

The Reception of Luther's Understanding of Freedom in the Early Modern Period

The Early Years

By Mark U. Edwards, Jr.

Martin Luther attempted mightily throughout his life to dictate how his own writings should be understood. Even though he could normally (but not always) control what was printed under his name, he could not (try as he might) control how he was interpreted by his readers. And when readers became preachers or publicists in their own right, Luther had even less control over the message they associated with his name.¹ They issued their own treatises to explain what he said, what he meant, what people should do. Opponents took to the press as well to decry Luther's message and explain its fallacies and its dangers. Even Luther's allies often disagreed with each other, and with the Reformer himself, in their understanding of what he had said and what he stood for. So, too, did his opponents. Each treatise was received differently by different people, interpre-

- FLFri6 FLUGSCHRIFTEN DES FRÜHEN 16. JAHRHUNDERTS: Microfiche serie 1978-1987; Register/ ed. by Hans Joachim Köhler; Hildegard Hebenstreit-Wilfert; Christoph Weismann. 10 Vol. ZH 1979-1988. (Fiche/ Nr.)
- FLFrR FLUGSCHRIFTEN DER FRÜHEN REFORMATIONSBEWEGUNG: (1518-1524)/ ed. by Adolf Laube (Leitung), Annerose Schneider und Sigrid Looß; Erläuterungen zur Druckgeschichte von Helmut Claus. 2 Vol. B 1983.
- FLGFr FLUGSCHRIFTENSAMMLUNG GUSTAV FREITAG. STADTBIBLIOTHEK FRANKFURT A. MAIN/ im Auftrag der Gesellschaft der Freunde der Stadtbibliothek bearb. von Paul Hohenemser. Nachdruck der Ausgabe F, 1925. Hildesheim 1966.

¹ For example, Luther prefaced his 1519 »Sermon on the estate of marriage« with the observation that a sermon on this topic had already been published under his name. He was aware that he had preached on the subject, but never put it into writing. He asked his pious readers to disregard the first edition of the sermon. »Further«, he continued, »if anybody wants to start writing my sermons for me, let him restrain himself, and let me have a say in the publication of my words as well.« And he added a caution that today's scholars of sixteenth-century sermons should take to heart. »There is a great difference«, he pointed out, »in making public something with the living voice or dead letters« (WA 2, 166, 10f: »Es ist ein gross unterscheyt, etwas mit lebendiger stymme adder mit todtter schrift an tag zubringenn«).

ted differently by different audiences. It was the press, then, that both connected Luther with his audience and led inevitably to a divorce between Luther's »intent« and the »meaning« appropriated by various readers.

As distressing as this diversity was for Luther, and as unsettling as it may be for scholars today, we must recognize that the reader and the representer, that is, the *representer*, whether a preacher or an author, invested Luther's publications with meaning drawn from his or her own life experience. In the dialectic of reader and text, there was born myriad interpretations. There was no one uniform understanding of Luther's teaching in the sixteenth century.

It is this very diversity and the problems of reception that is the focus of my remarks today. I shall be sharing with you some of the variations regarding one of Luther's central concepts, the notion of »Christian freedom«, and the numerous ways that it found its way into the popular press of Reformed Strasbourg, Roman Catholic Albertine Saxony, and the Peasants' War, and how, and perhaps why, each of these communities understood Luther's Christian freedom differently.

I Strasbourg

We begin with Strasbourg, the third greatest printing center in German speaking lands, and with the period 1520 through 1533, when the Reformation movement first got underway. There were thirteen treatises, by ten or eleven authors, published in Strasbourg during this period that explicitly and at some length defended Luther against attack by defenders of the old faith. Strikingly, at least three or four of the authors of these treatises misrepresented Luther's position on Christian freedom, and only three presented it in a form that Luther might have acknowledged.² These »misrepresentations«, as it were, adopted Luther's insistence that Scripture should be the sole authority and his concomi-

2 The three treatises (and authors) that come reasonably close to Luther's position are Lazarus SPENGLER: Schutzred vnnd christliche antwurt ains erbern liebhabers gotlicher warhayt. der heyiligen schrifft. auff etlicher vermaint widersprechen. mit anzaygüg warumb Doctor Martini Luthers leer nit als vnchristenlich verworffen. sonder mer fur christenlich gehalten werdē sol ..., which was reprinted in »Martini Luthers der waren götlichen schrifft Doctors, Augustiner zu Wittenbergk, mancherley büchlin vnnd tractelin. In wölchē ein yegklicher auch einfaltiger Lay, vil heylsamer Christlicher lere vnd vnderweysung findet, so not seindt zu wissenn, einem yegklichen Christen menschen, der nach Christlicher ordnung (als wir alle sollen) leben will. Deren biechlin namen findest du am andern blatt, mit zale der blättern, in wölchem yegklichs

tant rejection of »man-made« laws that conflicted with Scripture, but they did not share his understanding of the inability of human beings to fulfill the law, even the divine law. Instead, they insisted upon freedom from »man-made laws« in order to fulfill »divine law«. The position they advocated, in sum, was more strongly reminiscent of Erasmus's insistence on a simple, scripturally based Christianity than Luther's paradoxical notion of Christian freedom.

