Luther and the Biblical Language of Poverty

Lee Brummel

The discussion about Martin Luther's relation to the poor traditionally has centred around his reaction to the Peasants' War of 1524-1525. There can be no justification for down-playing the importance of the war in German or ecclesiastical history, nor for denying that the slender treatises Luther wrote just before, during, and after the period of greatest hostility in the region were among the most important of his life. Luther's name is inexorably linked to one of the tragic events of the sixteenth century. In order to arrive at a more comprehensive evaluation of his understanding of the identity of the poor and how the Christian must respond to them, however, the war must be seen as an aspect of only one stage in Luther's career—neither the first nor the last, and the most important only because of the number of lives lost.

The decisive period of Luther's influence on Reformation policy and practice towards the poor was without doubt the half decade from 1520 to 1525. The concept of poverty Luther defended during this period, however, was not the only one to emerge during his career. There are four stages, clearly identifiable and mutually exclusive, in Luther's interpretation of the biblical language of poverty. This study will focus on Luther's hermeneutical posture when confronting the biblical language of the poor. This choice is in no way arbitrary; Luther's exegesis served as a sensitive barometer registering the pressures—religious, ecclesiastical, social—to which the reformer was submitted between 1513 and 1530.

The "biblical language of poverty" includes those words, relatively numerous in the Latin text,[1] which for Luther had the same denotation and

• Dr BRUMMEL is Professor of Church History at ISEDET (Institute for Advanced Theological Studies), Buenos Aires, Argentina. This article appeared earlier in *Los pobres: encuentro y compromiso* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1978), pp. 107-130, written by faculty members of the Protestant Institute for Advanced Theological Studies in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was also published in *Cuadernos de teología*, V, No. 1, a periodical of the same institution. Some modifications in the original text have been introduced in this translation, which is by the author.

[1] Although Luther referred to the Hebrew text in his *Dictata* and to the Greek in his commentary on Romans, he maintained the Latin biblical terminology in these Latin writings.

significance as "the poor" (for example, the needy, the afflicted, the oppressed, etc.), or which complemented these terms (hunger, misery, etc.). In each of the four periods of Luther's life there was a high degree of coherence in his interpretation and use of this language.

The concept of poverty developed in Luther's first biblical commentary was not sustained in his later writings, nor was there gradual change within the framework of basic continuity. The history of his concepts of poverty is much more complex and contradictory. Any attempt to unify his interpretations of the biblical language of poverty between 1513 and 1530 must necessarily fail. If Luther's exegesis is analysed chronologically rather than topically, however, a remarkable coherence emerges—within, that is, each of the periods in question.

This study will accent, without isolating, the biblical language of poverty as a key to understanding the pendular swings in his approach to socio-economic poverty. It is not difficult, in principle, to find the reasons for these changes since a careful reading of his exegetical works in the four periods of his life gives certain indications. On the one hand, Luther as exegete projected his own experience—as a human being *coram Deo* and as a reformer—on the biblical language of poverty. Salient themes of his theology also affected the meaning attributed to this language and influenced his choice of the groups designated as poor. On the other hand, Luther listened to the biblical testimony and did not only manipulate the language of poverty to conform to his central theological, ecclesiastical, or social concerns. Both historical situation and biblical word are important; without taking both into account it is impossible to understand the sharp discontinuities in his interpretation of the language of poverty.

It is unnecessary here to discuss the "objectivity" of Luther's exegesis or to touch on the many tangential areas occurring to the attentive reader. This study is limited to Luther's concepts of poverty and leaves aside other relevant issues such as commerce, work, usury and property, that is, subjects which have already received scholarly attention. The present essay must be seen, nevertheless, within a wider spectrum of Luther research and within the context of those contemporary theological studies which encounter the poor with renewed concern. For only repeated comparisons of the results of contemporary research with available sixteenth century sources make possible an approach to Luther's integral position. And only through such reconstructions may Luther be confronted once again as an architect of that Protestant tradition which the Church must in part reaffirm and in part reformulate.

I. THE FIRST DEFINITION OF THE POOR: "TRUE CHRISTIANS" 1513-1516

In Luther's first existing biblical commentary, terms referring to poverty appear more than one hundred times. The tripartite system (interlinear glosses, marginal glosses, scholia) of the commentaries of the period gave Luther the opportunity to paraphrase the text between the lines, to make critical observations or comment on the meaning in the margin, and

to write a more extended commentary in the scholion. In these numerous confrontations with the biblical language of poverty, Luther categorically rejected any socio-economic interpretation of its meaning. Poverty, from a Christian perspective, was regarded as a spiritual rather than a social reality. This religious interpretation of poverty and the poor constituted the full and exclusive significance of these terms in a Christian context. The Christian, according to Luther, has transcended concern about wealth and its acquisition, or poverty and its suffering, and seeks only true spiritual humility in forgetfulness of self. This identification of the poor with true Christians, understood as the spiritually humble, is the uniform argument of the *Dictata super Psalterium*, that is, the lectures given on the Psalms, 1513-1515.

The poor identified with the faithful

From the beginning of his lectures on the Psalms, Luther identified the biblical language of the poor with the contemporary ecclesiastical term "the faithful".[2] In the interlinear glosses he clarified the poor's identity by equating them with "the faithful of the people of God" or "true Christians", seeing no necessity to justify or defend this interpretation.[3] Furthermore, the poor and the exploited could not be oppressed by the powerful and rich as such, since authority and wealth are in a plane removed from the spirit; as a result, the powers of this world are unable to exercise influence on the poor in spirit.

