising the evils borne by the church across the world and throughout the ages moves the Christian to bear such evils too, knowing them light by comparison. This is the irony of those who worship the saints: often they do so in order to escape the very evils the saints themselves bore and for which they are worshipped! Luther turns to the writer to the Hebrews, who encourages us to remember that the Lord disciplines those he loves, which makes any such correction something to be loved, a cause for joy. Seeing others with lighter or heavier evils to bear never gives one any excuse, since different children are obviously treated differently. God treats all of us according to our strength, and ensures that appropriate help accompanies greater evil. Some will say: 'the saints suffered for their righteousness, yet I suffer for my sins.' Luther replies: 'whenever you suffer it is either because of your sins or your righteousness. Both kinds of suffering sanctify and save, if you will but love them.'²⁵ The solution is to confess that you are suffering on account of your sins, at which point you become righteous and holy, just like the thief on the cross. Remember: 'the righteous man always suffers innocently.'²⁶

²⁴ Luther, *Consolations*, 137.

²⁵ Luther, *Consolations*, 140.

²⁶ Luther, *Consolations*, 140.

7) *Above*

To examine the evil above us is to ‘ascend with the Bride’ and see Christ crucified, head over all, the Prince of Sufferers, whose words are perfectly pure, and perfectly sprinkled with ‘precious and chosen myrrh (that is, the most bitter death).’²⁷ His lips make even the bitterness of death ‘sweet and fair and bright and dear.’²⁸ How? By Christ’s death our deaths become the door to life. In contact with his flesh and blood all things are inverted: death is made the way of life, curse the fountainhead of blessing, shame the gateway to glory. This touch of Christ makes death, for a Christian, like the bronze serpent Moses held up in the desert; it appeared to be a snake but was without life, motion, venom or sting. For Strohl ‘mortal life might be said to undergo a process of transubstantiation in the believer, the accidents of existence remaining the same to outward view while the substance is profoundly changed.’²⁹ Not only are Christians’ deaths transformed, but their sufferings also—and this promise distinguishes the Christian from the unbeliever. Luther moves on to say that they are therefore foolish who revere Christ’s relics as consecrated by his touch: ‘why will you not much more rather love, embrace, and kiss the pain and evils of this world, the disgrace and shame, which he not only hallowed by his touch, but sprinkled and blessed with his most holy blood?’³⁰ His wounds are of much greater merit than any relics, since they offer victory over sin, death and hell, and relics offer nothing! This last consideration of evils catches us up with the risen Christ and teaches us not only to bear evils, but also to love them and even pursue them, knowing that to think otherwise is to despise our Lord’s Passion.

Part II: Blessings

1) *Within*

Who could even number the simple blessings we all enjoy, such as those of body, strength and years, to which God often adds riches and offspring? When enjoying these for many years, how much does a little occasional suffering matter? Further, when compared to these innumerable blessings, the gift of a Christian mind is of even higher value still. God is lovingly sovereign in distributing gifts in diverse proportions and amounts, which makes even an infirmity the comforting sign of God’s goodness. This is so because all things must ‘be tempered and sanctified

²⁷ Luther, *Consolations*, 141.

²⁸ Luther, *Consolations*, 141.

²⁹ Strohl, ‘Consolations,’ 318.

³⁰ Luther, *Consolations*, 143.

with the relics of the cross, lest they decay, just as meat must be seasoned with salt.³¹ Finally, the greatest blessing within is faith in Christ. Just as a man is unable to see all the evil in him, so he is likewise unable to see all the blessings, which inability moves him to rejoice in and search further after God himself through such means of grace as speaking of God, hearing his word, serving him, doing good and suffering evil.

2) *Before*

The unconverted find little comfort in hope, though God does mercifully grant them some lest they be broken. However, Christians have a certain assurance of great future blessings awaiting them, though only through death and suffering. Even death is a blessing in that it brings ‘the whole tragedy of this world’s ills’ to a close and also ‘puts an end to all sins and vices.’³² Sin is thus ‘destroyed by its own fruit, and is slain by the death to which it gave birth.’³³ Meditation on these great blessings that will be brought to pass through evil naturally shrinks the import of any evil currently experienced. ‘How can any small evil distress us when in the great evil that is to come we see such a great blessing?’³⁴

3) *Behind*

Reflecting on our past is a humbling reminder of how much worse life would have been if we had been given our own way. We should ‘hang our heads in shame’ for any self-sufficiency that remains after such a meditation, ‘yet we cannot commit our care to him in even a small present evil, and we act as if he had forsaken us or could forsake us!’³⁵ Following Augustine we should resolve to let God care for us. Yet sometimes our own insight blinds us to all the care he lavished upon us, and we begin to think that the blessings we enjoy are due to our good plans. We need then to remember God’s knitting us together in a mother’s womb; this should be sufficient to remind us of our own lack of involvement in any blessings we currently enjoy. In this knowledge Christians can cast their cares on the Lord and entrust their souls to God. How precious such a knowledge of God would be, leading one to live in safety, full of peace and joy! ‘Therefore, we ought to have no other care for ourselves than this, namely, that we do not care for ourselves or rob God of his care for us.’³⁶

³¹ Luther, *Consolations*, 145–6.

