

A D F O N T E S

A JOURNAL OF PROTESTANT RESOURCEMENT

A DAVENANT INSTITUTE PUBLICATION

ISSUE 2.9 • MAY 2018

A CALL FOR A FREE COUNCIL

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As the controversy surrounding Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* intensified, the University of Wittenberg professor's prince, Frederick III, Elector of Saxony, arranged for him to be interviewed by Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg during the meeting of the imperial diet there in October 1518. During the meeting the professor and the cardinal discussed indulgences, the treasury of merit, papal authority, the relationship between Scripture and ministry as well as the necessity of faith for the saving reception of the sacraments.

While Cajetan sympathized with Luther's criticism of indulgences, he forthrightly rejected Luther's view of the papacy. With no agreement resulting from the meeting, on November 28, 1518, Luther appealed to the pope for a trial before a general council of the church. Luther grounded his appeal on the decree issued by the Council of Constance, and confirmed by the Council of Basel, that a general council "lawfully assembled in the Holy Spirit," represented the Catholic Church, and therefore has "its authority immediately from Christ," meaning "that all men, of every rank and condition, *including the Pope himself*, is bound to obey it in matters concerning the Faith."¹

This would have not been a surprising move on part of the beleaguered professor, for the Fifth Lateran Council had concluded in the previous year—the same year in which Luther nailed the *Theses* to the door of the Schlosskirche at Wittenberg. Convened by Pope Julius II in 1512, and adjourned by Leo X, this ill-fated council, intended to reform many of the abuses in the late medieval church, ultimately

failed in this mission, but instead re-asserted earlier papal condemnation of conciliarism (the principle of the supremacy of a general council within the universal church expressed by the earlier councils above) and of the growing autonomy of national churches, particularly in France.² Although the council passed numerous resolutions calling for reform of abuses of ecclesiastical taxes and fees, it failed to stop simony (the buying and selling of church offices) and pluralities (the holding of several ecclesiastical

by one person). For instance, when the papal bull on reform of the church, read during the ninth session of the council, was sent to Albert of Mainz, it was accompanied by an offer condemned in this very bull: the pope was willing to allow Albert to retain his numerous ecclesiastical offices in exchange for ten thousand ducats.³ As Luther continued to wage his controversy with the papacy and its agents, he increasingly qualified his view concerning the constructive role of councils in affecting substantial reform as well as defining and preserving

orthodox doctrine. While the Wittenberg professor considerably devalued the authority of councils in favor of his understanding of *sola scriptura*, he still assigned, albeit perhaps reluctantly, a tentative function to councils in reforming the church. Thus, as this article will argue, Luther, for all his criticism of councils, still used elements of conciliarist thought in his early advocacy of reform. This will mainly require examination of the reformer's discussion concerning councils

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2. Nelson H. Minnich, *The Fifth Lateran Council: Studies in Its Membership, Diplomacy, and Proposals for Reform (1512-1517)* (Variorum, 1993); Norman Tanner, *The Church in Council: Conciliar Movements, Religious Practice, and the Papacy from Nicaea to Vatican II* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 26.

3. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress), 10.

1. Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church*, fourth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 143. Italics added.

in his *Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom* (1520).

THE CONGREGATIO FIDELIUM AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

The “third wall” of the “Romanists” which Luther sought to demolish in this major reform treatise was the pope’s claim to be the only one with the authority to summon a council. A cursory examination of this section in relation to the entire work suggests that the summoning of a council as well as the nature and extent of conciliar authority constitute the central issue of this treatise. This is evidenced, first of all, by the fact that Luther speaks of the necessary dismantling of the two previous “walls,” the superiority of the clergy to secular rulers, and the Roman Church’s prerogative to be the only interpreter of Scripture as consequently and leading to the third: “The third wall falls without more ado when the first two are demolished.”⁴ As will become apparent below, Luther thought these two claims to be the main impediments to a legitimate council as they necessarily supported sole papal control of such a council. Secondly, this subsection on convening a council serves as the basis for the two major sections concerning the subjects to be discussed by councils, and the proposals for reforming the state of Christendom.⁵