When the Psalms speak of injustice, or of those who devoured the people as if they were bread, Luther made clear that such crimes were carried out through evil doctrines that detour Christians from the way of true faith.[4] The enemy of the poor is above all the heretic; the only correct reply to his pernicious doctrines is to bear up under their onslaught and maintain the hope of converting the soul even of him who corrupted the saving doctrine of the Church.[5]

Those who attack the poor are godless and arrogant. Although possibly rich and powerful, such persons do not become the poor's enemies by oppressing them economically or by expropriating their possessions. Luther rather used the terms "poor" and "rich" to designate opposing aspirations. The rich aspire to accumulate worldly possessions—their minds are carnal. The poor aspire to eternal realities—their minds are spiritual. As a consequence, the biblical language must be seen to refer to the "poor in spirit, not the poor of the world".[6] Thus when he interpreted Psalm 72 : 4: "May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor!" (RSV) Luther rejected a socio-economic interpretation.[7] Oppression is rather the attempt to drag the hearts of the poor from spiritual heights and enmesh them in the worldly, temporal plane.

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[2] *W.A.*, 3, 87, 28. In referring to the Weimar edition of Luther's works (*D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar: Bohlau, 1883ff.), I follow custom by indicating the volume number, the page, and the line, respectively.

[3] *W.A.*, 3, 86, 13. [4] *W.A.*, 3, 100, 9. [5] *W.A.*, 3, 87, 36.

[6] *W.A.*, 3, 458, 23. [7] *W.A.*, 3, 459, 27.

Humanity must be divided into two groups: those who seek material riches, interested only in worldly and temporal concerns; and those who look to God and eternal realities, interested only in the spirit and in God. The poor and needy hate the riches of the world and glorify the name of God even to forgetfulness of self; the ungodly want only the things of the world and glorify themselves even to forgetfulness of God.[8]

Poverty and the monastic vow

It would be tempting to think that Luther's definition of poverty would be narrower still. As a monk cognisant of his vow of poverty, Luther associated largely with other members of his vocation outside as well as within the lecture hall, and references to the monastic life abound in the *Dictata.* Did Luther believe that only monks constituted the real poor in spirit? In his 1521 treatise, "Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows", he affirmed that the monastic consensus supported this conclusion.[9] Nevertheless, there is not a single reference in the *Dictata* relating the biblical language of poverty to the monastic vow. Luther rather underscored that the spiritually poor were present in the entire church militant.[10] He affirmed that the poor, as stated in the Psalm, hunger and will be filled with bread given by God; he interpreted the passage as meaning that all the faithful will be filled, even satiated, by the Scriptures and the preaching of the Word.[11]

Luther's personal experience confirmed (and the references in the text are occasionally autobiographical) that he could not assure his own spiritual poverty through a monastic vow. Nor was the vow effective in the life and death struggle for salvation. This struggle was not a mere test, but an integral part of the Christian's spiritual poverty. The true Christian is poor owing to his humility; his spiritual struggle deepens and intensifies his lowliness, reducing him to nothing. Such a person could know what it means to be poor, to have nothing of his own on which to rely.

Absolute dualism

Later in his career Luther called these attacks of conscience *Anfechtungen.* They could arise through Satan's tramps, or through knowing oneself to be lost and totally isolated.[12] The most severe *Anfechtungen,* however, came from the awareness that God, the divine majesty in his absolute holiness, confronts man in his finitude, fallibility, and sin. Luther repeatedly stated that it is horrible to think that this majestic God knows the works and examines the hearts of all the sons of man.[13] Only true Christians, the poor, experience such a spiritual crisis because only they are conscious of God's holiness and man's sin; only the faithful are aware of their peril and thus fear the devil who strives to gain control of them.[14] There can be no doubt that Luther considered himself to be one of the poor subject to these *Anfechtungen.* Commenting on Psalm 34:6: "This poor man cried

[8] *W.A.*, 3, 491, 16.
[9] *W.A.*, 8, 641, 32.
[10] *W.A.*, 4, 254, 18.
[11] *W.A.*, 4, 432, 2.
[12] *W.A.*, 4, 200, 13.
[13] *W.A.*, 3, 190, 24.
[14] *W.A.*, 3, 87, 14.

out", Luther wrote in the interlinear gloss: "That is I, he who is speaking to you, have cried out in tribulation."[15]

The lack of references to material poverty in the *Dictata* is in agreement with the absolute dualism of the work.[16] Throughout the commentary there is sharp contrast between present and future, visible and invisible, manifest and hidden, temporal and eternal, human and divine. Ebeling indicates that this dualism is as radical as any defended by a theologian of the Middle Ages,[17] and a hermeneutical posture based on a comprehensive dualism of course reaches beyond the meaning attributed to poverty. Consistent with the *Dictata*, the meaning of biblical language is completed only through the spiritual expression of its content; a vulgar literalism obviates the truth that one may belong to the community of the poor, understood as the totality of true Christians, only by faith.[18]

II. THE NEW DEFINITION: "SOCIO-ECONOMIC POVERTY" 1516-1519

In the lectures on the Psalms a concept of poverty emerged which excluded any socio-economic connotation. Poverty was unrelated to hunger or misery, oppression or social powerlessness, political or class structures. But on the other hand, material poverty was not romanticized as if the needy were more pious because of suffering privation of the goods necessary for life with dignity. Neither did Luther argue that the misery of the poor in this life would be compensated in the next. He was concerned with true Christians, justified by grace through faith in Christ. His *Dictata* were premised on a dualism that relegated material poverty to a plane foreign to the interest of the Christian concerned for his salvation.

In his lectures on Romans, Luther abandoned the monolithic concept of poverty sustained in the *Dictata.* He took the decisive step of interpreting the biblical language of poverty in worldly or historical-literal terms. In these lectures, Luther began to speak of poverty as a socio-political and economic reality; as such, he argued, both Church and state must take the necessary measures to remedy the oppression and injustice responsible for the creation and perpetuation of poverty in Germany.

Several factors contributed to the hermeneutical break of 1516. Throughout his commentary on Romans, Luther was gradually overcoming the dualism of the earlier work. The familiar contrasts of the *Dictata*—body/spirit, time/eternity, world/heaven—appear less frequently as opposing poles to which contrasting biblical terms must be assigned. Second, Luther interpreted the biblical text more literally in *Romans* than in the *Dictata.* Especially in the scholia, he attempted to comment on the pericope instead of using it as a springboard for an argument frequently

[15] *W.A.*, 3, 185, 21.