³² Luther, *Consolations*, 149–150.

³³ Luther, *Consolations*, 151.

³⁴ Luther, *Consolations*, 152.

³⁵ Luther, *Consolations*, 153.

³⁶ Luther, *Consolations*, 154.

4) *Beneath*

The blessing of looking beneath us comes primarily in seeing how great our gain is in comparison to the hell we deserve. This blessing rarely affects us, being so familiar, and yet it is amongst the highest of blessings. ‘These matters must not be lightly glossed over with a light heart, for they forcefully commend to us the most wonderful mercy of God.’³⁷ Going further, we may make the extreme effort of imagining ourselves in the place of the damned, which would lead us to praise God for his goodness, hell, no less than heaven, being full of the highest good. God’s perfect justice is throughout hell, and is to be ‘loved, praised and glorified above all things’³⁸ as much as his mercy. Luther is emphatic: to feel compassion for those who crucified the lord of glory would be to deserve their punishment also. Therefore we ought to rejoice in the piety of the church and God’s justice in punishing their persecutors that he might deliver his people out of their hands. Moreover, we should not be surprised that God uses even such evils to take vengeance on our enemy, the sin in our bodies. This again is cause for rejoicing—not in the evils or punishments themselves, but in the supreme justice and goodness of God.

5) *Left*

The blessings upon our left hand are clear when considering not just the lost who have died, but those who live still. First, even if they enjoy large temporal blessings we know and trust that God has done far more good to us. In this way blessings seen become incentives towards hope for blessings unseen. Secondly, the evils of those who oppose us become blessings to us, in providing an opportunity to endure temptation, leading to the crown of life (Jas 1:21). In fact, some trouble and oppression is good for the Christian in teaching us to avoid sin and pursue righteousness. Further, when the world turns from tyranny to pleasure in seeking to woo us, even that turns us again to pursue true gospel blessings and thus works for our good. Hence ‘they who inflict the greatest harm on the believers are their greatest benefactors, as long as they bear their suffering in the right spirit.’³⁹ Troubles are gifts from God to keep us leaning on Christ.

³⁷ Luther, *Consolations*, 155.

³⁸ Luther, *Consolations*, 156.

³⁹ Luther, *Consolations*, 160.

6) *Right*

The material blessings enjoyed by the church are not to be condemned, though the rich are regularly encouraged towards humility throughout the Bible. In fact, the Lord gives such material gifts that his people may be comfortable, and also be generous in providing for others. Yet we must remember that these are not true blessings, being but shadows of faith, hope, love and others. Such is the communion of saints that ‘all things belong to all,⁴⁰ and hence what others enjoy is really ours, as well as our evils being truly theirs. This is what it means to be part of one body: evils and blessings are alike shared. We must pray for the spiritual sight required to think this way, learning that when we suffer we do not suffer alone, and that we can glory in the blessings of others, since they are ours to enjoy. Such spiritual sight, through the eyes of faith, reveals to us ‘the Church around us.’⁴¹

7) *Above*

The blessing above us is not even heaven and the perfect vision of God that his people enjoy. The great blessing is the risen and triumphant Christ himself. He has been given to us. What has he achieved in his resurrection? ‘He hath destroyed sin and raised up righteousness, abolished death and restored life, conquered hell and bestowed everlasting glory on us. These blessings are so incalculable that the mind of man hardly dares believe that they have been granted to us.’⁴² Hence a Christian may boast of all Christ’s merits as his own, as if he had won them himself, and may look forward to enjoying them even at the judgement of God. This is the blessing of blessings, when as sons we inherit all our Father’s goods. We are guilty of sin under the law, and deserve death for our sin, yet Christ’s righteousness conquers these two, and in his life we are lifted above even our other blessings. ‘We are set down, I say, in Christ’s righteousness, with which he himself is righteous, because we cling to that righteousness whereby he himself is acceptable to God, intercedes for us as our Mediator, and gives himself wholly to us as our high priest and protector. Therefore, just as it is impossible for Christ, with his righteousness, not to please God, so it is impossible for us with our faith clinging to his righteousness not to please him.’⁴³ Therefore ‘we should not only not grieve over our evils, but

⁴⁰ Luther, *Consolations*, 162.

⁴¹ Luther, *Consolations*, 163.

⁴² Luther, *Consolations*, 164.

