



Forgiveness Liberates and Restores: The Freedom of the Christian according to Martin Luther

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In 1520 and 1521 Martin Luther composed five treatises that presented his program of reform to the reading public, from his *Open Letter to the German Nobility* to *On Monastic Vows*; none of them was entitled *On Justification* or *On the Forgiveness of Sins*, often thought to be the central topics that shaped the Reformer's thought. Nonetheless, Luther did include the theme in his reform program. Justification, understood as the forgiveness of sins through Christ's death and resurrection, was the subject of the treatise entitled *The Freedom of a Christian* in German and *On Christian Freedom* in Latin.

"Justification" and "the forgiveness of sins" are often seen today as concepts difficult to relate to people in a society that systematically denies human guilt and characterizes the fundamental human dilemma in ways other than "sinful." Many instead interpret what is wrong with them as being trapped or captive to forces beyond their control that make them victims. Or they view their lives as lacking meaning and worth, in need of a new start that lies beyond their ability to create. In addition, "forgiveness" is sometimes viewed as a narrowing, a restriction, of the rich biblical understanding of salvation with its many expressions for God's repair or restoration of truly human living.

We learn from Martin Luther how forgiveness liberates us from the power of sin and death, and liberates us for living according to God's design in relation to other people and all God's creation. Forgiveness frees us to be truly human.

However, guilt is not “gone.” Psychiatrist Karl Menninger’s observation a generation ago still echoes across the North American psychic landscape: he insisted that responsible human action and an integral human personality need the sense of accountability that requires guilt when individuals do wrong as well as pride when they accomplish the good.¹ Furthermore, Luther’s concept of forgiveness is not as narrowly focused as his followers have often represented it. The Reformer did indeed place the forgiveness of sins at the heart of the restoration of humanity to sinners. He defined the Holy Spirit’s action in forgiving sins as constitutive of the life not only of individual believers but also of the church itself.² But he also understood God’s forgiving action as a liberating action, a restoration of the worth and dignity of the sinner, an act of new creation that once again transforms the “nothingness” of sinful misuse of humanity into genuine human living and renders those who had rejected their Creator and Lord truly and completely human in the sight of their Maker (Eph 2:1–10).

FORGIVENESS OF SINS AS LIBERATION OF THE SINNER

In many writings, including *The Freedom of a Christian* and *The Large Catechism*, Luther depicted forgiveness of sins as Christ’s emancipation of God’s rebellious human creatures from their enslavement to both internal and external forms of evil. Forgiveness frees those separated from God—whether by their own rebellious defiance or by forces over which they seem to have no control—from their oppressors. In 1520 Luther summarized the two dimensions of living as a child of God in two propositions. In relationship to God—that is, in the fundamental orientation of human life—God’s children are “perfectly free lords of all, subject to nothing.” In relationship to other human beings they are “perfectly dutiful servants of all, subject to all.”³ Luther posed this contrast, he explained, to reflect Paul’s language in 1 Cor 9:19 and Rom 13:8. This kind of life reflects Christ’s binding himself under the law to serve humankind (Gal 4:4; Phil 2:6–7).⁴ The bondage that attaches God’s human creatures to each other in mutual love and service is in fact the freedom to be the kind of human being that God designed them to be in the first place (Gal 5:13–14), as Luther made clear in *The Freedom of a Christian*.

¹Karl A. Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1973).

²Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, Creed, third article, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (11. ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992 [henceforth BSLK]), 511–512; *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 355–356.

³Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*. The German version of Luther’s treatise is found in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993 [henceforth WA]), 7:12–38, this passage on p. 20–21; the Latin version, 7:39–73, this passage on p. 49; see *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958–1986 [henceforth LW]) 31:344. The translation in LW follows the Latin text. On Luther’s concept of two kinds of righteousness, see Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999) 449–466.

⁴Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, WA 7:21,5–10 and 49,26–50,4; LW 31:344. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent references to Luther are from this treatise.