[16] The only exception with regard to poverty is a discussion of Christ as poor and as a beggar in his comments on Psalms 40 and 41. Later in the *Dictata*, as before, Luther spiritualized the passages discussed in that context.

[17] Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, Band I. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1971, p. 17.

[18] *W.A.*, 3, 229, 1.

having little or nothing to do with the scriptural passage. The historical sense of biblical language became relatively more important and the allegorical or spiritual interpretation less frequent. Third, Luther evidenced growing awareness of, and increasing concern for, the world outside the monastic walls. He began to speak frequently of politics, injustice, poverty. And nearly always he did so in contemporary terms in order, he said, more effectively to teach biblical doctrine. So that his students could understand the scriptural witness, Luther insisted on adducing examples of injustice from the contemporary situation.[19]

It is unnecessary to draw a clear line of demarcation in Luther's writings between the spiritual and the literal interpretations of the biblical language of poverty. Nevertheless, the hermeneutical break is clearly articulated in his comments on chapter 12, in both glosses and scholia.

Interpretation in socio-economic terms

An example may be seen in the commentary on Romans 12 : 16: "Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly..." (RSV). It would have been simple, perhaps tempting, to interpret the verse in the spiritual terms of the *Dictata*. Instead, in the marginal gloss, Luther underscored that the apostle was referring to people's condition in society. The lowly, he specified, are "the poor, the common people, the illiterate".[20] Luther did not forthrightly abandon humility as the soul's quality *coram Deo* but, in chapter 12 of his Romans commentary, he clearly interpreted the biblical language of poverty with reference to its social, cultural, and economic implications.

Luther tirelessly repeated in the Romans lectures that members of other social classes hate the poor.[21] He maintained that a fundamental characteristic of human nature makes it inevitable that those who enjoy material comfort should despise the poor. Every person is naturally curved in on himself (*incurvatus in se*) and loves himself above all others; this tergiversated love is the basis of all iniquity. The natural person absolutizes himself, makes of himself an idol. He is individualistic and egocentric in his rejection of the common good; he chooses only what benefits him personally.[22] This "cunning of the flesh" enables the individual instinctively to know that he will receive much by allying himself with the rich and powerful, but nothing for his solidarity with the poor and weak. The few people who help the poor usually do so for personal motives inconsistent with alleviating poverty.[23] The rich do not understand the significance of Romans 13 : 10: "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (RSV). If the rich would place themselves in the position of the poor, they would know what to do with their money; they would demand justice, and thus know the true meaning of love.[24]

Luther sharply criticized both secular and ecclesiastical authorities throughout the commentary. The princes governed through power and terror while living luxuriously and accumulating fortunes.[25] At the end of a

[19] *W.A.*, 56, 480, 3.
[20] *W.A.*, 56, 122, 13.
[21] *W.A.*, 56, 482, 30.
[22] *W.A.*, 56, 361, 11.
[23] *W.A.*, 56, 459, 5.
[24] *W.A.*, 56, 483, 21.
[25] *W.A.*, 56, 458, 5.

lengthy analysis of the exploitation practised by the princes and feudal lords, Luther summarized his argument in the words of Ezekiel: "The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them" (RSV).[26]

Princes and the Church attacked

Luther dared refer to secular authority in harsher terms than those employed in the peasants' *Twelve Articles* nearly a decade later: "By what authority do the princes and secular rulers keep all the [wild] animals and birds for themselves so that no one else may hunt them? By what legal right? If any one of the common people would do this he would rightly be called a thief, robber, and cheat because he would be stealing from the community that which was not his. But because they are rulers who do it, they are not able to be thieves!"[27]

In spite of the hermeneutical break in the Romans lectures, Luther insisted that personal poverty is not the decisive consideration for the Christian. Other evils may be worse than poverty. There are occasions when people are willing to sacrifice everything to obtain a greater good, as when the followers of the apostles endured poverty, suffering, and even death for spiritual gain.[28] If one leaves his neighbour in poverty to attain heaven for himself, however, the decision is egocentric. It is sin. This position added a social dimension to the indulgence controversy that was to follow.

In his *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses,* Luther attacked the Church for requiring money of the many poor people who had neither bread nor adequate clothing. The indulgence sellers were deceivers, the indulgences, as presented to the public, spiritual frauds. Luther argued repeatedly that those who had no money should contribute nothing to a project as trivial as the construction of a church in Rome, and those having money should not buy indulgences, but give to the poor.[29]

In a paragraph characterized as "the truth correctly preached",[30] Luther maintained that Christian priorities for the use of money are clearly established in Scripture. The first and most important is to help the poor, the needy, those who suffer. While there are poor, churches should not be built or decorated nor sacred vessels bought. Secondly, hospitals should be built. Only when there remain no more needy persons should the construction of churches be resumed.[31]

Above all, give to the poor

In another context, Luther stated that a model sermon should include the following priorities: Above all, believe and trust in Christ and repent [*poenitentiam agite*], carry the cross, follow Christ, etc. Above all, love one

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[26] *W.A.*, 56, 458, 9. The reference is to Ezekiel 34 : 4.
[27] *W.A.*, 56, 189, 15.
[28] *W.A.*, 56, 477, 22.
[29] *W.A.*, 1, 626, 27.
[30] *W.A.*, 1, 598, 37.
[31] *W.A.*, 1, 598, 21.

another and help the poor and needy. This was the gospel absent from the sermons of the indulgence sellers.[32]

Among the many comments on poverty and the poor in the *Explanations*, none is more important than Luther's elaboration of thesis 43: "Christians must be taught that giving to the poor or lending to the needy is a better work than buying indulgences." Everyone, averred Luther, including the Church hierarchy, theoretically accepted the clear Christian obligation to respond to the needs of the poor. Only the common people never had occasion to hear this evident and basic truth.[33] If the people had the chance to hear, they would not delay in understanding.