⁴³ Luther, *Consolations*, 164.

should also glory in our tribulations, scarcely feeling them for the joy that we have in Christ.⁴⁴

The Theology of the Consolations

Jane Strohl rightly places much of Luther's 1519 theology in its medieval catholic context. Many of his views on the right responses to suffering were mainstream, for example, having been taught by Pope Gregory.⁴⁵ Concepts such as God's chastisement being a sign of his love and good for the spiritual health of a Christian would have been familiar, as would those of evil and illness as warning to the unbeliever. As Strohl rightly notes, Luther diverges from that tradition in ensuring that God's wrath does not obscure his love, and that the believer builds nothing on his or her own performance.⁴⁶ However, this essay is concerned with the theology of the *Consolations* as they stand. While medieval context important, it will not occupy our attention in the remainder of this paper.

Before outlining the four major theological areas covered in the *Consolations* it is right to highlight their overall thrust: God abounds in love for, care of and grace towards his people. Luther presents God as maximally kind to his people in every possible way. This is clear throughout and present in each chapter. [I.i]⁴⁷ emphasises God's love in restricting our knowledge of evil and care in providence, [I.ii] his comfort when we have but little faith, [I.iii] his care in the past, [I.iv] his grace in not giving us the punishment we deserve, [I.v] his love in protecting us from enemies, [I.vi] his caring discipline and real forgiveness, and [I.vii] his kind transformation of evils into blessings. Then [II.i] lists his generous blessings to us, [II.ii] shows even death as a good gift, [II.iii] re-emphasises his care in the past, [II.iv] explains the way he uses even evils to kill our sin, [II.v] reminds of his blessing us even through trouble-makers, [II.vi] highlights his gift of the church to each other, and [II.vii] lauds his infinite gift of Christ. There are many other doctrines within the *Consolations* but this macroscopic thrust must not be lost. It is beyond description in dogmatic terms, since it transcends the whole of Luther's pastoral theology that is seen here. In a sense this is not a locus of the theology of the *Consolations* but Luther's orientation of all the loci; his

⁴⁴ Luther, *Consolations*, 165.

⁴⁵ Strohl, 'Consolations,' 311.

⁴⁶ Strohl, 'Consolations,' 312.

⁴⁷ Henceforward the symbols [I.i] should be taken to mean Part I chapter i, [II.iv] Part II chapter iv and so on.

overriding purpose is to present and apply the truth that God is infinitely good.

Within this, the *Consolations*' theology can be summarised under four heads: sovereignty, cross, evil, and eschatology. That the first two are prominent in a work written during 1519 is no surprise given their attention in Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, where the distinctions between *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus* as well as those between *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis* are prominent.⁴⁸ An examination of each of the four loci will present the theological heart of the pastoral Luther. It will also allow consideration of how Luther's thinking had changed by 1535, and thus how the *Consolations* themselves might have been edited when Luther re-issued them some 15 years after their original publication.

1) Sovereignty

God's loving sovereignty is seen within the *Consolations* both in things he doesn't allow and the things he ensures. This first category should not be understood negatively or passively, as Luther presents God as actively involved in restraining evil and hence protecting his people. God is just as pro-active in this as in positively sustaining and blessing his people through generous provision of their practical, relational and spiritual needs. There is thus a great breadth to Luther's view of God's loving sovereignty, from which Luther offers warm personal and practical encouragement and solace.

In [I.ii] Luther turns to Lamentations and Job in praising God for his restraint of evil, since 'it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed,' and 'the preventing right hand of the most high surrounds us on all sides with great might ... that Satan and all the evils in their frustration can only be grievously vexed.'⁴⁹ Luther then emphasises God's personal protection by saying that any evil which does occur should lead Christians to rejoice in all those from which they are lovingly protected: 'see how many evils threaten and attack us, if he himself did not stand in the way.'⁵⁰ This motif sounds repeatedly through the *Consolations*, not least in [I.v], [II.i] and [II.v]. It could be thought that God saving his people from hell is also a restraint of evil, and in one sense it is, yet Luther will argue in [II.iv] for hell as full of the highest good, being full of God's

⁴⁸ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2011), 216. Also Forde, *Cross*.

⁴⁹ Luther, *Consolations*, 128.

⁵⁰ Luther, *Consolations*, 128.

justice. Such issues, together with that of God's relationship to evil, are discussed below. For now we note Luther's focus on the loving Lord who restrains evil in protecting his people.

