

Reaction to “Breaking Free”: Martin Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in Context by Pastor Benjamin P. Schaefer

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church was a shot across Rome’s bow, but it didn’t come out of the blue. On the final page of *To The Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, written two months earlier, Luther revealed that he had “another little song about Rome and the Romanists.” And sing he did. Like a canary in a coalmine, Luther sounded a warning call about the errors, abuses, and dangers of the existing sacramental system. He wrote with passion and conviction (and also some biting sarcasm), but his goal was not to burn Rome to the ground. Instead, Luther was motivated by a love for the truth of God’s Word and by a concern for conscience-stricken souls. As a result, the treatise was both theological and pastoral.

Theological and pastoral. Those two words could also be used to describe the essay Pastor Schaefer has shared with us this afternoon. Like Luther, you have demonstrated a love for God’s truth. Like Luther, you have shown us a pastor’s heart. We are grateful for your work, and we are eager to dig deeper. I offer the following thoughts to initiate the discussion:

The term, *sola Scriptura*, doesn’t appear anywhere in the essay, but in his review of Rome’s seven sacraments Pastor Schaefer draws attention to the great damage that is done when people “invent new things (sacraments, vows, vestments, etc.) apart from Holy Scripture out of their own brains” (12): the common people are denied full participation in the Lord’s Supper, the blessings of Baptism are minimized, the church claims for itself the authority to institute even more extra-biblical teachings, and the list goes on. As we anticipate our annual celebration of the Reformation, Rome’s errors remind us that *sola Scriptura* is much more than a Lutheran slogan or catch phrase. By the grace of God, it is the firm foundation for everything we believe, teach, and confess.

In the appendix, Pastor Schaefer suggests hermeneutics as the first of several topics for further study in connection with *The Babylonian Captivity*, and his comments about communion and extreme unction provide anyone who chooses to take up that task with a good place to start. Even when Rome did use the Bible to justify its positions (like John 6 for communion and James 5 for extreme unction), their proof passages didn’t prove anything, except for the fact that they failed to understand the Bible in its grammatical and proper sense (38). Shepherds and future shepherds of God’s flock, whose task it is to correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), would do well to learn from the errors of the past so as not to repeat them.

You can’t react to an essay about *The Babylonian Captivity* without mentioning the three “captivities” at the beginning of the treatise. Luther doesn’t rank the abuses of the Lord’s Supper from least to most egregious, but he does save the worst for last when he identifies the mass as sacrifice as “by far the most wicked abuse of all” (16). If you are tempted to think that the needle on Rome’s position has moved in a more evangelical direction, think again. One week ago today the Archdiocese of Milwaukee order excusing members from in-person worship expired. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel quoted Archbishop Jerome ListECKI as saying that Catholics “who deliberately fail to attend Sunday Mass commit a grave sin.”¹ A statement like this is regrettable,

¹ The article can be accessed online at: <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/2020/09/12/milwaukee-archbishop-reinstates-sunday-mass-obligation-catholics-covid-19/5765762002/>

but at the same time it can be quite helpful because it gives a Lutheran pastor perspective as he teaches prospects and serves members with a Roman Catholic background.

For the skeptic who questions whether a document written half a millennium ago can have any real relevance for pastoral ministry in the twenty-first century, Pastor Schaefer provides a clear answer: “This treatise was written in Latin for the clergy and the educated ecclesiastical elite. Simply put, **Luther addressed pastors dealing with people under their care**” (2). After making that “bold” statement, our essayist goes on to demonstrate that *The Babylonian Captivity* is both pastoral and practical.

Instead of saving all the applications for the end, Pastor Schaefer asks us to consider two “current captivities” within the body of the paper (set off by icons on pages 18 and 22). His comments about communion made me think back on the twenty years of sermons I had preached in the parish. If I was able to do a “sacrament search” of my body of work, what would it reveal? That I had fed my people with a steady diet and rich variety of gospel promises and evangelical encouragement? Or that I had left them to survive on crumbs that barely prevented sacramental starvation? If it was actually possible to do a search like that, I’m not sure I would want to know the results. What about you?

In the final part of his paper, Pastor Schaefer discusses what he considers to be two current “captivities” according to Lutherans: the spirit of Antichrist and secular humanism. I am guessing that this was the most challenging part of the assignment, but these examples didn’t feel forced or contrived. When talking about the culture of secular humanism (35), he suggests that this dominant world view has its own “sacraments” which people participate in as a way to prove their adherence to the faith. If time allows, I am curious to know if there are other “sacraments” he would identify with this philosophy.

The quality of the essay’s content is matched by the quality of its prose. Long after this symposium is over, I will remember the following:

- Describing the intellectual climate of the day: “Two movements were swirling when Luther wrote his *Babylonian Captivity*. One was circling the drain, the other a whirlwind of activity: scholasticism and humanism” (7).
- Addressing the question about whether or not Luther had reached the conclusion that the pope was the Antichrist when he wrote the treatise: “Based upon my research, it seems that Luther at this time positioned himself between Revelation 17 and 18. That is to say, he will identify the whore and her tyranny of adulteries (Rev 17), but he is not yet calling to the elect: ‘Come out of her!’ (Rev 18:4)” (10-11).

A closer look at the essay’s bibliography reveals something else worthy of mention. The robust list (41-43) includes sources you would expect: biographies by Bainton and Brecht, as well as contributions from WELS theologians like Meyer and Pieper. I was somewhat surprised, however, by the number of sources that were published in the last decade. I recall a specific Zoom conversation with the essayist some months ago, where I could hear the excitement in his voice (and I suppose I could see it on his face on the screen too) as he explained how much he

had benefited from the groundbreaking work of Amy Burnett. Again, as time allows, perhaps he will be able to share some of his discoveries with the assembly.

One final thought. At the end of the paper, tucked between the appendix and the bibliography, is a prayer (translated by the essayist). I bring it your attention, not just because it would be so easy to miss, and not to praise the author for his Latin skills, but because the words so beautifully express what *The Babylonian Captivity* is all about. Like the treatise itself, this prayer was composed for pastors and for men who are preparing to be pastors. As we mark the five hundredth anniversary of this important work, it is my prayer that our study and discussion will instill in each of us a deeper appreciation for the sacraments and a Spirit-worked desire to faithfully administer them, for the glory of God and the good of his church.

Let us pray:

O God, Father of all good order, Author of the holy ministry, I implore you with sincere and humble prayers: maintain intact and incorrupt the governance of your church (which you have most wisely instituted in a way fitting for mortals) against the muttering of the world and Death! Grant your servants who are planting and watering an extremely fruitful increase! Grant also to me, your infirm and inept servant, a mouth of wisdom! Confer your sanctifying gifts! Impart a fearless spirit! Lavish prosperous successes upon the work! I implore you also that I may teach rightly according to the rule of your Word, dispense your sacraments properly, live piously, and learn how to depart peacefully from this life (just as from an inn – not as from a home) when you command. Amen.²

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² Prayer by David Hollaz (1648-1713 A.D.) *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum* (Stockholm and Leipzig: Gottfried Kiesewetter, 1750), page 1352.