Luther begins his removal of this “third wall” with a call to the church at large to correct the pope because he was acting contrary to Scripture. The reformer issues this admonition on the basis of Matthew 18:15-17 in which Jesus gives instructions for correcting an erring brother.⁶ In this discourse, Jesus says that if the offender remains unrepentant after being warned by two or three witnesses, then his followers were to refer the matter to the church, and if the wrongdoer remained obdurate after the church’s rebuke, he was to be treated as a “Gentile,” or as one no longer fellowship with the church. Luther regards this passage as enjoining upon every Christian to exercise concern for the spiritual well-being of their fellow believers. The reformer then applies this responsibility of one Christian towards another to the universal church regarding one of its most prominent, but erring members, the pope. Underlining this particular appropriation of Matthew 18:15-17 is Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which he clearly articulated earlier in the treatise, in a section where he counters the alleged superiority of the clergy to secular rulers:

Hence we deduce that there is, at bottom, really no other difference between laymen, priests, princes, bishops, or in Romanist terminology, between religious and secular, than that of the office or occupation, and not that of Christian status. All have spiritual status, and all are truly priests, bishops, and popes.⁷

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Moreover, when addressing the pope’s claim to be the ultimate interpreter of Scripture, Luther avers: “[A]ll of us are priests because we have the one faith, the one gospel, one and the same sacrament; why then should we not be entitled to taste or test, and to judge what is right or wrong in the faith?”⁸ The common priesthood of all Christians, grounded in the same faith, and conferred by the same sacrament, baptism, empowers them to decide matters concerning the church’s doctrine and practice.

Indeed, the priesthood of all believers, which is the central theme running through the treatise, serves to undergird Luther’s repudiation of the pope’s claim to sole authority for summoning a council while at the same time affirming the council’s own power to correct the pope:

Romanists have no Scriptural basis for their contention that the pope alone has the right to summon or sanction a council. This is their own ruling, and only valid as long as it is not harmful to Christian well-being or contrary to God’s laws. If, however, the pope is in the wrong, this ruling becomes invalid, because it is harmful to Christian well-being not to punish him through a council.⁹

Luther here states a condition cited by late medieval conciliar theorists that qualify the canon law stipulation authorizing the pope alone to summon a general council.¹⁰ Luther’s application of the priesthood

of all believers to nullify papal authority to call a council as well as the doctrine itself arguably does not originate with the reformer himself, but rather derives from antecedent canonist and conciliar thought. When commenting on Distinction 19 of Gratian’s *Decretum*, Decretists, particularly Huguccio (d. 1210), distinguished among different meanings of “church,” the two principal ones of which were the church as the pope with the cardinals, and the church as the *congregatio fidelium* (“congregation of the faithful”) throughout the world.¹¹ Since the history of the church has shown that individual popes have and will err, Huguccio and other Decretists observe that Christ’s promise that the church would be free from error applies to the latter, and therefore ultimate authority resides throughout the *congregatio fidelium*.¹² Yet, neither Huguccio nor the other Decretists ever explicitly argued that the *congregatio fidelium* on account of its authority due to its preservation from error, could actively correct the pope.¹³ The rendering of the authority possessed inherently by the *congregatio fidelium* into a positive power actually superior to that of the papacy was the work of fourteenth and fifteenth-century conciliarists like William of Ockham (1287-1347), Franciscus Zabarella (1360-1417), and Jean Gerson (1363-1429). What Luther effectively

8. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 414.

9. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 415.

10. Gratian, in his *Decretum*, states: “It has been shown above from the writings of the saints when the general councils were celebrated and that their authority is greater than other councils. *Authority for convoking councils, however, belongs to the Apostolic See*” [Emphasis added]. Gratian, *Decretum*, D.17. p.1. See Gratian, *Treatise on the Laws (Decretum DD. 1-20)*. Translated by Augustine Thompson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 66.

11. Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 42-46.

12. Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory*, 43.

13. Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory*, 46.

4. John Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 415.

5. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 417-85.

6. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 415.

7. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 409.

does, then, is to take the church as the *congregatio fidelium* as the only valid definition of the church; in this definition, the pope is just one individual member. Moreover, the reformer expands on this definition in such a way so as to sacralize every member of the church by virtue of the indefectibility of the *congregatio fidelium*. This sacralization of all members of the *congregatio fidelium* for Luther serves as basis for its active collective power to decide matters of the faith and correct offenders within its fold.

A PAPAL-CONVOKED COUNCIL AS AN UNLAWFUL COUNCIL

Luther further nullifies papal control of a council by means of his appeal to Acts 15 which records the account of the Jerusalem Council. In referencing this passage, Luther points out that all of the apostles and elders participated equally in this “Apostolic Council.”¹⁴ Had Peter, Luther asserts, sole authority to summon this first church council, “it would not have been a ‘Christian council,’ but an heretical *conciliabulum*.”¹⁵ Luther’s employment of this term, *conciliabulum*, to characterize papally summoned councils is significant in that it denotes an unlawful council.

The implication here is radical. In assigning this term to papally sanctioned councils, Luther sets them against orthodox ones representing the whole church. Whereas earlier canonists and Decretists conceived of a legitimate council as representing all churches in union with the Roman Church, and hence the pope,¹⁶ fourteenth and fifteenth-century conciliarists posit the possibility of a council representing the whole church acting against the Church of Rome, and specifically, the pope.¹⁷ Luther takes this conciliarist concept of a council acting against a pope even further so as to place past general councils summoned by the pope in direct opposition to the first four ecumenical councils (Nicaea I (325), Constantinople I (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451).

One of the stark contrasts to which Luther calls attention is the fact these ecumenical councils were summoned by Christian Roman emperors. “[T]he bishop of Rome neither called nor sanctioned the Council of Nicaea, the most celebrated of all, but the emperor Constantine. After him, many other emperors did the same, and

these councils were the most Christian of all.”¹⁸ From there the reformer immediately brands councils summoned by the pope alone as “heretical.”¹⁹

Even though Luther charged the pope with being antichrist in his debate with Eck at Leipzig a year before, in this particular context Luther makes use of a scenario discussed extensively by Decretists, especially Huguccio, who explicitly posited the possibility of the pope being publicly guilty of heresy.²⁰ However, Luther is not content with merely acknowledging the pope’s guilt of heresy as a possibility; rather, he transfers the pope’s heresy from the realm of the hypothetical and speculative to that of the historical and institutional. At worst, papally summoned councils have profaned the church; at best, “they did nothing of special importance.”²¹ Since the papal institution itself is antichrist, all that it does is necessarily heretical, and thus injurious to the state of the church.

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A FREE COUNCIL FOR THE STATUS ECCLESIAE

Decretists and conciliarists alike regarded the *status ecclesiae*, the “state of the church,” as “the overriding consideration in all matters of ecclesiastical policy.”²² Both Decretists and conciliarists regarded the limitation of papal power as indispensable to general “state of the church.”²³ They regarded the General Council as the best means of restraining papal authority for the sake of the church’s overall well-being.²⁴ The logical consequence of the necessity of a General Council to curb papal power is its role in correcting the pope when his actions prove deleterious to the “state of the church.” Luther appropriates this same Decretist/Conciliarist idea of correction of the pope by a council to ensure the *status ecclesiae* in his call for a “free council” (i.e. one not subject to papal control): “Therefore, when need requires it, and the pope is acting harmfully to Christian well-being, let anyone who is a true member of the Christian community as a whole take steps as early as possible to bring about a genuinely free council.”²⁵ Like his medieval and late medieval predecessors, Luther avers the need of a council to correct an



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14. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 415.

15. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 415.

16. Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory*, 55.

17. Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory*, 55.

18. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 415.

19. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 415.

20. Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory*, 59.

21. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 415.

22. Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory*, 51.

23. Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory*, 51.

24. Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory*, 51.

25. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 415-16.

erring pope, but with this caveat—he assigns to the responsibility of convoking such a council to any Christian, which is a direct application of the priesthood of all believers to conciliarist theory. However, for what he understands as practical reasons, Luther identifies those Christians best capable of summoning such a council for the *status ecclesiae* as secular authorities:

No one is able to do this as the secular authorities, especially since they are fellow Christians, fellow priests, similarly religious, and of similar authority in all respects. They should exercise their office and do their work without let or hindrance where it is necessary or advantageous to do so, for God has given them authority over every one.²⁶

Civil magistrates within a Christian state, like the Holy Roman Empire, are members of the church by virtue of their faith and baptism, and therefore, like all other Christians, are priests. Secular rulers are most suitable to summon such a council not only because of their own priesthood, but also their office lends itself to such a task because it entails protecting Christendom. Just as it is incumbent upon magistrates to protect cities within their principalities, so it is compulsory for them to exercise their temporal authority to ensure the external order of the church. Luther thus revives the ancient imperial prerogative of summoning councils by sacralizing the laity of which they are the leading part while relegating the external order of the church to the sphere of their protection. In so doing, Luther made the magistrate a lay priest to counter the pope as false priest.

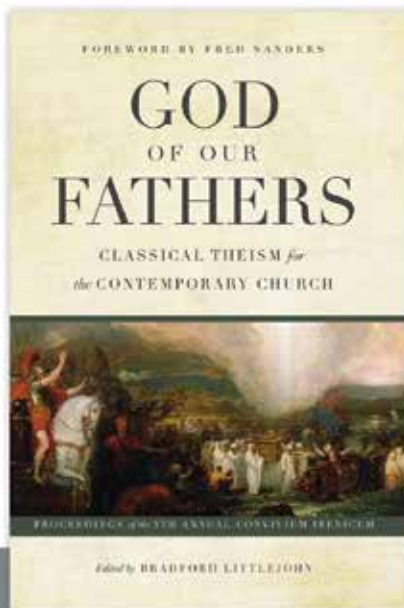
26. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther*, 416.

CONCLUSION

Luther's *An Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* is essentially a conciliarist work. Throughout this seminal 1520 treatise, the reformer employs concepts derived from Decretist and conciliar thought in his call for a council to reform Christendom. Yet, the reformer expanded on these concepts in order to develop his own program of reform. Foundational among these was the *congregatio fidelium* which served as the source of his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. It is this doctrine whereby Luther removes the barrier between clergy and laity, thereby sacralizing the laity, and thus empowering it to summon a council through their chief agent, the civil magistrate. The second concept was the hypothetical possibility of the pope's guilt of heresy about which earlier Decretists and conciliarists speculated extensively. Luther explicitly argued this as a reality to the point of placing papally summoned councils in contradistinction to the first four ecumenical councils which together served as the standard for orthodoxy, resulting in his assessment of the former papal councils as consequently heretical. Finally, Luther appealed to the *status ecclesiae* as reason for correcting papal error though a council summoned by the civil magistrates, who, among the sacral laity, had the practical means to do so.

LUTHER MADE THE MAGISTRATE A LAY PRIEST TO COUNTER THE POPE AS FALSE PRIEST.

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THE SINGING REFORMATION

DAVID LARSON

The practice of Protestant hymnody and church music today owes a great debt to the reforms and innovations of Martin Luther and his successors. Assumptions about church music that we take for granted today—that it should be in the vernacular language of the congregation, that it should be easy to sing, and that it is primarily for the edification of the congregation—were not always so widely accepted in the Western church, and it is Luther who bears an enormous share of responsibility for embedding these ideas in Christian practice. Although Luther is primarily known for his theological reforms, we should not be surprised that he took sacred music so seriously. He is well known to have placed music second only to theology in importance for the spiritual life;¹ among his most florid commendations of the art came in the form of a poem rhapsodizing on music's ability to calm the soul, brighten the heart, and distract the mind from temptation.² The 500th anniversary of the Reformation provides us a perfect time to reflect on Luther's musical development and principles, as well as the ways in which his successors furthered his reforms. After providing some historical and theological context, we will focus on the quintessential form of early Lutheran church music: the chorale.