Luther's expositions of the grace of God in loving provision are even more prominent. The practical blessings of life and health and money and offspring and mind are passed over in quick time at the start of [II.i], without being either minimised or idolised. They are good blessings, yet small in comparison to others—just as 'loving parents who at times give their children foolish little toys with which they would lead their hearts to hope for better things.'⁵¹ The relational blessings of being part of the body of Christ are given strong emphasis as, for Luther, the church is 'the new creation of God, our brothers and our friends, in whom we see nothing but blessing and nothing but consolation, though not always with the eyes of the flesh ... but with the eyes of the spirit.'⁵² He goes further in detailing our possession and therefore enjoyment of one another's blessings, which are truly ours since we are part of the same body and hence 'all things belong to all.'⁵³ In turning to spiritual blessings, [II.v] shows that the blessing of faith is of much greater value than all the good things the wicked enjoy. Any temptation to envy is thus an opportunity for the Christian to hope for those blessings not yet seen. In addition [I.ii] highlights God's loving personal protection of that faith under extreme fear of the future where 'in no other area has the divine mercy been more concerned about comforting faint hearts.'⁵⁴ All of these are sovereign gifts from the Creator, and each aspect of this sovereignty is clearly pastoral.

In the years following 1519 Luther's view of the sovereignty of God changed little, if at all, in its big picture. He continued to see God as fully sovereign in protection and provision. Yet Luther did examine some of the issues in a little more depth, particularly as sparked by his debate with Erasmus and expressed in *The Bondage of the Will* (1524). Here the *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus* distinction was made much more rigorous and prominent. Lohse is surely right that this is the most significant aspect of Luther's doctrine of God,⁵⁵ and although it existed in 1518 (which is clear from the *Heidelberg Disputation* and other works) it became increasingly important to Luther. Lohse shows that Luther even spent time in the 1530s trying to link the doctrine of the Trinity with this

⁵¹ Luther, *Consolations*, 147.

⁵² Luther, *Consolations*, 160–1.

⁵³ Luther, *Consolations*, 162.

⁵⁴ Luther, *Consolations*, 129.

⁵⁵ Lohse, *Theology*, 215.

distinction between the hidden and revealed God,⁵⁶ which might well have made its way into a revised edition of the *Consolations*. Perhaps he would have re-shaped some sections to be explicitly Trinitarian? Perhaps also some explicit mention of God ‘in his divine nature and essence’ as distinct from God ‘as he is given to us’⁵⁷ could have been expected?

2) Cross

There are two relevant aspects to the cross. One is the distinction Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ makes between *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis*; the other is his doctrine of the cross, his teaching on what was accomplished by Christ’s work on the cross. The two are obviously linked, but the former is a macroscopic theological framework, the latter a locus within his theology.

Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ was opposed to the ‘theology of glory’ prevalent at his time, and is apparent throughout his *Consolations*, which are, in many ways, an extended exercise in *theologia crucis*. In essence this sees God as revealed in his hiddenness, and that this revelation is incomprehensible without faith. This was Luther’s major theological project, so that, when organising his thoughts on the ‘theology of the cross’ at Heidelberg he called it ‘our theology.’⁵⁸ It was designed as an alternative to the medieval scholastic system in which he had been raised and trained. For Luther the issue was twofold: the revelation to which theology responds and the heart of that revelation both needed challenging. He saw that both the revelation and heart of true theology are found at the cross: ‘true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ.’⁵⁹ A number of things flow out of this. One mark of a ‘theologian of the cross’ is their ability to call a thing what it really is, whereas a ‘theologian of glory’ cannot (Thesis 21 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*). This honest realism pervades the *Consolations*, even right at the start when [I.i] is blunt in assessing the evil within any human and concluding that we feel less than one thousandth of our evil. [I.iii] recognises that God allows evil things to happen, [I.iv] expresses surprise that Christians do not suffer more, and the list could continue. Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ allows him blunt pastoral honesty, calling a thing what it really is. The second corollary of Luther’s *theologia crucis* is in the

⁵⁶ Lohse, *Theology*, 217.

⁵⁷ The phrases are taken from Luther’s 1537 work *First Disputation against the Antinomians*; Lohse, *Theology*, 217.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Kolb, *Confessor*, 23.

⁵⁹ From the *Heidelberg Theses*, quoted in Kolb, *Confessor*, 23.

role of human works within salvation: a ‘theologian of the cross’ has been taught humility by the Law and hence found grace, whereas a ‘theologian of glory’ will have contributed something, however little, to their salvation (Thesis 25 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*). The phrase *facere quod in se est* was often used in describing this, and means doing what lies within you or (in the vernacular) doing your best. This aspect of Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ grew to become salvation by grace alone and can be seen in the *Consolations* at [I.iv] when Luther notes the punishments all Christians deserve, and in [I.v] where salvation is seen as the freeing of slaves to sin. [II.i] then teaches that faith is a gift, and [II.iii] annihilates any possibility the we might take credit for anything good which happens in our lives; Luther reminds us of our total lack of involvement in earning or gaining any of the blessings we currently enjoy. Finally, [II.vii] shows how Christ’s righteousness is a gift, given despite our deserving death in our guilt under the Law. The heart of Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ is here: nothing earned, nothing deserved—yet the righteousness of Christ given through faith to all who come in humble need. [I.vi] sums up Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ in brief: ‘if you are a sinner, good!’⁶⁰ Thus a right humility is at the heart of the *theologia crucis*.