Take for example the almost prototypically Erasmian attack in »New Karsthans« on external ceremonies.³ Although ostensibly championing Luther's cause, the author of »New Karsthans«, probably Martin Bucer (1491-1551), objected not to a reliance on law per se but only to a reliance on false, man-made laws and especially ecclesiastical law. In fact, he sought above all to champion »divine law and commandments« which he equated with God's »wholesome faith«.⁴ Tradition or custom was rejected in favor of the teachings of Christ and the apostles.⁵ Christ was a teacher and example to the clergy.⁶ It is crucial to

eygentlich anfahe, vnd ein epistel zu denen die sollich buchlin lesen, oder hören lesen von D. Martini Luther außgangen. Item Apologia: das ist ein schirmred vnd antwort gegen etlicher einrede, so geschehen wider D. Martinū Luthern vnd seine Ewangelische lere, mit fast schönen wollgegrünten bewerungen, das sein leere, als warhafftig, Christlich, vnnnd göttlich anzunehmen sey. Strasbourg: Schürer, 1520«; FlFrR 1, 501-516; Michael STIFEL: Von der Christförmigen, rechtgegründten leer Doctoris Martini Luthers, ein überuß schön kunstlich Lyed, sampt seiner neben vßlegung. Strasbourg: unknown, [1522]: Schott, 1522 [Miriam U[sher] CHRISMAN: Bibliography of Strasbourg imprints, 1480-1599. New Haven 1982, 324 [P3.9.6f]; FlGFr, 195 [2935]; FlFrR 1983, 45f [1093 / 2773]; 1979, 36 [315f / 900]; 1980, 43 [364 / 1024]; and the anonymous HÜPSCH ARGUMENT RED FRAGEN VND ANTWURT DREYER PERSONEN NEMLICHEN AINS CURTISANEN AINES EDELMANS Vñ AINES BURGERS NIT ALLAIN KÜRTZWEYLIG SUNDER VAST NUTZLICH ZU LESEN VND ZU HEREN ALLES D.M.L. LEER BETREFFENT. Strasbourg: Beck, 1522 [Chrisman: Op.cit., 324 [P3.9.5]; FlGFr, 254 [3922]].

3 [Martin BUCER]: Gespräch biechlin neüw Karsthans. Strasbourg: Schürer, 1521 (Chrisman: Op.cit., 325 [P3.11.1]; FlFrR 1978, 11 [172 / 475]; Martin BUCER: Deutsche Schriften. Bd. I: Flugschriften 1520-1524/ hrsg. von Robert Stupperich. GÜ 1960, 406-444.

4 »Dann die unsere fleischliche ding, das ist weltliche gütter, von uns schneyden wöllen, seind schuldig dargegen geistliche ding, das ist, das Ewangelium und gute Christliche ler zu sewen und pflantzen, wie das Paulus hat geschriben, den sie auch in dem nit hören wöllen, do er sie von weltlicher eer abzeücht, sunder wöllen nur allein in der welt geert sein, erheben sich über Keiser, König und Fürsten. Ja mer, heissen sie in dieselbigen ihre fuß küssen. Ach got von hymel, warzu ist dein heilsamer glaub kommen. Was hat man uß dir gemacht. Wie ist dein göttlich gesatz und gebott so gar verkeret ...« (ibid. 1, 426, 27 - 427, 7).

5 Ibid. 1, 419, 4-7.

note that the author did not offer his readers Luther's condemnation of all works done in anticipation of reward. More importantly, he did not offer the word of promise as the answer to the challenge of the law, even (or perhaps especially) the challenge of »divine law«. The view of Christian freedom developed here was quite different from Luther's.

Other treatises also took this more »Erasmian« than »Lutheran« approach to law and works. The author of »A beautiful dialogue and conversation between a pastor and a mayor concerning the evil condition of the clergy and the evil dealings of the worldly«,⁷ who may be the same person as the presumed author of »New Karsthans«, namely Bucer, used Scripture to criticize the clergy and the institutional church. Scripture he saw as the source of divine law, which took precedence over all human laws of the church. When he stated that Luther »grounds all his writings in right faith and out of the holy gospel and out of Saint Paul's teaching and leads us out of many entanglements into which the clergy has for a long time gotten us on account of money and goods«,⁸ the clerical entanglements that he had in mind was the ecclesiastical law, concerning which he remarked, »I am concerned [that] there is little in it of God's law«.⁹

The student Laux Gemigger in his »To the praise of Luther and to the honor of the whole of Christendom«,¹⁰ suggested that Luther had taught »Christ's tea-

6 E. g., »Daruß clârlich zô vernemen, das er [Christ] hat gewôlt, die Apostel und ire nachkommen, priester und gaistlichen, im am nechsten nachvolgen und in seinem beyspil leben« (ibid. 1, 436, 22-24).

7 [Martin BUCER]: Ain schöner dialogus Und gesprech zwischen aim Pfarrer und aim Schulthayß, betreffend allen übel Stand der gaystlichen. Und böß handlung der weltlichen. Alles mit geitzigkayt beladen. etc. [Strasbourg: Schürer, 1521]; Bucer: Deutsche Schriften 1, 445-495. For the attribution, see ibid. 1, 396-399.

8 »... nun hat er doch gûnt und Cristenlich ding gelert und geschriben, das dem glaubn nicht abnymbt. er macht in wol gûnt und vergründt all sin geschriff in rechtem glaubn und auß den hailigen ewangelien und auß sant Pauls ler und fiert uns auß vil stricken, die uns die gaystlichen langher gelegt hond umb gelts und gûts willn, ...« (ibid. 1, 445, 18-23).

9 Ibid. 1, 446, 12 f.

10 LAUX GEMIGGER: Zü lob dem Luther vnd eeren der gantzen Christenhait. The verse on the title page reads (FlFrR 1, 555):

»Wôlt yemant wissen wie der hieß
Der disen spruch außgon liess
Das hat gethon Laux Gemigger student
Auß vrsach, dz man des Luthers bücher hat verprent.«

ching«, namely, »how we have turned from good to evil«, and had laid out the »teaching of the evangelists ... without additions«. The additions were, of course, human laws. Luther was »sent by God to teach us God's word and good morals and to drive out the Antichrist here on earth, also to see to it that God's word not be fully spoiled and that the Roman tyranny be recognized, that they should have no kingdom here on earth«. ¹¹

While »New Karsthans«, »A beautiful dialogue and conservation ...«, and Gemigger's »To the praise of Luther ...« did not even mention salvation by faith alone, the nobleman Hartmuth von Cronberg's (1488-1549) »Rejection of the alleged dishonor attributed by many to the pious and Christian father, Doctor Martin Luther of the Augustinian order, in that he called our father the pope a vicar of the Devil and Antichrist«, ¹² did attempt to explain the relation between salvation by faith alone and good works. Luther had given everyone the power to

The print FlGr, 280 (4329) is identified as a Nuremberg printing done in 1522. Claus gives an uncertain date of 1521, printed in Augsburg by Erhard Öglin Erben. Chrisman dates the work to 1520 and has identified two editions printed in Strasbourg: From the internal evidence the treatise was written earliest by the end of November 1520 and latest by March 1521. The 1520 dating is probably too early. Claus identifies two Strasbourg and an Augsburg edition (FlFr 1, 555).