Luther was a talented and well-trained musician, with an excellent singing voice, a background in lute-playing, and education in medieval music theory at the University of Erfurt.³ Further, his time as an Augustinian monk gave him deep familiarity with Rome's liturgical music, a domain of increasingly alienating practices. The more that medieval Gregorian chant developed in the Roman Catholic Church, the more complex it got, and by Luther's day many churches were outsourcing large chunks of the liturgy to professional choirs.⁴ An example of how elaborate these chants could be is seen in a piece like

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Perotinus's setting of *Viderunt omnes*, a bloated, challenging work that stretches the short text of the Gradual into around ten minutes of performance time.⁵ Besides this, the gradual decline of Latin as a commonly spoken language created new obstacles for Roman Catholic worshippers. Although vernacular settings of hymns were tolerated by some parishes on special occasions,⁶ the decline of Latin and subsequent rise of vernacular languages was creating a barrier between Catholic parishioners and their worship services. Luther felt the weight of all these problems, but even more, he passionately objected to the transformation the service of the Mass into a legalistic duty, a sacrificial rite that focused more on outward forms and the efforts of the believer than the ministry of Christ to the faithful.⁷

These concerns drove Luther in his reform of church music practice. His time as pastor in Wittenberg gave him a perfect opportunity to apply his theological distinctives, and he set to work writing hymns and translating portions of the Latin liturgy into German.⁸ Known as a hot-headed and stubborn man, in liturgical reform he was profoundly conservative. He had no ambition to "retrieve" the liturgical forms of the ancient church; distinctions of ancient and modern were unimportant to him.⁹ The service of the

Roman Catholic church was the only one he knew, and he sought to keep as many elements of it as he could. In his own writings, Luther gives two reasons for his caution. First, he did not wish to introduce liturgical change so quickly that it rattled the faith of the timid. Second, he did not wish to indulge those with a thirst for novelty as such, an appetite he rebukes in his characteristically ferocious style.¹⁰ But he also saw the urgency of reform and did not temper his criticisms of Roman Catholic liturgical practice. He went on to replace many sec-

1. Robin A. Leaver, "Luther, Martin." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed September 6, 2017.

2. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 319-320.

3. Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 6.

4. J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 59.

5. J. Peter Burkholder, and Claude V. Palisca. *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, Vol. 1, 7th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 79-92.

6. Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, xvi.

7. Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, 21-22.

8. Leaver, "Luther, Martin."

9. Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, xv.

10. Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, 19.

tions of Latin chant with German hymns, and it was in this way that the chorale became the primary form of Lutheran worship music.¹¹

When we hear the word “chorale,” if we think of anything, it is probably the chorales of Bach: complex works for organ and choir. But Luther’s chorales were simple, monophonic (that is, made up of a single melodic line) and meant to be sung by the congregation a cappella. Alongside Luther, however, was his faithful collaborator Johann Walter, a gifted and ambitious composer who immediately began arranging Luther’s melodies into homophonic (multiple voices but one melodic line) works. Luther strongly approved of such adaptations, desiring them to be used as a pedagogical device in the home and school as well as the church.¹² His own style of composition, both in melody and text, was straightforward, simple, and pungent. A good example of this is found in his original setting of *Eine feste burg* (known in English as “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”), where his original rhythms are more much jaunty and jagged than the majestic, polished lines of Johann Walter’s four-voice adaptation. As time passed, Luther’s original model of the chorale was expanded, varied, and elaborated by subsequent composers in the Lutheran tradition. Walter and his peers, influenced by Renaissance

11. J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 216.

12. J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 218-219.

choir music, experimented with chorale motets, a genre eventually exploited to the full by the great German composer Michael Praetorius, in his prime at the beginning of the 17th century. Instrumental forms

of the chorale also grew to maturity in the 1600s, typified by the great organ preludes of Dietrich Buxtehude. Finally, the 18th century would see perhaps the high point of the entire tradition of Lutheran sacred composition in the chorales, oratorios, cantatas, and other church music of J.S. Bach. Throughout all these advances, composers retained a distinctly Protestant emphasis on proclaiming the Word and catechizing the congregation. Although works on the scale of a Bach oratorio are not attempted in the Protestant church today, we still retain this theological legacy from Luther and succeeding generations of Protestant composers.