Luther’s doctrine of the cross overlaps with the above, but is not exhausted by it. [I.ii] speaks of Christ’s trembling and sweating of blood in the garden, by which Luther emphasises how great and terrible the cross was. [I.vii] shows how Christ’s death has transformed a Christian’s death, and [II.ii] extends this to evil and suffering, so that we see a David and Goliath moment on the cross as Christ slays sin. Perhaps the best statement of the consequences of this came in Luther’s first Psalms lecture: ‘He killed death by death, punishment by punishment, sufferings by suffering, disgrace by disgrace, so that in Christ death is so precious in the sight of the Lord (Ps 116:15) that it is eternal life, punishment is joy, suffering is pleasure, disgrace is glory; and, on the contrary, life is death.’⁶¹ A highlight of Luther’s doctrine of the cross comes in [II.vii] where he turns to Rom 8:32 and other verses to show how much blessing is lavished on Christians in God’s giving Christ to them, and hence giving all things. Here we see substitution, and here also the marvellous exchange: ‘I am a sinner, but yet I am borne by in his righteousness, which is given me. I am unclean; but his holiness is my sanctification, in which I gently ride.’⁶² Luther also highlights the blessings won in Christ’s victorious

⁶⁰ Luther, *Consolations*, 140.

⁶¹ Lohse, *Theology*, 215–6.

⁶² Luther, *Consolations*, 164.

resurrection—beating death, winning life, breaking hell and giving his people eternal glory. Thus the doctrine of the cross in the *Consolations* is focussed on the effects of Christ's death and resurrection. Christ's death not only kills sin and earns infinite merit for his people, it also transforms suffering and evil; Christ's resurrection perfection is then entirely ours so that 'a Christian is almighty, lord of all, having all things and doing all things, wholly without sin.'⁶³ Luther never separates things out as neatly as that, and certainly did not break Christ's perfect life, sufferings, death and resurrection up into systematic categories.⁶⁴ He offers instead a 'rich palette of descriptions ... [giving] focussed applications to distinct dilemmas suffered by sinners under the various impacts of evil.'⁶⁵

In the 15 years following his writing the *Consolations* Luther's 'theology of the cross' as opposed to a 'theology of glory' changed but little. The *Heidelberg Disputation* was programmatic here, and although the details continued to be worked out, Luther never turned from this principal theological project. His doctrine of the cross, however, is more complex—not least because scholars are in no agreement as to when he first formulated a theology of justification. Certainly the issue of how one might stand before the judgement seat of God was of life-long concern to Luther, being one of the causes of his involvement in the indulgences controversy. Yet Luther never set out a 'coherent explanatory discourse' laying out the working of the atonement.⁶⁶ The *Heidelberg Disputation* is extremely close to his later doctrine of justification, and we have seen that the *Consolations* are very much an outworking of the *theologia crucis* so integral to that *Disputation*. Though the word 'justification' appears only once in the *Consolations*, and that in [I.vi] to explain the efficacy of confession, [II.vii] explains the very heart of the doctrine: Christ's righteousness is given to his people at the cross. Further aspects also exist, with [I.vii] expounding the benefits of Christ's wounds and [II.i] ranking faith as the highest blessing. Thus although the doctrine of justification is not explicit in the *Consolations*, it is essentially present.

By 1537 Luther would say: 'the article of justification is master and prince, lord, leader and judge of all kinds of teachings, which preserves and guides all churchly teaching and establishes our consciences before God.'⁶⁷ Hence a 1535 revision of the *Consolations* would surely have been more

⁶³ Luther, *Consolations*, 165.

⁶⁴ Kolb, *Confessor*, 119.

⁶⁵ Kolb, *Confessor*, 118.

⁶⁶ Siggins *contra* Aulen, quoted in Kolb, *Confessor*, 118.

⁶⁷ Lohse, *Theology*, 258–9.

explicit on the topic of justification. One intriguing link between 1519 and 1535 is the publication of Luther's two commentaries on Galatians. Lohse sees the later work as much clearer on issues of justification and faith as Luther explains: 'faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ.'⁶⁸ This language of possessing the treasure of Christ is present, though not prominent, within the *Consolations*. By 1536 Luther had written his *Disputation Concerning Justification* and there clarified the concept of justification *sola fide* as opposed to the works righteousness that is central to the 'theology of glory' his *Heidelberg Disputation* had attacked. Lohse concludes that Luther would have been much clearer on *sola gratia* and *sola fide* by the 1530s.⁶⁹ It is noteworthy too that Lutheranism, under the influence of Melancthon, reduced justification to 'just' the imputation of Christ's righteousness, whereas Luther had included the renewal of the person within justification. While the *Consolations* are strong on the effect of Christ's sacrifice and victory in changing evil to good, death to life and so on, they contain no focus on the transformation wrought within the believer.