It is relatively easy to criticize Luther's recommendations for alleviating poverty in Germany. Poverty was much more deeply rooted and would not disappear as rapidly as he supposed. Individual charity could not eradicate poverty, even if the Pope had sold St Peter's Basilica to give to the poor as Luther counselled. What is striking is not Luther's incomplete analysis of poverty, but that he achieved so much in so short a time. It is tragic that his concept of poverty, evolved from 1516 through 1518, did not continue to mature. In the final months of 1518 or early in 1519, Luther abandoned a socio-economic interpretation of the biblical language of poverty. In its place he substituted a religious interpretation: the poor became Christians under the cross. The poor of the Bible were understood as Christians in the dimension of their suffering. Poverty as a socio-economic reality is totally absent from the most ambitious exegetical work of the period 1511-1525, his *Operationes in Psalmos.*

III. THE HERMENEUTICAL RETREAT: "CHRISTIANS UNDER THE CROSS" 1519-1530

During the period of Luther's decisive formative influence on Reformation policy and practice, 1520-1525, he interpreted the biblical language of poverty as having no bearing on the poor in German society. Biblical references to the poor designated, according to Luther, Christians who suffer, and every social connotation was explicitly rejected—with the exception of the ungodly's persecution of Christians. The question to be asked is obvious: What was the cause of this second change in Luther's hermeneutics? Why did he abandon a position maintained for several years that, in addition to its biblical basis, responded to an evident social reality: the poverty of "the many", repeatedly emphasized in his earlier writings?

There are several secondary reasons which should not be left aside, even though taken together they do not adequately explain the hermeneutical retreat of 1519. The first is that Luther's defence of the poor, elaborated in some of his most widely circulated writings, found no echo in the growing conflict with Rome. There is no mention in the 41 articles of the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* of Luther's demand that the Church impoverish itself, if necessary, to minister to the poor, although the *Explanations* is one

[32] *W.A.*, 1, 587, 38. The phrase "above all" translates Luther's *ante omnia*, which introduces both series.
[33] *W.A.*, 1, 600, 14.

of the documents most cited against him. It is obvious that the defence of the poor did not involve an offence by which Luther "perverts the faith, seduces the simple, and relaxes the bonds of obedience, continence, and humility".[34] These words from the letter Leo X sent to Frederick the Wise indicate Luther's challenge to Church doctrine and authority. The Church's traditional position was not jeopardized, however, by a pious insistence to eradicate poverty in the "German nation". With the exception of popular support awakened by his theses and the *Explanations*, Luther's references to the poverty of "the many" lacked weight in his confrontation with Rome.

The poor lose ground under "reorientation"

A celebrated "reorientation" in Luther's concept of justification occurred around the beginning of 1519. Before then, Luther considered Christian righteousness the result of God's imputation and promise; righteousness is partial during the Christian's life, since the Christian is fully righteous only in hope. Later, however, Luther modified the formula to argue that the justified person, through faith in Christ, has Christ's own righteousness, free of sin. Under the law and apart from Christ, an individual is totally sinful; in Christ he is totally righteous *coram Deo.* The righteousness of Christ, imputed through faith, is an "alien" righteousness coming from outside and is prior to, and the basis of, the individual's "proper" righteousness. In the signification of the person already just *coram Deo,* proper righteousness complements alien righteousness. Proper righteousness consists of a life of good works, the elimination of the desires of the flesh, humility before God. The just person hates his self and loves his neighbour; he does not seek his own good, but that of the other. He works love.[35]

This outline of Luther's modified understanding of justification would seem to increase the place of the poor in his theology. That was not the result. One reason is contextual: since Luther, during the period 1519-1525, was engaged in continual polemics, he strongly rejected justification by works as antithetical to justification by faith. Few subjects of the period received such detailed attention. Luther saw his concept of alien righteousness, not proper righteousness, threatened by the Church's theory and practice. On the other hand, "the poor" were no longer interpreted as recipients of the Christian's love; this ethical relationship is stripped from the term. The biblical word replacing "the poor" as the beneficiary of Christian concern is "the neighbour", whose needs, however, are almost never specified; on the few occasions when he elaborated them, Luther underscored the neighbour's almost exclusively spiritual needs. "The poor", that is, the poor mentioned in the Bible, was interpreted exegetically as the Christian under

[34] Translation taken from Roland Bainton: *Here I Stand.* New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950, p. 148.

[35] The reader may consult, among the many expositions of this topic, Edward Cranz: *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on Justice, Law, and Society. Harvard Theological Studies XIX.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964.

the cross. The reasons mentioned for Luther's hermeneutical retreat, however, are almost incidental apart from this emphasis on cross and suffering which now reached new conceptual clarity.

Poverty identified with the cross

The decisive factor behind Luther's hermeneutical retreat was the emergence of his theology of the cross. The general lines of this theological construct may be outlined in the following terms:[36] (1) God does not want to be known by that which is invisible, but only by what He has disclosed. (2) The knowledge of God, veiled in revelation, is a matter of faith. What is known is God's humanity and weakness revealed indirectly through the cross. (3) As revealed, God is, at the same time, hidden. The revealed God has hidden himself under suffering and the cross. (4) This means that the revelation of God is apprehended only in suffering and the cross, understood as Christ's passion and at the same time as the Christian's suffering and cross. The suffering of Christ and of the Christian belong together. (5) This way of knowing God shows the necessity of suffering and excludes all work-righteousness. Suffering is most precious while work-righteousness is useless and deceptive, because God accepts only those who are lowly and despised.

