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Against the Antinomians (Martin Luther)

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"Against the Antinomians," Excerpts

By Martin Luther

1539

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[This is a letter from Luther to Dr. Caspar Güttel, who like Luther was originally an Augustinian monk who became a Lutheran pastor. Luther introduces the letter by explaining that he writes to clarify his teaching against the claims of those, especially John Agricola, who said that Luther's position required Christians "to expel the law of God or the Ten Commandments from the church. . . ." He asks Dr. Güttel to publish it as much as possible. -Site Editor]

[Introduction omitted]

It is most surprising to me that anyone can claim that I reject the law or the Ten Commandments, since there is available, in more than one edition, my exposition of the Ten Commandments, which furthermore are daily preached and practiced in our churches. (I am not even mentioning the Confession and the Apology and our other books). Furthermore, the commandments are sung in two versions, as well as painted, printed, carved, and recited by the children morning, noon, and night.^[1] I know of no manner in which we do not use them, unless it be that we unfortunately do not practice and paint them with our deeds and our life as we should. I myself, as old and as learned as I am, recite the commandments daily word for word like a child. So if anyone perchance gained some other impression from my writings and yet saw and perceived that I stressed the catechism so greatly, he might in all

fairness have addressed me and said, "Dear Dr. Luther, how is it that you emphasize the Ten Commandments so much, though your teaching is that they are to be discarded?" That is what they should have done, and not worked ^[2]secretly behind my back and waited for my death, after which they could make of me what they would. Ah well, let them be forgiven who cease doing this.

To be sure, I did teach, and still teach, that sinners shall be stirred to repentance through the preaching or the contemplation of the passion of Christ, so that they might see the enormity of God's wrath over sin, and learn that there is no other remedy for this than the death of God's Son. This doctrine is not mine, but St. Bernard's.^[3] What am I saying? St. Bernard's? It is the message of all of Christendom, of all the prophets and apostles. But how can you deduce from this that the law is to be cast aside? I cannot find such a deduction in my logic textbook. I should like to see or hear the master who could demonstrate it.

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

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

[Some text omitted]

Dear God, should it be unbearable that the holy church confesses itself a sinner, believes in the forgiveness of sins, and asks for remission of sin in the Lord's Prayer? How can one know what sin is without the law and conscience? And how will we learn what Christ is, what he did for us, if we do not know what the law is that he fulfilled for us and what sin is, for which he made satisfaction? And even if we did not require the law for ourselves, or if we could tear it out of our hearts (which is impossible), we would have to preach it for Christ's sake, as is done and as has to be done, so that we might know what he did and what he suffered for us. For who could know what and why Christ suffered for us without

knowing what sin or law is? Therefore the law must be preached wherever Christ is to be preached, even if the word “law” is not mentioned, so that the conscience is nevertheless frightened by the law when it hears that Christ had to fulfill the law for us at so great a price. Why, then, should one wish to abolish the law, which cannot be abolished, yes, which is only intensified by such an attempt? For the law terrifies me more when I hear that Christ, the Son of God, had to fulfill it for me than it would were it preached to me without the mention of Christ and of such great torment suffered by God’s Son, but were accompanied only by threats. For in the Son of God I behold the wrath of God in action, while the law of God shows it to me with words and with lesser deeds.

[Some text omitted]

They [the antinomians, the Anabaptists] have devised for themselves a new method whereby one is to preach grace first and then the revelation of wrath. The word “law” is not to be heard or spoken. This is a nice little toy^[41] from which they derive much pleasure. They claim they can fit the entire Scripture into this pattern and thus they become the light of the world. That is the meaning they foist on St. Paul in Romans 1 [:18]. But they fail to see that he teaches just the opposite. First he calls attention to the wrath of God from heaven and makes all the world sinners and guilty before God; then, after they have become sinners, he teaches them how to obtain mercy and be justified. That is what the first three chapters powerfully and clearly demonstrate. It is also indicative of a particular blindness and stupidity when they claim that the revelation of God’s wrath is something different from the law. This is, of course, impossible, for the manifestation of wrath is the law when it is acknowledged and felt, just as St. Paul says, “The law brings wrath” [Rom. 4:15]. So haven’t they fixed things smartly when they abolish the law and yet teach it by proclaiming the revelation of wrath? But they reverse the order of things and teach the law after they teach the gospel, and wrath after grace. I can indeed see some of the shameful errors the devil has in mind with this little toy; but I cannot enlarge on these at present. Moreover, this is unnecessary, because I hope that they will cease.

It also reflected extraordinary arrogance and presumption that they wanted to unearth something novel and uncommon, so that people would say, “I really believe that he is a great man, a second Paul.” Why should those in Wittenberg^[42] have a monopoly on wisdom? I, too, have a brain, etc. Yes, of course you have a brain, but one that is bent on its own honor and that exposes itself to ridicule with its wisdom. For they want to do away with the law and yet teach wrath, which is the function of the law alone. Thus they merely discard the few letters that compose the word “law,” meanwhile affirming the wrath of God, which is indicated and understood by these letters. It is only that they reverse the order fixed by St. Paul and try to place the last first. Isn’t this a fine piece of work, before which all the world should stand in amazement? But let this suffice for the time being; for I hope that since Master Eisleben is changing his mind and recanting, the others who derived their views from him will also desist. May God help them to that end. Amen.

[The rest of the letter is omitted]

^[41] Between 1520 and 1529 Luther published a number of studies of the Ten Commandments which later served as a basis for his treatment of them in the *Large Catechism* and *Small Catechism* of 1529.

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His *Treatise on Good Works* of 1520 (LW 44, 15–114) also follows the structure of the Decalogue. The two sung versions mentioned here are no doubt Luther's two hymns based on the Ten Commandments: "These Are the Holy Ten Commands" (1524), LW 53, 278–279; and "Man, Wouldst Thou Live All Blissfully" (1524), LW 53, 281.

^[2] A charge that had been leveled at Agricola by his opponents in the controversy; see above, p. 108. Already in the summer of 1538 Luther spoke of the Antinomians as a "new sect" and discussed them in the same context as he does here: "I have survived three terrible storms: Münzer, the Sacramentarians, and the Anabaptists. When these were quieted others arose." WA, TR 4, 30–32.

^[3] Bernard of Clairvaux (ca. 1091–1153). Luther felt that Bernard, although he misinterpreted the Christian faith on some matters, was essentially in agreement with him in the doctrine of justification. Cf. John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 101–103.

^[4] *Katzenstühlchen*, a toy chair for dolls.

^[5] Although Agricola was at this time resident in Wittenberg, Luther here still identifies him with Eisleben, where his teachings had gained considerable currency; cf. Luther's comment above, p. 108.

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