Therefore, his two propositions might better be described as God's liberation of those captivated by sin *from* their oppressors *for* the practice of the freedom to love the neighbor and care for God's world in daily life.

The origin of human freedom lies in Christ, the resurrection and the life (John 11:25), who makes God's people truly free (John 8:36). He gives and sustains this life through the word of God (Matt 4:4), Luther presumed.⁵ Christ's liberating action also stood at the heart of the Reformer's explanation of the second article of the Creed when he composed *The Large Catechism* some nine years later. Luther confessed that before his release from sin, Satan, death, and adversity, "I had no lord or king, but was captive under the power of the devil. I was condemned to death and entangled in sin and blindness." That meant also being subject to God's wrath, displeasure, and condemnation, without resources to change his condition, without any grounds for comfort in this world. Luther then used the language of liberation to describe what the forgiveness of sins brings about in the lives of Christians. Christ's death and resurrection mean that "[t]hose tyrants and jailers have now been routed, and their place has been taken by Jesus Christ, the Lord of life, righteousness, and every good and blessing. He has snatched us poor lost creatures from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free and restored us to the Father's favor and grace."⁶

***"to preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous,
set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching"***

The Freedom of a Christian brought Christ's liberating work into association with both God's word of the gospel that conveys its benefits to sinners and also with the faith or trust that receives those benefits and with them the new identity they bring to the children of God. "To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, *set it free*, and save it, provided it believes the preaching," for "[f]aith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God..." (see Rom 10:9).⁷ Faith constitutes the heart and center of the person whom God's word creates anew on the basis of what Christ has accomplished by dying and rising. Therefore, faith alone justifies, *frees*, and saves, Luther argued, because trusting in God's word of promise, which delivers the benefits of Christ, frees believers from every claim of lordship from other sources. The law of God only describes what God expects of those whom he creates and re-creates as his children; it does not give life. God alone gives life, without any precondition or minimal commitment on the human side of the relationship.⁸

Trusting in God frees because it acknowledges God as the only lord of human

⁵WA 7:22,3-14 and 50,33-51,3; LW 31:345.

⁶LC Creed, §27-30, BSLK, 651-652; *Book of Concord*, 434.

⁷WA 7:51,15-19; LW 31:346, italics mine.

⁸WA 7:22,31-23,6; 28,19-25; LW 31:348.

living, its origin and its determiner.⁹ This trust recognizes that God has reasserted his lordship in the lives of sinners through Christ's taking their sins upon himself, burying the sins of the baptized in his tomb and raising them up to a new life in himself. As Paul wrote in Rom 4:25, Christ died because of sin, to receive its wage (see Rom 6:23a) in behalf of sinners, and he rose in order to restore them to righteousness with the free gift of new life (see Rom 6:23b). Luther often used the Pauline explanation of God's baptismal action as the death of the human creature's identity as sinner and the gift of the new identity as child of God to explain how God forgives and justifies.¹⁰ Faith grasps God's love in Christ as the word that conveys his death and resurrection effects God's act of new creation, his bestowal of new birth.

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Luther described faith as the relationship of intimacy and sharing that bride and bridegroom experience. Using the language of certain medieval devotional writers, he stated that faith “unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom.”¹¹ In the union of marriage, of course, brides experience not only union with the bridegroom but also never lose track of who is bride and who is bridegroom. That is the wonder and delight of this kind of union. This image of marital union prevented Luther from leading his readers to think in terms of some human merging into the divine, the loss of human identity as the believer is absorbed into the Godhead, along lines suggested by certain medieval mystics. With his use of the metaphor of marriage for the relationship of God and believer, Luther preserved the distinctiveness of the human creature, whom God made and regards as good. Precisely to make the contrast between the two individuals joined in this relationship comparable to marriage, the Reformer developed the image of the “joyous exchange” of the sinner’s “sins, death, and damnation” for Christ’s “grace, life, and salvation” in a union of two individuals who remain distinct persons while sharing everything.¹² This union dumps sin upon Jesus and graces his bride, the sinner, with righteousness; it imparts a liberation from sin and death to the bride.¹³

That liberation not only bestows new life in relationship to God. It thrusts the new creature in Christ back into human life as God designed it in the first place.