Luther research has never clearly pointed out that Luther developed his theology of the cross as an instrument for reforming the Church. In terms of the task for which it was created, the theology of the cross was highly effective and of enormous psychological power. The phrase first appeared, as is well known, in 1518, and its basic lines of development were completed within a few months. The task that would absorb Luther during the next few years had been joined and the theology of the cross was an instrument with which he would confront Church, theologians, and the universities that challenged his orthodoxy. To buttress this theology biblically, Luther annexed the language of poverty to his basic concept of the suffering, humble, despised Christian—the Christian under the cross. The biblical language of poverty was thus emptied of socio-economic content and used in a spiritual and ecclesiastical struggle.

In his most important commentary of the period 1519-1525, the *Operationes in Psalmos*, Luther consistently identified the biblical language of poverty with the suffering of the cross. This suffering related exclusively to the soul; on the few occasions Luther mentioned bodily pain or the anguish of economic poverty it was to emphasize that such distress is ephemeral, hardly serious, and without danger for the person concerned with eternal salvation. On the contrary, one may be called poor when he experiences in this life the suffering of death, despair, and descent into hell.[37] The Christian's agony is provoked by his poverty before God; his hands are empty

[36] This outline is an adaptation of "the meaning of Luther's programme of the theology of the cross" which appears in more extended form in Walther v. Loewenich: *Luthers Theologia Crucis*, 4., durchgesehene Auflage. München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954, pp. 12-18.

[37] *W.A.*, 5, 632, 18. Cf. Horst Beintker: *Die Überwindung der Anfechtung bei Luther: eine Studie seiner Theologie nach den Operationes in Psalmos 1519-21*. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1954.

and he has nothing to contribute to his own salvation. This concept of the poor in spirit includes all the biblical language of poverty, and underscores that only the poor have hope of salvation. The poor person recognizes that he possesses nothing, and receives everything by the grace of God—everything, that is, related to spiritual life.

The hermeneutical retreat of 1519 did not signify simply abandoning the position developed from 1516 through 1518 in order to take up again the interpretation articulated in the *Dictata*. The retreat is much more complex, since it involved drawing back from a socio-economic understanding to return to a spiritual interpretation, but within the new theological configuration of the theology of the cross. The biblical language of poverty became critically important in the development of the sharp affirmation: "*CRUX sola est nostra Theologia.*"[38]

Physical needs of the poor not recognized

There are hundreds of instances during this period of Luther's interpretation of the language of poverty; it is enough to give a few representative examples. In his discussion of Psalm 22:26: "The poor shall eat and be satisfied", Luther affirmed that this language has nothing to do with the needs or suffering of the body. The verse must be interpreted in terms of eternity, with no reference to physical hunger. The poor are persons desirous of grace, oppressed by sin, labouring under the temptations of conscience; but they will receive the Word of God, will eat of this spiritual delicacy, and will be satisfied. There is no room for ambiguity: "What if the belly dies? Your soul [*cor*] will live through this food, the immortal Word of God."[39]

The poor have heard the word of the cross which, through the crucifixion of the old man, has transformed them into the people of God. This change is brought about, now as always, through the preaching of the cross: "The word of the cross crucifies the old man and forces him to endure many sufferings."[40] In this condition, in the sufferings occasioned by the word of the cross, God is to be found. In the desperation which verges on hatred and blasphemy, expressed in sighs too deep for words, God holds out his mercy. "I will say this spontaneously and freely: there are none nearer to God in this life than these haters and blasphemers of God, nor sons more pleasing and beloved by him."[41]

Poverty is *Anfechtung*. The biblical language of poverty becomes the representation of the suffering of the Christian under the cross. The term "the poor" includes the different *personae* of the Christian in the range of his suffering and lowliness. "And 'the poor' [in this verse] signifies those who are afflicted, that is, those who are evangelical and faithful, who elsewhere [in the Bible] are called 'the miserable,' elsewhere 'the humble,' elsewhere 'the meek'."[42] Poverty determines one's relationship with God: "God's eyes are ever upon the afflicted and the poor. The more abject the man, the nearer and more present God is to him. But the proud he knows

[38] *W.A.*, 5, 176, 32. Emphasis in the original.
[39] *W.A.*, 5, 665, 10.
[40] *W.A.*, 5, 249, 37.
[41] *W.A.*, 5, 170, 25.
[42] *W.A.*, 5, 664, 24.

from afar."[43] Before God and the world, the humble are reduced to nothing, declared sinners, and condemned. In the midst of this tribulation they take up their cross, confident that their consolation will be found in the God who has not forgotten the cry of the poor.

The nuance given the biblical language of poverty frequently resulted from the struggle with Rome. Luther referred to the greed and corruption of the Church and, less frequently, to the accusations against himself. But he continually returned to the central point: two conflicting ways of understanding the Christian faith. Luther distinguished between the godly and the ungodly, that is, between the respective proponents of true and false religion. The ungodly, in this context, were not atheists, but militant advocates of Roman unbelief; their impiety was based, not on ceremonies and activities bereft of meaning, but on the arrogance, self-confidence, and pride that result from idle speculations about Christian truth. Godliness, on the other hand, comes from faith and confidence in God. The power base of the ungodly was their false faith; the result—their suspicion of those who believed in the Gospel, those who in the Bible are called poor and needy.[44] The Pope affirmed that these innocent Christians, whose only crime was professing the truth of the Gospel, were heretics, schismatics, rebels, disobedient and seditious. The Pope as a consequence manifested his true identity as anti-Christ.[45]

Theology of the cross for reforming the Church

Luther's concern was to reform the Church, and this task required a coherent theology to oppose to medieval Roman tradition. The reaction of the young theologians in the Heidelberg Disputation convinced Luther that he had discovered in the theology of the cross an effective and biblical position that would place in sharp relief the non-evangelical character of medieval theology. While his predecessors (the so-called forerunners of the Reformation) had attacked the life of the Church and had failed, Luther succeeded, according to his own judgment, because he went to the core of the Church's self-understanding: doctrine.