MUSIC SHEET OF EIN FESTE BERG, MARTIN LUTHER, C. 1529

Luther’s belief in the power of church music to move, delight, and educate the congregation was consistently applied in his own practice and that of his successors. Celebrating the first half-millennium of the Reformation is an apt occasion to pray for a renewal of our own passion for the worship of God in “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.”

David Larson is a senior majoring in Piano Performance at the University of North Dakota. When not occupied by music, he enjoys reading philosophy, theology, and literature.

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MARTIN LUTHER AND THE SEVEN

SACRAMENTS BY BRIAN C. BREWER, BAKER PUBLISHING

GROUP, 2017

REVIEWED BY JAMES CLARK

The Roman Catholic Church has historically held that there are seven sacraments instituted by Christ. According to the Catechism, they are “Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation), the Eucharist, Penance, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.” During the Reformation, Martin Luther and other reformers maintained that only two of these—baptism and the Eucharist—are truly sacraments, a teaching which is basic to contemporary Protestantism.

Protestants today still practice marriage, confirmation, and holy orders (i.e., ordination), but they generally neglect penance and anointing the sick, dismissing them as “Catholic things.” After all, the reformers said they are not sacraments, so why observe them?

But according to Brian C. Brewer, associate Professor of Christian Theology at Baylor University, such thinking is mistaken—even if baptism and the Eucharist are the only sacraments, the other five rites can still play a salutary role in Christian practice, such that failure to incorporate them in the everyday life of the church is to our detriment:

Even though Luther and his Reformation successors reduced the number of sacraments, they never intended to diminish most of the sacraments’ material practice in the Christian faith. Their diminution, and even abandonment, in some circles, has nevertheless become the unfortunate outcome within most Protestant congregations. Now, for centuries, Christians from the Protestant tradition have ignored important traditional and often biblical disciplines in their faith because of their misunderstanding of Luther’s intentions.

Brewer thus seeks to “assist in recovering a more robust understanding of the rites, ceremonies, and traditions that are still in keeping with Protestant convictions and appropriate within Protestant worship practices.” To this end, he devotes one chapter to each of the seven Catholic sacraments, conducting a brief historical overview of the practice—its development through early and medieval Christianity, and its reception by Martin Luther and other reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Thomas Cranmer—followed by an assessment of how Protestants might freshly conceive or reclaim it.

Brewer’s historical overviews of the theological development of each rite before and during the Reformation are interesting and informative, as are his ideas for retrieving or reconceiving them. Yet some of

these practices strike me as being more in need of a contemporary re-appraisal than others. As mentioned above, Protestants have affirmed the sacramental nature of baptism and the Eucharist since the Reformation, and they have written a great deal on the nature and purpose of these sacraments up to the present day. Likewise, many Protestants practice marriage, confirmation, and ordination even though they are not considered to be sacraments, and we do not lack for deep reflections on these rites.

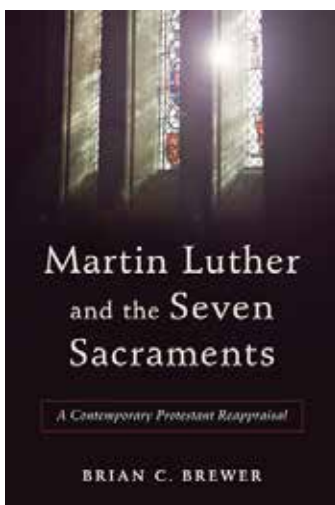
Thus, while Brewer’s analysis of all the Roman Catholic sacraments is both informed and informative, I believe his treatments of penance (i.e., confession) and anointing the sick are the most valuable parts of the book because they deal with spiritually beneficial practices that many Protestants do not observe in any form. I will therefore devote particular attention to Brewer’s ideas on what practicing these rites might look like for Protestants today.