11 »Wie mag ainer der warhait sein feindt | der sy gantz clar sagt und herwider bringet? | Dann er [Luther] Christus ler beschirmt und lert | wie wir uns von gutem hond in das böß bekört. | Uns hat der frum Luther bißher angezaigt | der ewangelisten leer, bloß [rein, ohne Zusätze] fürgelegt, | auch Gotes wort uns erklet | und Christo seinen glauben gemert. | Und er warlich volbringt, was Got gebotten hat, | als in dem ewangely geschriben stat [Matth. 10, 1]: Der Luther von uns treibt die bösen gaist, | die unser laster ursacher seind am aller maist, | wann sy uns leren menschen gebert | und uns hinderhalten [vorenthalten] Gottes wort, | zwitrechtig secten under uns machen thünt, | die uns verfühen zů der helle grund. | Den ablaß sy solchem gewalt geben zů | das dann weder glimpff hat noch füß, | wann sy yederman hond betrogen umb das gelt, | welches Got dem herren gantz mißfelt. | So hond die schlechten christen gemaint, | sy haben Christo gethon groß wolgefallenheit. | Darumb uns der Luther ist von Got geschickt | das er uns ler Gottes wort und güte sit | und er den endchrist vertreiben sol hie auff erd, | auch das gotes wort nit gantz verderb, | und das der Römer tyranny erkent werd, | wie sy kain reich sollen haben hie auff erd« (FlFr 1, 552, 34 - 553, 18).

12 Hartmuth VON CRONBERG: Ableynung des vermeinlichen unglimpffs so dem Andechtigen Hochgelerten vnd Cristenlichen vatter Doctor Martin Luther Augustiner orders. etc. von vielen zůgelegt, in dem das er vnsern vatter den Babst ein Vicari des Teüfels vnd Antecrists etc. genant hat. Strasbourg: Pruss, 1522; FlFr 16 1987, 5 (1889 / 4824); Hartmuth VON CRONBERG: Die Schriften/ hrsg. von Eduard Kück. Halle 1899, 18-31.

become a child of God and an inheritor of his eternal kingdom, von Cronberg began:

»He who believes that is assured and his God will lead him and keep him on his way. There may be no doubt: no one who believes in Christ rightly may be ungrateful for such magnificent grace. For this reason we wish to be thankful to our Lord Christ for the magnificent grace that he has shown to us, his unworthy creatures. Therefore we must be attentive to the works that please the Lord God the most and on which the whole Christian foundation stands. That is to love God with all the strength of body, mind, and soul and [to love] the neighbor as our selves.«¹³

But as this excerpt shows, von Cronberg was still operating largely with a contrast between the divine law of love and human laws. Von Cronberg set the two great commandments taught by Christ against the ecclesiastical laws of the pope. If the pope could be led from »human wisdom« to the »true wisdom«, »the divine Christian wisdom«, he would virtuously desist from »all unchristian laws«. All self-seeking would be transformed into »the most sweet brotherly love« based on the love of God and neighbor. Justice would be instilled into human hearts and consciences, and there would be less reliance on juridical books because »Christian brotherly love cannot tolerate the interminable legal dealing [Juristery]«. ¹⁴ God, for von Cronberg, »does not regard the multiplica-

13 »Er hat einem ietlichen geben gewalt ein kindt gottes, vnnd ein erbe seines ewigen reychs zûsyn, welcher das glaubt, der ist versichert vnd syn gott wirt In leiten vff synem weg vnd behalten, da bedarff keins zwyfels: sôlicher vber hõhen gnade mag keiner der in Christum recht glaubet vndanckbar syn: Des halb wollen wir vnserm hern Christo danckbar syn, syner vber hõhen gnaden so er gegen vns synen vnwürdigen creaturen erzaigt hat, so müssen wir acht haben vff die werck die got dem hern am gefelligsten, vnnd dar vff der gantz cristlich grundt steet. Das ist gott lieb haben vss aller kraft des leibs, des gemûts, vnd der selen, vnd den nechsten glich vns selbst« (ibid., 19f).

14 »Der Babst vnd sie synen werden selbst tugentlichen absten von allen vncristenlichen gesetzen, vnd mit willen abtreten, vnd sich mit vns erfreuwen des hiemelischen liehtes, in diser vnser greülichen finsterniß durch die aller höchste gütigkeit gotts gegeben, zû vnser gemeyner sâligkeit also überschynbarlich leüchtende. Aller eigener nutz würt verwandelt werden in die aller süsseste brüderliche liebe, alles auß grundt gemelter zwayer stuck, daruß dan wyther volgen würdt, das ein yetlicher für synes nechsten notturfft sorgen würdt, glich syner eigen selbst sachen. Vnd dardurch würt die gerechtikeit in die hertzen vnd gewissen der mensch gestilt werden, vnd nit souil vff die vnnßgründlichen Juristen biecher wie bißhar gesetzt, dan die cristlich brüderlich liebe mag die vnentlich Juristery nit erlyden, in welcher keyn endschafft zûfinden ist, wie wir augenscheynlich sehen in allen großwichtigen sachen« (ibid., 28).