⁹WA 7:52,20-24; 58,6-11; LW 31:356.

¹⁰See Robert Kolb, “God Kills to Make Alive: Romans 6 and Luther’s Understanding of Justification (1535),” *Lutheran Quarterly* 12/1 (1998) 33–56.

¹¹WA 7:25,26–26,12 and 54,31–55,6; LW 31:351.

¹²Ibid.

¹³WA 7:55,24-36; LW 31:352.

The Freedom of a Christian not only treats the believer's relationship with God; it also discusses what that relationship means for the practice of our humanity in relationship to others. The first of the treatise's propositions indicates that "we [are] the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings." Priests are bound to other human beings. They have been freed from being preoccupied and possessed by their own concerns: they are "worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things."¹⁴ As a result of their being cleansed from sin and freed from its control, believers strive to subdue their lives to Christ.¹⁵ Adam had no need to justify himself through his works since God had made him righteous and upright. Therefore, he performed God's will as "the freest of works, done only to please God and not to obtain righteousness, which [he] already had in full measure and which would have been the birthright of us all."¹⁶ Luther understood this freedom that forgiveness bestows as a freedom to perform God's will in new obedience toward the Creator and through good works for the neighbor as the discipleship that follows Christ, as Paul described his servanthood in Phil 2. "Although the Christian is thus free from all works [as a means of justifying his existence], he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in [human likeness] and found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way treat his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him."¹⁷ That was the exercise of freedom in love.¹⁸ That is the result of the freedom forgiveness brings. This kind of liberated love has so redesigned human life that believers enjoy full forgiveness of sins, "both in that God forgives us and that we forgive, bear with, and aid one another," Luther wrote in *The Large Catechism*.¹⁹ Therefore, Luther's understanding of forgiveness helps twenty-first-century Christians to understand who they are, as God's newborn children, and to understand how they are to relate to others.

FORGIVENESS DEFINES WHO I AM

I understand myself to be a forgiven child of God because of the new birth God has bestowed upon me. My own unruly, obstinate, defiant desires to do what is not according to God's plan do not define me; feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy do not define me. God's word of forgiveness defines who I really am—"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:4–25, specifically v. 25). My enemies do not define who I am, through accusations and innuendo, through labels reflecting social or racial prejudice, through social systems that leave

¹⁴WA 7:27,17–28,5 and 56,35–57,23; LW 31:355.

¹⁵WA 7:30,11–30 and 59,37–60,9; LW 31:358–359. Luther's use of the contrast between soul and body in this passage indicates that he remained ensnared in the Augustinian anthropology of late medieval theology, from which he gradually separated his thinking.

¹⁶WA 7:31,17–32,3 and 61,6–16; LW 31:360.

¹⁷WA 7:35,20–36,10 and 65,10–66,6; LW 31:366.

¹⁸WA 7:36,20–30 and 67,27; LW 31:369.

¹⁹LC Creed, §55, BSLK, 573; *Book of Concord*, 438.

me at the side of the road. God's word of forgiveness defines me and assigns my life the greatest worth as a human creature of the Creator. Not even my own physical infirmities and failing powers of perception determine who I am; the loving Father, who has sacrificed his Son and raised him, has defined me as a person whom God has destined for a life made strong in my Savior.