The vital centre of Luther's theological revolution was undeniably justification by grace through faith, summarized in the slogan *sola fide.* Yet during the period 1519-1525, this reformation theme existed within the framework of the theology of the cross.

The theology of the cross, with its emphasis on passive suffering, constituted the theological programme and praxis for the reformation of the Church. Cross and ecclesiology were intimately related. In spite of the opposition that always arises to the Word of God, Luther characteristically asserted, the true Church will endure although afflicted and small.[46] The only way to resist the ungodly is through tearful prayers; neither arguments nor eloquence, wars or powers, decrees or resistance, prevails against the enemies of the true Church.[47] God in his mercy hears only the humble cry of the needy. Satan and the Church's enemies can not be overcome by

[43] *W.A.*, 5, 660, 7. [44] *W.A.*, 5, 375, 1. [45] *W.A.*, 5, 340, 20.
[46] *W.A.*, 5, 314, 4. [47] *W.A.*, 5, 468, 13.

works, but only by the suffering and entreaties of the poor.[48] Luther boldly asserted that the primitive Church triumphed precisely through the prayers and blood of the martyrs, another indication of the distance between the Roman Church, more cruel than Babylon herself, and the Church of the apostles.[49] The community of the new people of God depends on God exclusively, is hidden in the world, and lives by the mystery of faith; in the Bible "it is described as poor and afflicted".[50]

By the beginning of 1519, Luther had clearly distinguished two types of individuals, that is, public and private persons. Public persons, placed by God in their positions of civic responsibility, have been charged with punishing wrong-doers; they must use the sword and are exempt from the civic passivity demanded of private individuals.[51] The poor, on the other hand, do not recur to violence or revenge; they leave vengeance to God. The poor are those who hope in self-denial and resignation, in meekness and fear before God. If the authorities choose not to respond to their needs, the poor humbly accept the decision as their just punishment from God.

No support for insurrection for any cause

The tragedy of the Reformation is that a theology forged to reform the Church was used in a context foreign to it: the Peasants' War. In developing his theology of the cross, Luther emptied the biblical language of poverty of all socio-economic meaning and accentuated suffering as the key characteristic of the socially passive Christian. This theology he applied to the peasant situation, the same theology employed during the first crucial years of the reformation of the Church.

It is not remarkable that the peasants appealed to Luther as mediator in their dispute with the nobility. The documents in which Luther had expressed his solidarity with the socio-economically poor, such as the Ninety-five Theses, had been massively distributed. Luther seemed to be a natural ally who had established the Bible as an authority, direct and without intermediaries. The peasants could also interpret some treatises in their support, such as "The Freedom of a Christian" (1520), without being aware of the profound changes in Luther's position after 1519.

The peasants were among the first to lend enthusiastic support to the Reformation. As Luther indicated in a letter to Melanchthon in May 1521, the Reformation was most deeply rooted in the hearts of the common people; in Germany, according to Luther, there were a very great many evangelical peasants.[52] These peasants had also become aware of their social class. They had accepted the name *Karsthans*, a derogatory term insinuating the coarseness and ignorance of the peasantry, as a designation for the evangelical peasant. This term they applied to themselves in a book detailing their complaints about the Pope.[53] In his letter to Melanchthon,

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[48] *W.A.*, 5, 327, 7. [49] *W.A.*, 5, 308, 3. [50] *W.A.*, 5, 305, 25.

[51] *W.A.*, 2, 151, 1.

[52] *L.W.*, 48, 233. The abbreviation indicates respectively the volume and page number in Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds): *Luther's Works*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955ff.

[53] The *Bundschuh* is a similar, better known, case.

Luther considered them the backbone of the social defence of the Reformation.

By 1522 Luther was concerned that the peasants would rebel against the Church. Early that year, in his "A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion", he expressed his fear that the wrath of the common people would be directed against priests, monks, bishops. He insisted, nevertheless, that insurrection and rebellion are always instruments of the devil, Satan's last effort to stop the preaching of the Gospel. He hazarded that with only two more years of vigorous evangelical activity—teaching, speaking, writing, preaching—the Pope and everything belonging to him would "vanish like smoke".[54] His rejection of armed rebellion was categorical: "I am and always will be on the side of those against whom insurrection is directed, no matter how unjust their cause; I am opposed to those who rise in rebellion, no matter how just their cause..."[55] If the cause is just, the authorities have been instituted to promote it, and if they refuse to act Christians must accept that God thereby punishes them through the Pope. They must humbly pray against the Pope's rule, following the example of Psalm 10: "Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up thy hand; forget not the poor."[56] Passively awaiting God's victory over the ungodly, Christians may identify themselves with the poor in spirit about whom, according to Luther, this Psalm speaks.

Two governments, two kingdoms

The theology of the cross also influenced the distinction between two governments (*Regimente*) and two kingdoms (*Reiche*); God rules through the two governments and the Christian lives in the two kingdoms while in the world, a distinction first systematically expressed in the treatise "Temporal Authority".[57] The two kingdoms separate humanity into two classes: those who belong to the Kingdom of God and those of the worldly kingdom.[58] Citizens of the Kingdom of God are characterized by their justice, those of the worldly kingdom by their injustice. The just do all the civil law requires and still more, while the unjust voluntarily do nothing included in the law.

The temporal sword was instituted to punish those who violate the law and to protect those who observe it. Christians, who belong to the Kingdom of God, never recur to the secular government, however, to protect themselves from the ungodly. They are affected by the secular government only when, without being asked to do so, it protects them from the attacks of evil-doers. The government's role is licit, instituted by God, but only to restrain those who violate the law; its task is to avoid anarchy and chaos and to maintain the peace.

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[54] *L.W.*, 45, 68. [55] *L.W.*, 45, 63. [56] *L.W.*, 45, 66.

[57] One of the principal motives for writing this treatise was to indicate the limits of civil authority and especially to specify that it was illicit to prohibit the publication of books—Luther's books. In this instance, Luther evidently attempted to influence the practice of the Catholic princes.