tion of external works of pageantry or longer prayers. He wishes that [one] have a good heart. This is what is truly called seeking the kingdom of God.«¹⁵

Critics also read Luther differently than he intended. In Strasbourg the counter-attack was largely the effort of one man, the Franciscan poet Thomas Murner (1475-1537).¹⁶ »Christian freedom«, as Murner re-presented it, was the rallying cry of those who wished to throw over all authority and discipline. For example, in his 1522 »The great Lutheran fool«, Murner defined in biting verses what was required of men and women to become Lutheran. They must despise the papacy, bishops, and clergy, he said, consider the pope the antichrist, thread under food all papal pronouncements, give up fasting, confession and praying, deride all secular authority, hold the Mass in contempt and reject its sacrificial character, abandon the other sacraments, destroy churches and cloisters, drive out members of religious orders, abuse the clergy from the pulpit, advocate bloodshed and rebellion, plunder clerical property, and, in short,

»Alle ding zů keren umb,
Dan ist das ewangelium
Gar volkumen mit seim orden.
Also sein wir al lutherisch worden.«¹⁷

For Murner all these »Luthern rules« flow from Luther's fleshly Christian freedom, but especially the rejection of authority:

»Der cristlich glaub gibt vnß freiheit,
Zů erkennen hie kein oberkeit.
Wie sein im tauff al frei geboren,
Ee keiser / künig / fürsten woren.«¹⁸

15 »...: dan gott achtet nit die vile ver vsserlichen werck der gebrenge oder langer gebet, er wil ein gůt hertz haben, das heyßß warhafftig das reich gottes gesůcht« (ibid., 22).

16 In 1520 he published two general warnings about Luther, a defense of the papacy, and a reply to Luther's »To the German nobility«. Two treatises followed in 1521 and another three in 1522. For a detailed discussion of these treatises, see Mark U. EDWARDS Jr.: Printing, propaganda, and Martin Luther. Berkeley, Los Angeles 1994.

17 »To turn everything upside down fully realizes the gospel arrangement. Thus we have all become Lutheran« (Thomas MURNER: Deutsche Schriften/ mit den Holzschnitten der Erst-drucke ed. by Franz Schultz. Vol. 9: Von dem großen Lutherischen Narren/ ed. by Paul Merker. Straßburg 1918, 244, 3879 - 245, 3882).

18 »The Christian faith gives us freedom to recognize no earthly authority. We were all born free in baptism before there was an emperor, king, or princes« (ibid. 9, 242, 3787-3790).

We shall follow in a moment this Roman Catholic interpretation as it was developed in the presses of Albertine Saxony. But to understand the full thrust of later Roman Catholic characterizations of »Christian freedom« we must first examine how the slogan was employed in the Peasants' War of 1525.

II The Peasants' War

If the urban laity stressed »Christian freedom« as liberation from human laws and Roman domination and submission to divine law, the German peasantry saw in the slogan freedom from serfdom and exploitation by their lords. »The twelve articles«¹⁹ of the Swabian peasantry provided an ideological rationale for religious, economic, and social grievances that united peasant bands throughout southern and central Germany.²⁰ Of particular interest to us is its third article, which states:

»... it has until now been the custom for the lords to own us as their property. This is deplorable, for Christ redeemed and bought us all with his precious blood, the lowliest shepherd as well as the greatest lord, with no exceptions. Thus the Bible proves that we are free and want to be free. Not that we want to be utterly free and subject to no authority at all; God does not teach us that. We ought to live according to the commandments, not according to the lusts of the flesh. But we should love God, recognize him as our Lord in our neighbor, and willingly do all things God commanded us at his Last Supper.«²¹

In this demand you can hear echoes of Luther's paradox – »A Christian is a free lord over all things, subject to no one. A Christian is a subservient servant of all, subject to all.« – but transposed into a different key.²²

Luther acted quickly to reject this understanding of Christian freedom, or at least to disavow responsibility for it. In his 1525 »Admonition to peace: a reply to the Twelve articles of the peasants of Swabia«, Luther protested to the peasants:

19 Subtitled »The just and fundamental articles of all the peasantry and tenants of spiritual and temporal powers by whom they think themselves oppressed«.

20 Peter BLICKLE: *Die Revolution von 1525*. 2nd, rev. ed. M 1981, 89-103 ≙ *The revolution of 1525: the German peasants' war from a new perspective*/ trans. by Thomas A. Brady, Jr. and H. C. Erik Midelfort. Baltimore 1981, 58-67 (chapter 3).

21 Blicke: *The Revolution of 1525*, 197f.

22 See Martin BRECHT: *Der theologische Hintergrund der Zwölf Artikel der Bauernschaft in Schwaben von 1525*: Christoph Schappeler und Sebastian Lotzers Beitrag. ZKG 85 (1974), 174-208.

»[You assert that] there should be no serfs, because Christ has freed us all. What does that mean? That means making Christian freedom totally a fleshly matter ... This article would make all human beings equal, and make of the spiritual kingdom of Christ a worldly, external kingdom, which is impossible since the worldly kingdom cannot be maintained without inequality among persons ... «²³

The peasants, of course, didn't listen, and in the aftermath of their bloody defeat Luther found himself answering the charge that he had inspired the revolt. All his claims that his works carefully distinguished between spiritual and fleshly freedom did him no good with critics from the old faith and even with some of his supporters. The rhetoric of Christian freedom had taken on a life of its own. If Luther and some of his followers could distinguish between, on the one hand, the freedom to renounce ecclesiastical and secular laws enjoining fasting or prohibiting clerical marriage and, on the other hand, the freedom to renounce servile obligations to one's lord, especially when that lord was a monastery or bishop, many of the peasants and, for that matter, many of Luther's Roman Catholic critics failed to see the distinction, or they considered it hypocritical.