Caught in the trap of lives dug deeply into sinful soil, people become trapped in despair because they see no way of digging themselves out. They feel stuck, glued to their past, sinking ever deeper in the quicksand of their own mistakes and misjudgments. They cannot change their history; they cannot change the reality of what they have done to themselves and others. But God can. Only God has the power to change the reality of our defiant natures that have bound themselves to false centers of life. God's re-creative word alone can rewrite the histories that have identified his creatures as sinners. Therefore, forgiveness is an act of new creation, accomplished through God's promise of new life in Christ. This promise by its nature initiates new life as it buries the past in Christ's tomb and raises up this reborn child of God, so God's reborn children can live a different kind of life (Rom 6:5–22).

FORGIVENESS DEFINES MY RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

Luther distinguished two dimensions of human life, two forms of being truly human, or righteous. He never separated these two kinds of righteousness or two ways of being all that human creatures can be. In relationship to God, forgiveness repeats God's action at the beginning of time. When Christ breathed on the disciples and sent them into the world with the forgiveness of sins (John 20:19–23), God created a new people for himself, just as he had by breathing on the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7) to fashion humanity in the first place. The commission to forgive and retain sins, according to Luther, was given to the whole church, to each baptized Christian. To be sure, he taught that believers should receive formal absolution from their parish pastors and gave instructions on how that should proceed.²⁰ The Reformer also insisted that every baptized believer is called to deliver God's forgiveness to others and to practice that forgiveness in relationship to others. In 1537 he preached on Matt 18:15–20 in the town church in Wittenberg and explained to the parishioners,

Here Jesus is saying that he does not only want [the condemnation of sin and proclamation of the forgiveness of sins] to take place in the church, but he also gives this right and freedom where two or three are gathered together, so that among them the comfort and the forgiveness of sins may be proclaimed and pronounced. He pours out [his forgiveness] even more richly and places the forgiveness of sins for them in every corner, so that they not only find the forgiveness of sins in the congregation but also at home in their houses, in the fields and

²⁰See Luther, *The Small Catechism*, "How simple people are to be taught to confess," and *The Large Catechism*, "A Brief Exhortation to Confession," BSLK 517–519 and 725–733, *Book of Concord*, 360–362, 476–480.

gardens, wherever one of them comes to another in search of comfort and deliverance. It shall be at my disposal when I am troubled and sorry, in tribulation and vulnerable, when I need something, at whatever hour and time it may be. There is not always a sermon being given publicly in the church, so when my brother or neighbor comes to me, I am to lay my troubles before my neighbor and ask for comfort....Again I should comfort others, and say, "dear friend, dear brother, why don't you lay aside your burdens. It is certainly not God's will that you experience this suffering. God had his Son die for you so that you do not sorrow but rejoice."²¹

Bringing forgiveness from God to other people lays the basis for forgiving them oneself. Whatever it means to be created in the image of God (Gen 1:26), after the Fall and the restoration of humanity through Christ, forgiving is part of the natural reflection of God's love that appears in the way of life of God's reborn children, the new people of God.

Forgiveness is not simply forgetting in the sense of simply ignoring or overlooking a wrong, although it often leads to forgetting. Forgiveness acknowledges what is wrong and takes it seriously. When we forgive, we recognize the boundaries of the good life, and we recognize that a transgression of those boundaries has taken place. But we do not let these boundaries define and shape our relationships with those who have done us wrong. We climb over the rocks of offense to return to a godly relationship that reflects the peace and order of Eden in the midst of a fallen world.

"Forgiveness frees. I no longer let the enemy determine my thoughts: forgiveness bans brooding and routs revenge."

Indeed, forgiveness is not some alien concept that God interjects into a world that functions fine without it. Forgiveness of those who have injured or insulted me makes good practical sense, for when I forgive other human beings who have hurt or offended me, I liberate myself from those who have harmed me. The desire to get revenge, the continuing brooding over wrongs suffered, leaves me bound and captive to the hurt I have suffered, and thus to the one who hurt me. The action of that person continues to determine and define at least a part of who I am and what I want to do. Forgiveness frees. I no longer let the enemy determine my thoughts: forgiveness bans brooding and routs revenge. This is common sense, but among sinners who have to define and determine their own way, it is, of course, not only uncommon; it is impossible. Christ's lordship is the necessary prerequisite for being able to forgive. Sinners depend on the model and the power of God's forgiveness to loose the shackles of the need to restore their own egos by striking back.