[58] *L.W.*, 45, 88.

Both governments, the spiritual and the worldly, are necessary and must endure, the one to produce true justice, the other to restrict worldly injustice. Justice before God is not the work of secular government. Even if the laws of the state were identical with God's commandments, as they should not be, they could do no more than help preserve the peace and punish criminals. Spiritual government, on the other hand, can be exercised only over the tiny minority of true Christians. If spiritual government were applied universally, contrary to Scripture, the result would be catastrophic. Since spiritual government prohibits revenge, its exercise in the secular sphere would mean the removal of barriers to crime, and society would be destroyed by those who neither receive nor understand the Gospel. The obvious question, then, received no direct reply. When the government itself oppresses the poor (as was the case, Luther emphasized, in the sixteenth century), how must the Christian respond to help his neighbour? Luther himself gave no answer and on the basis of his concept of the two kingdoms there can be no answer other than passivity and patience. To those suffering unjust privation of life or property, Luther's counsel was simple and direct: "You have the kingdom of heaven; therefore, you should leave the kingdom of earth to anyone who wants to take it."[59]

Theology of the cross reinforced secular power

Luther intervened in the incipient Peasants' War as a theologian reputed to know how to interpret Scripture. His name was the first on the list, drawn up by the peasants' representative, of people capable of judging the validity of the Twelve Articles. The numerous biblical texts used to support the Twelve Articles indicate the close relation seen between the remedy of grievances presented to the feudal lords and the biblical message.

To Luther, however, in this stage of his life, material oppression and poverty were alien to the Gospel. The Bible had nothing to do with secular life, and the biblical language of poverty referred to spiritual suffering, not to the misery of being poor in the world. As a result, Luther questioned not only the godliness but also the honesty of the author of the document, who had related "many chapters of the Bible" with the social changes recommended in the Twelve Articles. The biblical texts, Luther insisted, did not support the peasant programme; they rather affirm that people "should live and act like Christians".[60] Luther alluded repeatedly to his theology of the cross, with its accent on suffering, to refute the peasant claim that the Gospel addresses the Christian's material welfare. He summarized his position in a pivotal text:

> Not one of the articles teaches anything of the Gospel. Rather, everything is aimed at obtaining freedom for your person and for your property. To sum it up, everything is concerned with worldly and temporal matters. You want power and wealth so that you will not suffer injustice. The Gospel, however, does not become involved in the affairs of this world, but speaks of our life in the world in terms of suffering, injustice, the cross, patience, and contempt for this life and temporal wealth. How, then, does the Gospel agree with you?[61]

[59] *L.W.*, 45, 102. [60] *L.W.*, 46, 34-35. [61] *L.W.*, 46, 35-36.

Luther demanded, repeatedly, vehemently, and with all the resources of his impressive vocabulary, that the peasants abandon the names "Christian" and "Christian association". If they wanted to be Christians they would have to stop their bellicose activity and passively suffer injustice. "There exists no other way."[62] The law to which the peasants appealed is natural law, shared by Turks, Jews, and pagans. Christian law can be summarized in a few words: "We have all we need in our Lord, who will not leave us, as he has promised [Heb. 13 : 5]. Suffering! suffering! Cross! cross! This and nothing else is the Christian law!"[63]

Does the biblical language of poverty have to do with the socio-economically poor? The peasants' Twelve Articles make precisely this relationship and promise to withdraw any claim not in agreement with Scripture. Luther insisted that the Bible and peasant poverty were absolutely alien; the peasants had to be denied the name "Christian" because they had distorted biblical teaching by relating it to their material wellbeing. Christianity, according to Luther, had nothing to do with the dispute between the two social classes. The Bible speaks of the poor in spirit, that is, of Christians under the cross. This is the vital theological premise behind Luther's position. The rest is denouement.

The Peasant War, Luther tirelessly affirmed, was a strictly worldly affair between those ordained to maintain order and those who rebelled against constituted authority. "Now, dear sirs, there is nothing Christian on either side and nothing Christian is at issue between you."[64] It was an affair of only one of the two governments, important for the spiritual kingdom only because massive insurrection threatened to destroy the society in which the Church must exist. Given this threat, the peasants might have to be destroyed, in Luther's well-known words, as if they were mad dogs.

Thus the theology of the cross, a theological instrument forged to combat an ecclesiastical power, was employed to reinforce a secular power. Liberation in the spiritual sphere implied oppression in the temporal. Those among the peasants who chose liberation for their social class were denounced as self-centred and pagans; the feudal lords who chose servitude for the peasants received confirmation that Christianity did not oppose them. Luther was convinced that his intervention was evangelical because the Scriptures speak no word on behalf of the poor.

IV. THE FINAL POSITION: "THE POOR WHO SUFFER" 1530-1546

The decisive period for social and institutional change in the secular sphere of the Lutheran reformation was undoubtedly 1520-1525; it is difficult to overestimate Luther's influence on the changes that emerged during this half decade—or on those which did not—in the German territories that became Protestant. After that half decade, significant social change was no longer feasible, in part because the *kairos* had passed, in part

[62] *L.W.*, 46, 36. [63] *L.W.*, 46, 29. [64] *L.W.*, 46, 40.

because the princes and lords were consolidating their position, and in part owing to the imminent possibility of war and the increasing pressure that the emperor exerted on the Protestant territories.

This decisive period for effecting change in the social structure coincided with Luther's greatest intransigence with respect to the poor, culminating with the slaughter of thousands of peasants and the destruction of this class as an effective social power. The tragedy of the Reformation is that the theology Luther effectively formulated for the reformation of the Church interrupted the promising interpretation of poverty that appeared in 1516 and that developed to the end of 1518. Later, after spiritualizing and neutralizing the biblical language of poverty, reinterpreted as referring to Christians under the cross, Luther had no theological basis to respond to peasant poverty or their call for social change. To deny that the peasants' Twelve Articles were Christian signified denying them his support, a decision many German pastors, apparently including Luther's beloved friend Amsdorf, and Rühel, a relative, could not defend.