III The Roman Catholic Reading of Christian Freedom

Of all Catholic printing centers, it was Albertine Saxony that contributed most to the Roman Catholic effort to reach a broad, lay audience. In the decade of the 1530s, while Cologne's presses were producing almost exclusively for a learned elite (85% of their production was in Latin), over fifty percent of the total output of controversial literature in the vernacular for all of Germany flowed from the presses of Leipzig and Dresden! This means that a study of the presses of Leipzig and Dresden in this decade tells not only what readers in these cities were likely to learn about Luther, but also much of what was available in the vernacular to adherents of the old faith throughout the Empire.²⁴

²³ StA 3, 129, 17-27 $\triangle$ WA 18, 326, 32 - 327, 23 $\triangle$ Am 46, 39.

²⁴ Not only does one lay principality dominate the Roman Catholic controversial effort in the vernacular; a handful of authors, most of them patronized by Duke Georg, account for nearly half of the Roman Catholic printings from 1518 to 1555. Witzel, Cochlaeus, Eck, Emser, Sylvius, and Murner produced about forty-six percent [46.4%] of the vernacular printings for this period. In all this Witzel and Cochlaeus, both supported by Duke Georg, are the most significant authors. Witzel's output accounts for nearly thirteen percent [12.8%] of the overall

We begin with Hieronymus Emser (1477/78-1527) and his 1525 »Answer to Luther's The abomination of the secret mass«, published in Dresden. Emser devoted half this treatise to demonstrating through dozens of excerpts drawn from Luther's writings that Luther was responsible for the Peasants' War.²⁵ Like Murner before him, Emser read Luther's »Christian freedom« as subversive to social order and as encouraging sin. He argued that Luther had condemned the authority of both estates and turned lords into subjects and subjects into lords and made everyone free.²⁶ For Emser, Luther was counseling sedition and rejecting legitimate authority when he rejected ordinances or distinctions of rank that limited Christian freedom, when he insisted that all Christians were born free in baptism and were therefore subject only to the divine word, and when he advocated the freedom to commune in both kinds without all the regulation of the mass.²⁷

Johann Cochlaeus (1479-1552) agreed. In the 1527 Dresden reprint of his »Answer to Luther's treatise ›Against the robbing and murdering hordes of peasants‹«, he stated that the Lutherans, »... under the semblance of Scripture with cunning and deceitful exegesis have so brought the poor unlearned people around to the false freedom of baptism that they believe that since we are all

production from 1518 to 1555. Cochlaeus is second with better than ten percent [10.6%]. For the period 1518 to 1539, Cochlaeus is the leading publicist with over twelve percent [12.4%]. Cochlaeus also subsidized the printing of various other Roman Catholic controversialists including Bachmann, Witzel, and Mensing. See Mark U. EDWARDS, JR.: Catholic controversial literature, 1518-1555: some statistics. ARG 79 (1988), 189-205.

25 Emser labeled as subversive Luther's teachings on the priesthood of all believers, his many attacks on the clergy and the papacy, his criticism of secular government interfering in the spiritual sphere, and his various predictions that the clerical and secular lords would be punished for their opposition to the Gospel. Hieronymus EMSER: Auff Luthers gewel wider die heiligen Stillmess Antwort Item wie, wo und mit wolchen wortten Luther yhn seyn büchern tzur auffrur ermandt, geschriben und getriben hat. Dresden 1525 (FLFr16 1979, 9 [242 / 667]) and Hieronymus EMSER: Schriften zur Verteidigung der Messe/ ed. by Theobald Freudenberger. MS 1959. For a consideration of this charge in detail, see Mark U. EDWARDS JR.: Lutherschmähung?: Catholics on Luther's responsibility for the peasants' war. Catholic historical review 76 (1990), 461-480, and Edwards: Printing, propaganda, and Martin Luther.

26 »Wie Luther beyder obgemelten stende gewalt, regiment, ordnung, recht unnd gesetze veracht, verworffen, verdammet, ouch ire underthanen zu verachtung und ungehorsam der selben vermanet, die herren zu knechten und die knecht zu herren und semper frey gemacht, dartzu er ynen allen gewalt oder oberkeit eyngeromet hat« (Emser: Auff Luthers gewel ..., Bij^v).

27 Ibid, Bij^v.

brothers in Christ through baptism, all things should be equal among us, as happens with true brothers«. He then addressed Luther directly and cited from Luther's »On the Babylonian captivity of the church«, »I tell you truly, you said, ›that no law can justly be imposed on Christians, neither by human beings nor by angels, no matter how much they wish to, since we are free from them all.«²⁸

The man responsible for the Cochlaeus reprint in Dresden, Petrus Sylvius (circa 1470 - circa 1536), summed up the controversialist's position in his 1527 »A clear demonstration«. »And in truth had the Christian princes not been so soon awakened against the Lutheran peasants«, Sylvius wrote, »then the Lutheran teaching would have turned all lordship and authorities into peasants and there would have not only been no divine service or houses of God but also no castle or noble estate left undestroyed in the German lands ...« Sylvius was convinced that this contention could be proved from Luther's own writings. »... Luther has written from the beginning of his publication and especially in the treatise on ›Christian freedom‹ and the ›Babylonian captivity‹ that each Christian should be and is free as a matter of right and should be himself a lord, prince, king, bishop, and pope since they were all to a man priests and kings«, Sylvius charged, »And each should believe, celebrate, and do whatever he wishes, however he wishes, without regard for anyone ...«²⁹