Forgiving our adversaries plops our vulnerability and frailties onto God's lap. Forgiving those who have hurt us surrenders ourselves and our desires for mastery

²¹Martin Luther, "Sermons on Matthew 18-24" (1539-1540), WA 47:297,36-298,14 (my translation).

in our lives into God's hands. Forgiving another person places his or her sins under the authority and power of God, who makes all things new, including broken human relationships. The psalmists did precisely this in their psalms of lament and the imprecatory psalms, giving over their anger to God. Forgiveness deprives others of the mastery that they have tried to assert over us in their attempts to use us for their own purposes. Forgiveness redefines the significance of those who have abused us. It disarms the power of the other person's hurt. The alternative is to suffer under that person's tyranny, or to be condemned to being possessed by a search for similar weapons to use against that person. Only when we recognize Christ's protective lordship in our lives can we be freed to be able to forgive through the gracious aid of God.

The practice of "forgiving, bearing with, and aiding one another" that Luther prescribed in *The Large Catechism* also requires God's special assistance when I am the one who needs to be forgiven by others. Sinners have great difficulty receiving forgiveness. Receiving forgiveness is an act that declares our dependence on other people as well as God. It is an act that also reveals our vulnerability, the justice of our condemnation as well as the failure of our own exercise of human responsibility. Sinners want to stand on their own two feet and be judged on the basis of their own merit, and receiving forgiveness sweeps us from our feet and places us in the hands of others, literally at the mercy of others. Therefore, we prefer to work out a deal whereby we can compensate for the wrong we have done rather than be forgiven. Often it is just and right to provide compensation for wrongs we have done, with the expenditure of goods or time or acts of love, but these do not restore the relationship that our offense has broken. Forgiveness does.

"forgiveness does not set aside the need to seek justice in interpersonal relationships"

Luther's concept of forgiveness is put into practice within the larger framework of his understanding of the situation of human life in two dimensions or two realms. This is particularly important in a world in which those outside the faith in Christ can only abuse forgiveness. In practicing forgiveness it is therefore necessary to distinguish between forgiving those who have hurt me and those who have hurt my loved ones or who have transgressed public order and justice. Forgiveness does not set aside the need to seek justice in interpersonal relationships. Forgiveness may free up personal relationships, but some consequences of sin still bind within the structures of this world. Within the temporal realm of God the consequences of certain sins still fall upon their perpetrators, even if they stand forgiven before God and have been forgiven by Christian neighbors.

Although believers do not lay aside their identities as children of God when they enter into the workplace or civil society, they recognize there that God's good order is preserved in a sinful world through the enforcement of order and God's

plan for human life among those who do not respond to forgiveness and the gospel but rather to constraint of wrongdoing and the imposition of justice. In achieving the goals of God's design for economic and political aspects of human life, performance must be the standard, and those who act exploitatively or defensively must be restrained from improper actions.

However, within the family and within the congregation, where the gospel's rule of human ways of viewing the world and motivation can be presumed, forgiveness is the key to good relationships that are exercised in true freedom under Christ. The cultivation of proper Christian living in the twenty-first century must teach believers how to pronounce forgiveness and to live and act as God's own forgiven people. For what should come naturally to those who are listening to Christ does not always flow easily from our hearts. Nonetheless, forgiveness is one of the foremost characteristics of those whom Christ has claimed as his own people. Luther confessed that forgiveness has reconstituted their lives as God's word of forgiveness in Christ has transformed the way they view themselves and the world, as well as God. That is what living by faith means: forgiveness and hence freedom to be truly human. ⊕

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