

**A Reaction to Professor James Danell’s
Presentation of Dr. Martin Luther’s 1520 Theses
“*The Freedom of a Christian and Treatise on Good Works*”**

“Martin Luther? 1520? Really, who cares? Have we not more immediate concerns—of disease, of justice and equality, of apocalyptic fires and storms, of whether ‘red’ or ‘blue’ or ‘just sick of it all’? And beyond all the concerns “out there,” what of my personal concerns—of schedules, of family, of health, of income?” Yet in those heart cries, we hear the echoes of the existential angst that afflicts us all, “Who am I? What do I mean? What is my purpose? What is my place? How am I fulfilled?” In his two treatises of 1520, *A Treatise on Good Works* (late May/early June) and *The Freedom of a Christian* (November 11), Martin Luther addresses these heart concerns with the only salve there is for our sin-sick and sin-weary souls: God’s eternal love for us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

I admit, it might have been a bit unfair to request, as we on the Symposium Committee did, that each essayist provide a summary of his subject treatise, its application to the world of Martin Luther, its contemporary application, and to do all of this in about seventy-five minutes. In this case, we asked Professor Danell to provide us with all of this for *two* of Martin Luther’s magnificent 1520 treatises. Professor Danell carried out the work of this assignment with the deepest care and diligence, with respect both for his subject matter and his listeners. Thank you, Professor Danell, for your faithful work and for sharing it with us today!

It has been said in regard to these 1520 treatises that it is simply not possible to “out-Luther Luther,”¹ and so our essayist let Luther speak for himself by providing us ample quotations from Luther’s two works before us this morning. Yet, there are certainly no apologies necessary for doing so. While Luther very often expresses Scriptural truth with such poignancy and precision that, at times, it is best to quote him since any summary could only obfuscate his point, it was up to the discretion of the essayist to determine where it served best to quote and where to summarize and highlight. Here Professor Danell did a masterful job, which provided us an artful tapestry of thought to summarize *A Treatise on Good Works* and *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther’s “bookends” on his *magna opera* of 1520.

I found it interesting that Professor Danell chose to begin his essay by examining first the latter of the two works of Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*. I suppose this makes sense since some have seen in this well-constructed treatise the fingerprints of Cicero-like rhetorical logic: narrow your message to key points (*inventio*), artfully organize your points for maximum impact (*dispositio*), and chose carefully how to present each point (*elocutio*)². As the essayist also notes, theologically speaking, it is easiest to begin here.

¹ I am quoting Rev. James Langebartels who made the comment during his introductory remarks as he presented his essay on Martin Luther’s *Freedom of a Christian* during the third session of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary’s Reformation Lectures in 2017. www.blts.edu/reformation-lectures/2017-reformation-lecture-videos/.

² As described at <https://bit.ly/3hFwuLR> (Cicero’s not-so-secret formula for persuasive talks)

Professor Danell highlights that *The Freedom of a Christian* centers on the propositions that “a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” He guides us through Martin Luther’s thinking, which shows how these propositions are not contradictory, but instead are necessarily complimentary. Humanity’s only hope before a just and righteous God lies not in obedience to God’s law, for such a task to God’s perfect standard is beyond us, but in Christ’s own righteousness for us and imputed to us fully and completely through faith in him. With accusation and guilt gone, believers live in freedom and joy to serve the God who has saved them, to control the sinful nature that we among the Church militant still battle against, and to serve our neighbor selflessly as our Savior has served us. Martin Luther did not negate the purpose of good works but simply set them in their Scriptural perspective. They cannot earn anyone heaven, but heaven is a gift in Jesus alone. With the gift given, believers express their new life in Christ by desiring to keep God’s law.

Understanding this, we see that Martin Luther’s two treatises, *A Treatise on Good Works* and *The Freedom of a Christian*, really begin and end the 1520 year with the same thought: faith alone grants the righteousness for Christ’s sake that God demands and therefore faith alone allows the believer the ability, freedom, privilege, and joy to serve the God who has redeemed him. *A Treatise on Good Works* requires a bit more explanation than the crystal-clear rhetoric of *The Freedom of a Christian*, yet as the essayist pointed out, a discussion of the ten commandments begins with the consideration of the first. The only way that God’s commands become anything other than damning is through faith in Jesus, the Messiah. On this point, hinges Martin Luther’s entire thesis. In explaining the first commandment, where he says that faith is the first and greatest work, Luther says this:

See, it is by the mercy and grace of God and not by their own nature that works are without guilt and are forgiven. They are good because of faith, which abandons itself to this same mercy. Therefore, we must fear because of the works, but take comfort because of the grace of God ... Look here! This is how you must cultivate Christ in yourself, and see how in him God holds before you his mercy and offers it to you without any prior merits of your own. It is from such a view of his grace that you must draw faith and confidence in the forgiveness of all your sins. Faith, therefore, does not originate in works; neither do works create faith, but faith must spring up and flow from the blood and wounds and death of Christ. If you see in these that God is so kindly disposed toward you that he even gives his own Son for you, then your heart in turn must grow sweet and disposed toward God. And in this way your confidence must grow out of pure good will and love—God’s toward you, and yours toward God. We never read that the Holy Spirit was given to anybody because he had performed some works, but always when men have heard the Gospel of Christ and the mercy of God. Faith must arise at all times from this same word and from no other source.³

Yeah, you can’t out-Luther Luther! If faith in the true God through his Son Jesus Christ is not present in an individual, the first commandment is broken, and with it all the others; we don’t even have to continue going down the list. Professor Danell unpacked wonderfully how the gift of faith, the evangelical imperative to believe, spreads from the first commandment to all the

³ Martin Luther. (1999). *Luther’s works, vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 44, pp. 37–39). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

others. The relationship with God restored in and through Christ Jesus alone, the believer alone has the desire to protect God's saving and holy name, to worship him, to respect the authorities that he has placed over us at home and in the church and in government, and down the list. To those who had accused Luther of being antinomian, Luther pointed out the Scriptural truth that good works are not in keeping extraordinary laws and ceremonies prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church but in the day-to-day observance of God's laws and commandments because he loved us first that he gave his Son for us. It is his life that courses through our spiritual veins.

In his concluding remarks, I appreciate very much Professor Danell's thoughts on practical applications and his encouragement for our continued use of these two theses: Gospel motivation, a heart for people, prayer, understanding the Scriptural purposes and uses of God's law, a commitment to excellence in our communication of the Gospel, our joy in serving for our Savior God through all of the rich and varied vocations that he has called and will call us to. I pray that these theses continue to be such a blessing and encouragement for all of us!

My one regret with this essay is that so much of it needed to be edited for the sake of brevity. If the essay seems a bit brusque in places or thin in describing a salient point fully, it is because sections needed to be "cut to the bone." Almost as much as what was presented this morning was left on the "editing room floor." I am thankful, however, that at least some of what was not able to be heard today was preserved for readers in the essay's appendix.

Do we have greater concerns than these present in Martin Luther's 1520 theses, *A Treatise on Good Works* and *The Freedom of a Christian*? No, in fact, they address the very heart of our concerns and those of all people. They point to Christ, who we are in Christ, our great and eternal hope because of Christ, our joy, our freedom to live and serve in Christ. Thank you, Professor Danell, for your fine work and for bringing all of this to our attention through your essay today!

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