On the subject of confession Brewer laments that “[m]any Protestants have unwittingly distorted Luther’s intention by discarding confession as a common Christian practice altogether.” He claims that

“Luther intended neither the abolition nor even the diminution of repentance in the daily life of the Christian.” The rationale for confession lies in the fact that, though we are justified by Christ through faith, we continue to sin and require God’s forgiveness every day. As such, although penance is not a sacrament, “Luther and many other Reformers and subsequent Protestant leaders still highly valued the practice of confession as essential to one’s continual sanctification, integral to growing and being drawn increasingly into union with Christ.”

Brewer suggests, based on Luther and Calvin’s own teaching on the subject, that confession can be made before “an ordained pastor or simply a trusted friend in Christ.” In either case, it is important to note two things: First, “confession” here refers not to confessing one’s sins to God alone, but to confessing one’s sins to another Christian and receiving absolution from that person. Second, the power of absolution derives not from any special quality of the person declaring absolution, but from the fact that the words of absolution are Christ’s own words. Says Brewer:

It is not the priest but Christ through the priest who gives the reminding words of grace through absolution. While the believer must have faith in the promise of God’s forgiveness, the priestly



declaration of this promise, “*Ego te absolvo*” (I absolve you!), is essential to the reception of this good news, not because of its ex opere operato quality, traditionally understood, but solely because it is believed by the repentant person.

Unless we are regularly assured of God’s promises to forgive those in Christ, our daily sins and failures will quickly lead us to doubt those divine promises, so the spiritual benefits of confession are apparent:

[Luther] observed that “secret confession” was “highly satisfactory” in that as “we lay bare to a brother what lies on our consciences, and in confidence unveil that which we have kept hidden, we receive, through the mouth of a brother, a comfort which God has spoken. When we accept this in faith, it gives us peace by the mercy of God through the words spoken to us by a brother.”

Given these benefits, we have good reason to make daily confession a church practice, notwithstanding its non sacramental nature.

The same can be said for anointing the sick. Regarding current Protestant approaches to pastoral care for the sick and dying, Brewer observes,

Following the complete rejection of unction as a sacrament, many Protestant circles either provide no specific instructions on how to be of spiritual assistance to the sick, or each tradition, church, or clergyman is left to “reinvent the wheel” in developing a particular version of pastoral care.

Drawing on Luther, who in turn draws on James 5, Brewer argues that while anointing with oil is no more than a “symbolic work representing the healing power of the Holy Spirit through the prayers of the elders,” its use is nevertheless “not only a tangible reminder of this divine work but also one that is biblically consistent.”

In short, anointing the sick can be adopted by Protestants in a way that does not distort it into some automatic miracle, but rather keeps the focus on faith:

Luther’s cautious but more mature moderation on this issue may serve as a guide for contemporary Protestants: unction might appropriately be used if preceded by the pastor’s teaching the congregation that it represents an important work of faith and that it is not a ritual performed with superstition or with a “magical” element. More importantly, the oil is used in association with the promise of God’s Word and the prayers of the faithful church leader(s).

Brewer maintains that the purpose of this and other non sacramental rites is to “strengthen a Christian’s faith in Christ.” If these practices are conducive to this aim, and if we do not ascribe magical properties to them, as Brewer cautions against, why should we not reclaim them?

In considering only two rites, and briefly at that, I have not done justice to the full scope of Brewer’s exploration of these and the other Roman Catholic sacraments. Suffice to say, I believe we would do well to adopt many of his suggestions, and I heartily recommend this book for those who wish to see the ideas introduced here unfolded in greater detail.

James Clark received his B.A. in Religion from Princeton University in 2014, and is currently a student at Yale Divinity School. His writing has been featured at the Institute for Faith, Work & Economics, the Acton Institute’s Powerblog, The Gospel Coalition, and Themelios (forthcoming), as well as other publications.

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Ad Fontes is a monthly journal published by The Davenant Institute. Senior Editor: Joseph Minich, Associate Editor: Susannah Black