28 »Falscher syn, ist nicht so vil by dem schlechten und einfeltigem volck, als bei euch meineydigen eemunchen [verheiratete ehemalige Mönche] und abtrunnigenn pfaffen, so ir das arm ungelert volck, durch vil scheins der schryfft mit listigem und trieglichem ußlegen, auff falsche freyheit der tauff so feer [weit] gebracht habt, das es vermaynt, so wir al bruder in Christo seind durch die tauff das alle ding sollen unte[r] uns gleich seyn, wie unter leiplichen brudern gesehen wird. Dan also hastu vor vier jarn geschryben in der babylonischen gefencknuss. Ich ruff auch getrewlich, sprichstu, das mit keynen rechten den christen mag uffgelegt werden eincherlei gesatz, weder von menschen, noch von engeln, dan so vil sy wöllen, wan wir seind frey von innenn allen« (Johann COCHLAEUS: Antwort Joannis Cochlei zu Martin Luthers buch, genant Wider die Stürmenden Bawern Jetzt auff's nawe mit einer sonderlichen Schlussrede M. Pe. Sylvii in Druck gebracht ... Dresden: Stöckel, 1527. I have not been able to find this edition, so I am using the 1525 Cologne edition reprinted in *FLUGSCHRIFTEN DER BAUERNKRIEGSZEIT/* unter Leitung von Adolf Laube; Hans Werner Seiffert bearb. 2., rev. ed. B 1978, 376-412. The quote is on page 378, 31-40.

29 »Vnd ynn der warheit wern die Christlichen Fürsten widder die Lutherischen pawrn, so bald nicht erwacht so hette die Lutherische lehre alle die Herschafft vnd öbirkeyt zu pawern gemacht, vnd were nicht alleyn keyn Gottes dienst noch Gottshaus, sonder auch keyn Schlos

Underpinning this freedom, as these Roman Catholic authors saw it, was, in Cochlaeus's words, the »false principle that faith alone justifies and sanctifies«. ³⁰ Luther knew, Paul Bachmann (1465/68 - circa 1538) wrote sarcastically, »that no believer goes to hell even if he is a murderer, thief, a robber, an adulterer and so on. Because no sin condemns a person, only lack of belief.« ³¹ And Johannes Fabri (1478-1541), later bishop of Vienna, remarked with a touch of »Schadenfreude« regarding the lament in the Saxon visitation articles that too much was being taught about the forgiveness of sin and too little about repentance, »Yes, dear Luther, not only a few but nearly all your disciples have for more than ten years not said or taught anything else but that only by faith, that faith alone justifies, that mere faith makes one blessed, that one should only believe and that is sufficient. And who, but you, first brought this teaching up?« ³² This indeed was their complaint against Luther and his »disciples« made twelve years ago, »that you forever preached naked faith alone so that the

noch Eddehoff ynn Teutzschen landen vnuerstört geblieben ... Das hette man der Lutherischen schrifft vnd lere gehabt zu danken, Sintemal Luther von anfang seynes schreybens, vnd sonderlich ym Tractat von der Christlichen freyheit, vnd Babilonischen gefencknis geschriben hat, das eyn yglicher Christe, von rechts wegen sol seyn vnd ist frey vnd seyn selbist eyn Herre, Fürste, König, Bishoff vnd Bapst, Syntemal sie weren allesamt Priester vnd Könige, vnd eyn yeder solte glauben, halten, vnd thun, was ynd wie er wölde, vnd niemand ansehen, vnd der gleychen« (Petrus SYLVIVS: Eyn klare beweysung wie Luther würde seyn eyn vrsache, des steten eynzuges des Türcken, des vnchristlichen yrthums, zwitracht, auffruhr, vnd empörung des gemeynen volckes ... L: Thanner, 1527, B^vf; FlFr16 1983, 46 [1183 / 2965]).

30 »Uch habs yhm offft vnd vil auffgeruckt, das er fast all [Bi] sein lere auff disen falschen grund setzt, das allein der glaub mach gerecht vnd selig, welchs in keiner schrifft also stehet« (Johann COCHLAEUS: Sieben kopffe Martin Luthers, von acht hohen sachen des Christlichen glaubens. Dresden: Stöckel, 1529, Aiv^vf; FlFr16 1978, 5 [136 / 370]).

31 »Er weys das kein glubiger in die helle kompt, ap es auch ein mörder, diebe, ein rawber, ein Ehebrecher sey etc. Denn keyne sunde verdampt den menschen, denn allein der vnglawbe ...« (Paulus BACHMANN: Luthers widerruf vom Fegefewer mit farbe ausz gestrichen durch den Abbt zur alden Zellen. Dresden: Stöckel, 1530, Eij^f; FrFl16 1981, 2 [691 / 1789]).

32 »Ja lieber Luther nicht allein vil, sonder gar nahe alle deñe jünger, haben wol zehen vnd mher jar nichts anders gesagt vnd gelert, dann allein von dem glauben, der ainig glaub mach gerecht, [Bij^v] der eynig glaub mach selig, man solle nur glauben so sey es genug. Vnd wer hat diss zum ersten anderst auffbracht, dann du?« (Johannes FABRI: Christenliche vnderichtung Doctor Johann Fabri, vber ettliche Puncten der Visitation, sso jm Churfürstenthumb Sachssen gehalten, vnd durch Luther beschriben, Welche antzunehmen vnd zuuerwerffen seyend. Dresden: Stöckel, 1528, Bij^f; FlFr16 1980, 12 [520f / 1342]).

common people, unfortunately, have fallen away from all fear of God, good conscience, love of neighbor, good works, indeed all Christian honesty«. Fabri drew a stark conclusion from this: »And who, other than you, is [therefore] responsible for those innocent children who were slain and perished in the Peasants' War?«³³ As he read it, Luther's Christian freedom gave the appearance of teaching improvement and edification but in fact was a »fleshly freedom« that came down to »whatever one wanted to say, one said, and whatever one wished to do, one did«.³⁴

But the Roman Catholic objection went beyond the reliance on »mere faith«. For, as they saw it, Luther said not only that faith without works saved, but that a striving after good works could actually damn. Luther, Sylvius explained in his 1534 »The last two books«, »rejects and slanders good works, even those done as well as possible, as if they were simply horrible sins, and [he] considers as no sins all the vices and wickedness that one can produce, and [he] wishes to deal before God with mere faith alone without any divine love and Christian works ...«³⁵

33 »Diss ist doch auch vntzer clag wider dich, vnd deine jünger, numals bey zwölff jaren, gewesen, das ir für vnd für, den blossen vnd eynigen glauben, gekert vnd geprediget, dardurch das gemein volck (leyder) von aller Gotsforcht, guttem gewissen, liebe des nehisten, gutten wergken, ja aller Christlicher Erbarkeit, gefallen ist. Vnd wer ist aber schuldig an dissen vndschuldigen kindern, so in dem Bawernkrieg erschlagen, vnd vmbkommen seind, anders dann du?« (ibid., Bi^r).