3) Evil

We have already seen how Luther's being a 'theologian of the cross' allows him to be truthful in calling a thing what it is. He pulls no punches throughout the *Consolations* in his descriptions of evil, as well as their purpose for believers and unbelievers; we will take the descriptions and purposes in turn. Evil is a broad term, however, encompassing many things: hardships in the world, our sins, other's sins, others' actions, and so on. The *Consolations* does not enter a lengthy discussion of how a good God could either do or allow such evils, or any differences in culpability. Luther is content in [L.iii] simply to say that God allows suffering and evil, and to emphasis his love and care in so doing. In fact, because Luther's purpose is pastoral, he focuses throughout the *Consolations* on the sovereign God who has loving intentions in everything which passes in his world.

The word 'evil' occurs regularly in the *Consolations*, together with its cognates. One difficulty in seeking to summarise its use and meaning is that Luther is at pains to stress that even the evil of punishment in hell is actually good. So what does Luther mean by 'evil'? His language is not neat and tidy, but the evils described may be summarised as follows: sins, hardships and punishments. The evils within us, as described in

⁶⁸ Lohse, *Theology*, 261.

⁶⁹ Lohse, *Theology*, 266.

[I.i], are clearly sins, being distinguished from the Fatherly chastenings given by God to drive out those sins. The hardships associated with such chastening are seen as monitors of one's spiritual condition so that 'they speak the truth who say that our physical sufferings are the monitors of the evil within.'⁷⁰ Likewise, in [II.v] and elsewhere, hardships are a loving gift to keep us leaning on Christ. The distinction is that the evil of sins exist within the human heart and are an offense against God, whereas hardships are felt and experienced as evils, but should actually be received as loving gifts from our Father. The distinction between hardships and punishments is that although God is righteous in both, the former are loving gifts to his people, the latter judicially wrathful actions against sinners. Hence Luther presents the evil of sins as common to all, whereas hardships are chastenings for the Father's children and punishments for their persecutors and all the damned.

For Luther the right reactions to these evils are four: relativise them, learn humility through them, pursue them, and be warned by them. Luther explains that the first may be accomplished in three possible ways: by comparing any evil we experience with the hell we deserve, by considering how many worse evils God has lovingly protected us from, or by comparing the evils we bear with those endured by others. This latter is not as trite in Luther as it might sound from the mouth of Bing Crosby in *White Christmas* singing: 'when my bank-roll is getting small, I think of when I had none at all, and I fall asleep counting my blessings.'⁷¹ Luther's teaching is more earthy and visceral than that—being a 'theologian of the cross' he can call a spade a spade. Humility is the second right response, and this emphasis later develops into Luther's doctrine of faith. For now it is a part of his understanding that humans need to be broken of all self-sufficiency in order to be taught to appropriate the cross by faith. The third reaction Luther teaches is the pursuit of sufferings, which follows logically from their benefits to the Christian. Hence [I.vii], [II.i] and [II.v] all teach believers to desire and even love diverse types of suffering since 'it is good for us to be always oppressed with some trouble.'⁷² The fourth reaction to evil is for the unbeliever: be warned! Whilst Luther is clear that evil is not evil to the believer, all things being seen to work for good in [II.v], to the unbeliever evil is a foretaste of eternal punishment, and should be received as such.

⁷⁰ Luther, *Consolations*, 125.

⁷¹ Irving Berlin, 'Count your Blessings Instead of Sheep,' in *White Christmas* (Paramount Pictures, 1954).

⁷² Luther, *Consolations*, 159.

Luther revisited this issue of how to react to evil when writing his 1527 work *Whether One may Flee from a Deadly Plague*⁷³ and makes some helpful distinctions in there which would, no doubt, have made it into a 1535 re-issuing of his *Consolations*. For example, he uses *reductio ad absurdum* to argue that teaching Christians to pursue suffering might be taken to such an extreme that they would never leave a burning building or swim when falling into deep water.⁷⁴ For the Luther of 1527 his best advice is this: pray and guard against evil, recognising that if the evil is God's will, it will come upon us; then stay if you feel bound and depart if you are free to do so—commending yourself to God in either case.⁷⁵ The re-issued *Consolations* would have been sure to include some of these vital pastoral correctives to the simple injunction that suffering be pursued as beneficial. [II.iii] would have been affected too, since Luther's *Plague* arguments would certainly require him, at the very least, to qualify his point that 'we ought to have no other care for ourselves except this, namely, that we do not care for ourselves, or rob God of his care for us.'⁷⁶