The last word concerning Luther's hermeneutics and the biblical language of the poor was not pronounced, however, in the events leading up to 1525. Around 1530 Luther developed a different posture for interpreting biblical references to the poor. It is important that after 1530 only the proclamation of the Gospel had priority over responding to the poor, and he considered concern for the poor a necessary and Christian pursuit, it must be underscored, in both kingdoms.

The last change in the "Mature Luther"

After 1530 Luther complained that no one listened when he spoke of the needy. The purpose of this essay is not to promote a similar conspiracy of the deaf; there exists, nevertheless, the possibility of summarizing only one of Luther's works, his commentary on Psalm 82, written and printed in 1530. This brief résumé will give the interested reader some of the elements necessary to continue research in the works of the "mature Luther".

It is not difficult to encounter the reasons for this last dramatic change in the interpretation of the biblical language of the poor. Among the most important are the virtual disappearance of the theology of the cross, the peasant defeat,[65] and the very different circumstances confronting the Reformation's advance.

Luther wrote his commentary on this Psalm immediately before leaving for the Coburg where he would wait while the Protestant princes continued their trip to Augsburg for their encounter with Charles V. There can be no doubt that in his interpretation of the Psalm Luther believed, as the editors of the *W.A.* affirm, that he was writing on the burning questions of the day.

A few days before beginning the commentary, Luther had visited churches in Saxony and was surprised and scandalized; he chose a Psalm

[65] Luther made several references to the Peasants' War in his exposition of the Psalm. On one occasion he made Müntzer and Carlstadt responsible for "this whole great calamity". *L.W.*, 13, 64.

in which both princes (gods) and poor figure prominently. The choice cannot have been arbitrary. Preaching the Gospel in terms of the theology of the cross could not alleviate the misery of the poor and oppressed—contrary to what Luther, retrospectively, had hoped. Whatever may have been his motive, Luther abandoned the theology of the cross, both the term and particular emphasis, and began to interpret the biblical language of poverty as a socio-economic reality. The extensive references to the poor in his commentary on Psalm 82, instead of alluding to Christians under the cross, are secularized to such a degree that there remains no allusion in the entire commentary to the faith of the poor. It is enough to be poor and without help for Church and government to be obligated to respond effectively.

The response to the poor could not be alms. Around 1518 Luther rejected almsgiving, extremely popular during the Middle Ages and widely practised in Germany. He remained steadfast in rejecting this system. Among the measures practised for helping the poor were common funds, a concept taken from the primitive Church and established in many reformation cities during the decade of the 20s. The common funds were subsidized in part with property formerly belonging to the Catholic Church.[66] In his 1530 *Fürstenspiegel*, without resorting to an appeal to give alms, Luther ordered a reorganization of priorities concerning the poor.

Welfare of the poor—concern of princes and priests

Luther organized his work around the three virtues every governmental authority should cultivate: the first, to protect and promote the preaching of the Gospel; the third, to pacify, that is, to impede the unjust use of violence. Luther defined the second virtue as the wellbeing and protection of the poor. He emphasized that the prince must help the poor, widows and orphans and promote their cause because "this virtue includes all the works of righteousness".[67] The problem in Germany was that there were no laws to protect the poor from being exploited, and even less were there laws assuring them the necessities of life.[68] Even if the government did not actively exploit the poor, it did not prevent the nobles and even certain peasants from taking advantage of the defenceless; secular government does "not provide the poor and wretched with law and protection. In this way they [the princes] are not only heedless and negligent; but they vex their subjects with force and wrong, or wink at it when others do so. And yet no one must say that this is wrong!"[69]

The prince of a territory should establish institutions to help the poor, in the first rank of which Luther mentioned hospitals. But no institution or effort could be effective without laws to protect and help the poor, and

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[66] This was one of the few initiatives of the Protestant Church to arouse positive interest among the Catholics. Delegates from several Catholic cities travelled to Leisnig, and other places where common funds were being established, to study the plan. The Catholics, however, did not have the same amount of resources suddenly available for endowing the funds.

[67] *L.W.*, 13, 53.

[68] *L.W.*, 13, 60.

[69] *L.W.*, 13, 69. This complaint, articulated with the irony Luther used to good effect, appears repeatedly in the commentary.

above all laws justly administered. In the long run, effective laws justly administered are the only enduring help for the truly poor and defenceless.[70] "After the Gospel and the ministry" a territory can possess nothing of greater value than a prince who makes his own the cause of the poor; such a prince may justly be called a "god".[71]

Luther did not discard the Church's responsibility to the poor; with the exception of proclaiming the Word, always placed first, the most important church activity was ministering to those without resources. "Next to the proclamation of the Gospel, it is the task of a good pastor to be mindful of the poor".[72]

The responsibility for an effective and preventive solution, however, had to fall on the princes and lords, a conclusion evident from his reading of Psalm 82. In the 1530 situation, however, no one listened when Luther thundered in favour of the poor. "But how could it be worse, when neither silence nor speech helps? If we are silent, they become worse day by day; if we speak, they become still worse. Then the poor and wretched must suffer and be unsuccoured. This is all the fault of the princes and lords..."[73]

In this final period of Luther's life, when he turned once more to a socio-economic interpretation of the biblical language of poverty, he complained that no one wanted to hear about the exploitation of the poor. His accusations and threats, his instructions and pleas, were ignored by contemporaries. Despite having lost the decisive moment for social change, 1520-1525, Luther reassumed an evangelical responsibility for "the many"; his concern for the poor and their suffering, his willingness to confront prince, lord, or pastor in defence of the helpless, is not the least of the legacies of the reformer from Wittenberg.

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[70] *L.W.*, 13, 53. [71] *L.W.*, 13, 71. [72] *L.W.*, 26, 105.
[73] *L.W.*, 13,61.