34 »Aber mit deiner Christenlicher freyheit, darinn du Placentia gesagt, vnd placentem gepacken hast, seind disse ding alle abgethan, du hast einem yeden ein küsse mögen machen vnder seinen arm, das er sich darauff stewrn möchte, wiewol du die freyheit zu besserung, zu erbawung, soltest gelernt haben, ist aber aus dem geist, ein fleischfreyheit worden. Vnd stehet die sach also, was eynem gefelt, das redt er, vnd was einem yeden gelust, das thut er« (ibid., Eijj^v).

35 »Zum andern ist zu erkennen, das, so Luther die guthen werck auch auff's aller besten gethan, verwyrfft vnd verlestert, gleychsam weren sie eytel gewliche sunde, vnd alle laster vnd bosheyt die man kan verbrennen, vor keyne sunde [C^v] helt, vnd alleyn mit dem blossen glauben one alle Göttliche liebe vnd Christliche werck wil vor Gote gehandelt haben, So hat er nicht alleyn die art vnd bosheyt des Antichrists ynn der verwerffung vnd verleuckung der guten werck, sondern er hat auch die art bossheyt vnd verfürischoydt aller bösen geystern, die da von anfang haben stets verworffen vnd verhyndert die guten werck vnnd angereytzt, zu allem arg, vnd seyn alleyn bey dem blossen glauben geblieben« (Petrus SYLVIVS: Die letzten zwey beschlüssliche vnd aller krefftigste büchleyn M. petri Syluij, so das Lutherisch thun an seyner person, von seyner geburt, vnd an seyner schriftt, von anfang bis zum end gründlich handeln, vnd seyne vnchristlickeyt schrifttlich entplossen. L: Blum, 1534; Wilbirgis KLAIBER: Katholi-

He and his colleagues read Luther to say that »mere, naked faith« would save, apart from works, and that traditional good works such as the mass were not only unnecessary but positively harmful. As Johannes Mensing († 1547) put it, »They have promised the people very many freedoms so that they become, indeed, slaves to their flesh ... so that they would prefer to outrage virgins than to hold mass.«³⁶ For Sylvius Luther's teachings about Christian freedom and equality made the »Lutheran common people« unable to tolerate authority or be anyone's subject. The »black Lutheran peasant« and »his« Anabaptists had already dared to practice Luther's teaching that in Christendom there could and should be no authority but rather everyone should be equal to every other. Looking towards the future, Sylvius predicted that the »Lutheran common folk«

»... will cultivate division, unrest, war, robbery, [and] murder, not only against true Christendom but also against each other. [They will do this] all on account of the many-sided and self-contradictory, wicked Lutheran teaching ... that one can and may freely practice and commit every vice and wickedness ... and it would be no sin if one only had mere faith. But one should only protect oneself from good works which even though done in the best way are nevertheless nothing more than horrible sins ...«³⁷

sche Kontroverstheologen und Reformer des 16. Jahrhunderts. MS 1978, 281 [3059]; FlGFr 225 [3430]].

- 36 »Sie haben den leuthen, fast viel, freyheiten vorheyschen: So sie doch selbst knechte seint, yhres fleyschs ... Also das sie lieber wolten iung frawen schenden, dan Messen halten« (Johannes MENSING: Von dem Opffer Christi in der Messe: Allen Christglaubigen/ Teutscher Nation not tzuwissen Denen zu Magdeburgk in sonderhey/ tzu gut geschriben vnd auszgangen. Beweret mit Götlicher schriftte. L: Schmidt, 1526, Aiv^v).

Paul Bachmann read Luther much the same way: »Vnd nach der art der hellischen geistern leret er [Luther] zu meyden das gut, vnd zu vben das arg. Sintemal sein lere ist, das man sich soll von allen götlichen vnd menschlichen gesetzen vnd gepot, vnd von allen gutten wergken, die Gott zu vben geboten hat, mehr hütten dann vor allen sunden, vnd allein dem blossen glauben anhangen, vnd das der do alle bossheit vbet, vnd verlest sich allein auff den blossen glauben, der bekrefftiget den glauben, vnd ist gereyt selig vnd heylig. Der do aber guttes thut, was Gott zuthun gepoten hat, der verstört den glauben, vnd ist gereyt verdampft« (Paulus BACHMANN: Ein sermon des Abts zur Cellen yn auffnhemung der Reliquien Sancti Bennonis, gehabt am .xxi. tag des Monats Julij. Geteylt in drey artickel. Dresden: Stöckel, 1527, Di^j^v; FrFl16 1983, 4 [1183 / 2966]).

- 37 Here is the full quote: »Die andere straffe vnnd vnseligkeyt wird seyn die stets auffruhr vnnd widerspennigkeyt des Lutheryschen gemeynem volckes, so es würde zur macht kommen, Auch widder yhre eygen Oberkeyt, sie sey Lutherysch oder alt Christisch, welche, sie oder yrer

All the elements of the Roman Catholic view are present in Sylvius's indictment.

IV Conclusion

Are we simply studying various misunderstandings or even deliberate propagandistic distortions of Luther's teachings? To an extent, but that's not all we're doing. To be sure there are misunderstandings and distortions, but such observations miss the point. Readers pick and choose among the ideas introduced to them. Some issues resonate with their life experiences; others do not. And in the dialectic of reader and text, some ideas are invested with new meaning, transposed to a different key, or filled out in ways unintended by their author.