4) Eschatology

The fourth theological locus of Luther's *Consolations* is eschatology. It has already been seen that a blunt realism marks this work, which is certainly peculiar to a 'theologian of the cross' as well as being an expression of Luther's character. Much frankness is certainly apparent as Luther discusses the issues of hell, hope and judgement.⁷⁷

To modern ears Luther seems to speak of hell a huge amount in this work. Perhaps that says more about modern ears than about Luther; Jesus certainly spoke more about hell than any other subject (if counting verses is the right way to measure such things). [I.i] emphasises the hell all people have within them, as well as the fact that all deserve punishment in hell, though this latter is affirmed rather than proved. [I.iv] and [II.iv] consider the evils and blessings beneath us, giving vigorous warnings of hell, such as Jesus' words regarding the tower of Siloam, and emphasising its justice and even goodness. Hope is likewise important within the *Consolations*, not least as Luther's bluntness comes out in his discussion in [I.ii] and [II.ii] of the future and all the possible perils it could bring. The Christian

⁷³ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 736–55.

⁷⁴ Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 741.

⁷⁵ Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 742.

⁷⁶ Luther, *Consolations*, 154–5.

⁷⁷ This ordering is not a systematic one, but follows the subjects' prominence in the *Consolations*.

hope is emphasised as certain and secure because of the work of Christ, as well as being rightly located in the risen Christ, [I.vii] and [II.vii] being particularly strong on this. Likewise, the hope offered by God's full sovereignty is stressed in [I.iii] as his care in the past is reason to expect such care in the future. Luther plays with the concept of hope in asking at a number of points what it is we are hoping for: [I.i] and [I.vii] show how evils are used by God to make us Christ-like, and [I.ii] shows that death is to be preferred to sinning. Each of these pushes the Christian to decide for what they hope: comfort or Christ-likeness, holiness in death or sinfulness on earth? Another notable moment on the subject of hope is Luther's intriguing statement in [II.ii] that God allows the unconverted to enjoy some hope lest they be broken by the hardships of this life. Luther's statements on judgement are mainly in the context of hell, though he also stresses God's justice in such a punishment; our deserving judgement is stressed throughout. Luther also makes prominent the certainty that all Christians enjoy at the judgement due to Christ's benefits being theirs.

Many rightly note the way that Luther's views were affected by his medieval context. Certainly 'the idea of death and the last judgement was Luther's constant companion,'⁷⁸ as Lohse shows—though his further statement that the Reformation emphasis on justification makes no sense out of that context is more questionable, given its popular emphasis today outside of that context. Although by 1545 Luther was clear that the soul went to be with the Lord at death, he is well known to have taught the idea of soul sleep, though some of what he taught spoke against it.⁷⁹ We have already noted this resistance to systematics and propensity to offer a diverse pattern of rich descriptions within its loci. He is likewise known for believing the eschaton to be imminent, which apocalyptic expectation was again common to his time. On the issues of hell, hope and judgement that have been seen in the *Consolations* Luther would change little through the years. Perhaps the only changes in a 1535 edition would have been the addition of such eschatological expectations, as opposed to theological changes. He certainly saw the presence of a Turkish army before Vienna in 1529 in eschatological terms, and remained convinced that the Pope was the spirit of the antichrist. Luther's theology of law and gospel also continued to develop through those intervening years, and this might have been more explicit after revision. Nonetheless, his gospel reversal of 'in the midst of death we are ringed round by life because we

⁷⁸ Lohse, *Theology*, 325.

⁷⁹ Lohse, *Theology*, 326–7.

have the forgiveness of sins⁸⁰ is already clear within the *Confessions* at a number of points.

Conclusions

There are obvious difficulties in any such systematic analysis of Luther's theology, since 'his theology has its peculiarity not least in the fact that all its topics are integrally linked, so that ultimately none may be treated in isolation.'⁸¹ This has been seen in the vital links between, for example, justification and eschatology, *theologia crucis* and sovereignty, cross and eschatology. Nonetheless, the theological and pastoral benefits of such an examination have been obvious.

The overarching theme of God's goodness has been seen as foundational to all Luther's pastoral working here, as fundamental orientation of any theological locus. Pastors could well learn to be careful in preaching or teaching any theological truth until they can show how it speaks to God's goodness towards and love for his people. In doing this Luther does not avoid hard topics; but, as Strohl has noted, neither does he teach God's wrath so that it obscures his love.⁸² Luther's twin foci within God's sovereignty on the loving restraint of evil and loving provision of good are at the heart of a biblical view of God, as is his repeated analogy which sees God as Father and understands his actions in comparison with those of parents. Luther further emphasises the reality of spiritual blessings, and the truth that Christians really do possess them. His *theologia crucis* allows him to call a spade a spade, and the *Consolations* show throughout how pastoral this blunt speaking is, and the benefits that flow from it. We are saved from needing to 'do what is in us' and are shown the glorious blessing of trusting in Christ by faith and hence being given all his merits—so that we can even boast about them. The way that Christ's death transforms our experiences of death and sufferings is also vital, and pastors could learn much from Luther's breadth of descriptions as well as the way he repeatedly teases out different aspects of each theological locus he teaches. Yes, a formal exposition of justification is missing—but key aspects are there in seed at least. Luther's pulling no punches on sin and evil is of pastoral import, as he shows time and again the vital consolations that flow from true understanding of sin, hardships and punishments. The four reactions of relativising, learning