Luther's defenders who were published in Strasbourg were divided in their understanding of Luther's concept of Christian freedom. While a few of these publicists understood Luther's radical proposal regarding Christian freedom, the majority of Luther's defenders published in Strasbourg were still reading

auffrürscher hoffertiger geist mit nichte wird wollen noch können dulden, noch yhnen vnderthan seyn, ja sie werden sie stets wöllen verachten vnd vertreyben, wie die Aposteln Petrus vnd Judas Thadeus ynn yren Episteln yn den letzten tagen bis zugeschehen verkündigt haben, Als denn auch Luther im buche von der weltlichen überkeit [Giv^v] schön angehaben hat zu leeren, sprechend, Das ynn der Christenheyt kan noch sol keyn Oberkeyt seyn, sondern ein yeder ist dem andern gleych usw. Vnnd die Schwarzen Lutherischen bawr vnd seyne Widder-teuffer sich auch gereyt dis zu practicirn vnderstanden haben, Darüber werden sie auch stehte zwytracht, vnfried, krieg, raub, mord, nicht allein wider die ware Christenheyt, sonder auch wider einander pflegen, von wegen der manchfaltigen vnd yhr selbst widersprechigen boshaff-tigen Lutherischen leere, vnd yhres bösen lebens, so Luther lert, wie bisher offft angezeygt ist, Das man kan, vnd mag, one alle sunde frey vben vnd treyben alle laster vnd bosheyt, auch der gantzen werlet, vnd es wer keine sunde, wo man nur den blossen glauben het, aber alleyn vor guten wercken sol man sich hüten, Denn wiewol sie geschehen ynn aller beste weyse, so weren sie doch eytel gewliche sunde usw. wie er geprediget hat dominica Cantate, am vierden Sontage nach Epiphanie, vnd das jamerlich zu klagen ist, auch ynn der kyndern büchleyn zu yhrer zeytlichen vergiftung gesetzt hat, dadurch er yhe wil verschaffen, das man von iugend auff, sol meyden alle gute sitten vnd tugenden, als sind die tugendliche gute werck Götlicher gebot, vnd sol frey vben alle sunde, laster, vnd bosheyt, vnd sol wider Gott noch menschen, noch keyne geystliche noch weltliche Oberkeyt fürchten noch achten, noch ynn der Christenheyt dulden usw. Was aber vor ein frieden, eyenigkeyt vnd gut leben darus würde entstehen, kan ein yeder natürlicher synreych mensch leychtlich ermessen« (Sylvius: Die letzten zwey ... büchleyn, Giv^f).

Luther within a context strongly shaped by humanistic and specifically Erasmian concerns. This context inclined these authors to assimilate Luther's scripturally-based criticism of human laws to the Erasmian attack on the »superstitions« of external observance that lacked spiritual grounding. For a time – a crucial time for the fledgling Reformation movement – Luther was read and re-presented in these Erasmian terms. It took time for these authors to realize that more was at stake, that Luther's radical understanding of commandment and promise was corrosive not only of »man-made laws« but of reliance on law in any form in the process of salvation. But even as they moved towards a more »Lutheran« understanding of Christian freedom, their Erasmian stress on »divine law« continued to color their thinking and accounts, in no small part, for some of the distinctive emphases of what came to be Reformed Protestantism.

The peasants in their articles misunderstand Luther in another way that is readily explicable and highly significant. Peter Blickle has shown that the Reformation changed how the peasants legitimated their long-standing desire to change their relations with their lords. Before 1525 peasants had claimed that their revolts were only to remove innovations that violated traditional law. By 1525, however, appeal to traditional law could not legitimate changes necessary to relieve the tensions that had developed in the last century. Appeal to divine law could, and did. Moreover, appeal to divine law – which could cover any demand that could be deduced from Scripture – allowed the uprising to take on a supra-territorial character.³⁸ Specifically in the matter of freedom from serfdom, the Reformation allowed the peasants to transcend the traditional law of serfdom and insist that all should be free on principle. If God is lord, the peasants concluded, there can be no seigneurs. »No one but God our creator, father, and lord should have serfs«, concluded the villages of Schaffhausen, and in this were followed by many other peasant articles. The Reformation also allowed the peasants to attack serfdom on the basis of justice and divine law.³⁹ It proved quite easy given the peasants' situation and aspirations to translate into the temporal realm Luther's insistence on the Christian freedom to test all laws against Scripture.

38 Blickle: *Die Revolution von 1525*.

39 Peter BLICKLE: *Gemeindereformation: die Menschen des 16. Jahrhunderts auf dem Weg zum Heil*. M 1985, 69-71.

Finally, the Roman Catholic controversialists failed to accept or perhaps in some cases even to understand, on the one hand, Luther's distinction between the two realms, spiritual and temporal, and, on the other, Luther's rejection of the distinction between the two estates, spiritual and temporal. So when they read Luther's comments about spiritual freedom, they saw Luther rejecting the authority of both estates. They understood Luther's insistence on Christian freedom from the necessity of good works *in the pursuit of salvation* as freedom from good works *for any purpose in either realm*. Salvation by »mere naked faith«, as they expressed it, opened the floodgates to fleshly license. If one were free from works, one was free specifically from works of obedience. The controversialists felt confirmed in this judgment by the events of the Peasants' War and especially by the notion of Christian freedom expounded by the peasants in the war.

Luther's treatises and the ideas they contained were received differently by different people, interpreted differently by different audiences. We cannot reduce Luther's message to his conscious intentions. Without the people who read Luther's writings or heard a pastor explain his views from within their own context, without the people who shaped his message to their own needs, Luther might still be considered a great theologian. But it was the reaction of his readers and re-presenters that made him the German Reformer.