⁸⁰ From Luther's *Lecture on Ps 90*, quoted in Lohse, *Theology*, 332.

⁸¹ Lohse, *Theology*, 258.

⁸² Strohl, 'Consolations,' 312.

humility, pursuing (with appropriate nuances) and being warned by them are as useful today as 500 years ago. How many pastors teach their flock to learn humility through trials? How many seek to inculcate in them a joy at the hardships God lovingly protects them from? Luther's realism on eschatological issues is likewise a vital corrective for many pastors today, despite his eschatological quirks. Death may seem less present in the modern world, praise the Lord, and yet death and hell remain the vital truths at the heart of pastoral ministry. Luther is here, as in so many issues, a model standing head and shoulders above many who call themselves pastor.

Perhaps most of all, Luther models a pastor who is prepared to do the hard work of teaching unpopular truths and hard doctrines, as his *Consolations* are full of counter-intuitive (to many in the twenty first century) yet biblical views on issues such as depravity, hell, the uselessness of human works for salvation and so on for the pastoral benefits they reap. Pastors who starve their flock of such truths are starving them of vital pastoral care; however hard those doctrines are to teach or conversations are to have, Luther calls down the years to remind us that they are worth whatever they cost. In many ways the *Consolations* are a reminder of the benefits of pastoral frankness.

Modern pastors may wish to apply discretion in some areas when availing themselves of Luther's pastoral theology as expressed in his *Consolations*. If so, they join with the Luther of 1535 who would have changed many of the things he had written during 1519. It has been seen that he considered the differences across those years sufficient to show his progress, and to give ammunition to those who sought contradictions within his works. He would likely have made the *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus* distinction more prominent, perhaps in a Trinitarian formulation and with reference to God in his essence as opposed to God as he is given to us. A clearer statement on justification would have been guaranteed, and with this would have come more specifics on such vital issues as *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. It is likely that Luther would have added a section on the transformation affected within the believer at justification. There would have been nuances in his call to pursue sufferings, and he might well have expressed clearer and more imminent eschatological expectations. Not all pastors would welcome all of these changes, with the last likely to be of greatest concern. There are no doubt many little issues and phrases with which the Luther of 1535 would have taken issue too, and others today will have their own concerns. Of course, few modern pastors minister in Luther's exact context, and thus such

discretion is to be expected. Yet the bulk of the *Consolations*' theology, together with their pastoral thrust and focus on the God who loves his people maximally, is of great use to any pastor today.

In reading and analysing the *Consolations*, and in asking how they might have been changed in 1535 one question has not been addressed: what was missing that might have been added? It is a surprise to find little direct teaching on assurance within them, such as Luther's famous distinction between himself and the Pope—both believing that Christ died and rose again, but Luther believing that he died and rose again for him. Likewise there is hardly any mention of the sacraments, which Luther would have linked to assurance. Further, Luther's 'Two Kingdoms' theology comes out within the *Consolations* at points, but is not made explicit.

Further research on the *Consolations* would be welcome. An examination of the historical and sociological background to the changes in Luther's theology between 1519 and 1535 would add to this paper's thrust, giving a sense not just of Luther's later thought, but also of the changed context in which he was thinking, and into which he would have thus written and been read. How would such changes affect the pastor in his writing (his character and personality) and in what he wrote (perceiving the concerns and needs of his audience)? Another writer could draft a modern Lutheran edition of the *Consolations*, and, in comparing its theology to the original, examine the pastoral impact of the changes from Luther to Lutheranism.

At the end of the *Consolations* a Christian is left educated, delighted at the loving sovereignty of God, confident in the completed work of Christ, humbled by their sin and full of hope through whatever lies ahead—even death. The *Consolations* show that Luther was not just a reformer. He is unfairly known simply as a scholar and debater who held his positions even under great strain. Of course Luther was a great theologian and reformer, but more than that he was a pastor. The *Consolations* and their pastoral theology have much to offer Christians and pastors alike, nearly 500 years after first seeing the light of day. Just as Richard Baxter is rightly known for writing *The Reformed Pastor* so Martin Luther should be known as the Reformer Pastor, for that was at the heart of all he did.

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