

PRAISE FOR BATTLE OF THE SOUL

Into the current discussion of Christian use of the classical views of vice and virtue, Michael Fiebertorn inserts the witness of Martin Luther. Luther sketched the human life lived in obedience to God in biblical terms. He found that the classic views of vice reinforce biblical condemnations of transgressions of God's design for humanity. The classic list of virtues served Luther less well, for he relied on the Ten Commandments and Paul's lists of gifts or fruit of the Holy Spirit to set forth the life to which God calls His human creatures. Fiebertorn's presentation of the Wittenberg reformer's proclamation of the Christian life, anchored in the First Commandment's fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things, invites careful consideration and will help believers in the battle to mortify the flesh as they seek support and guidance for life in a turbulent and tempting world. Reflection questions make this not only a good read but also a practical tool for discussion.

Rev. Dr. Robert Kolb, professor of systematic theology,
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Pastor Fiebertorn has done a great service to the church in writing a relevant and accessible book that addresses the challenge of Christian living in a fallen world. His treatment of vice and virtue, rooted in the writings of Luther, provides practical guidance for the church and the individual Christian. Like we find in Luther's catechisms and Paul's epistles, Fiebertorn contrasts the old way of life that seeks to serve oneself with the new life in Christ that flows from our identity as baptized children of God. The reflection questions at the end of the chapters make this a great tool for group studies in congregational settings. This is a brief and insightful work that helps the reader understand sanctification from Luther's writings.

Rev. Dr. R. Lee Hagan, president, Missouri District,
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

The battle is real because sin is real. Likewise, the victory is real because victory has been won and given in Christ. With a pastoral mindset, Dr. Fiebertorn shows Luther's reworked use of vice and virtue and their usefulness in our daily lives as the baptized. Presenting a distinctive Lutheran voice in the virtue ethics discussion, he shows this move from philosophical virtue ethics in the Aristotelian understanding to distinctive Christian virtues informed by the Ten Commandments and the fruit of the Spirit. These flow from faith and are lived in love toward the neighbor in very practical ways in the daily life of a Christian.

Rev. Andy Wright, STM, senior pastor, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

Dr. Fiebertorn has gifted the church with practical handles on biblical sanctification. No longer are we left with ambiguity regarding our soul's battlefield. The Holy Spirit leads us to know and experience Christ's virtues, countering the vices of sin, the world, and Satan. Fiebertorn demonstrates that Luther's theology held to Christ's Word (for example, the Ten Commandments and the fruit of the Spirit) to teach the results of our baptismal union with Christ. This is a delicious read, full of application and insight on how to live as Christians in the world today.

Rev. Dr. Alfonso Espinosa, senior pastor, St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Irvine, California, and author of *Faith That Sees through the Culture*, *Faith That Engages the Culture*, and *Faith That Shines in the Culture*

BATTLE
OF THE
SOUL

LUTHER REFORMS VICE AND VIRTUE

MICHAEL T. FIEBERKORN



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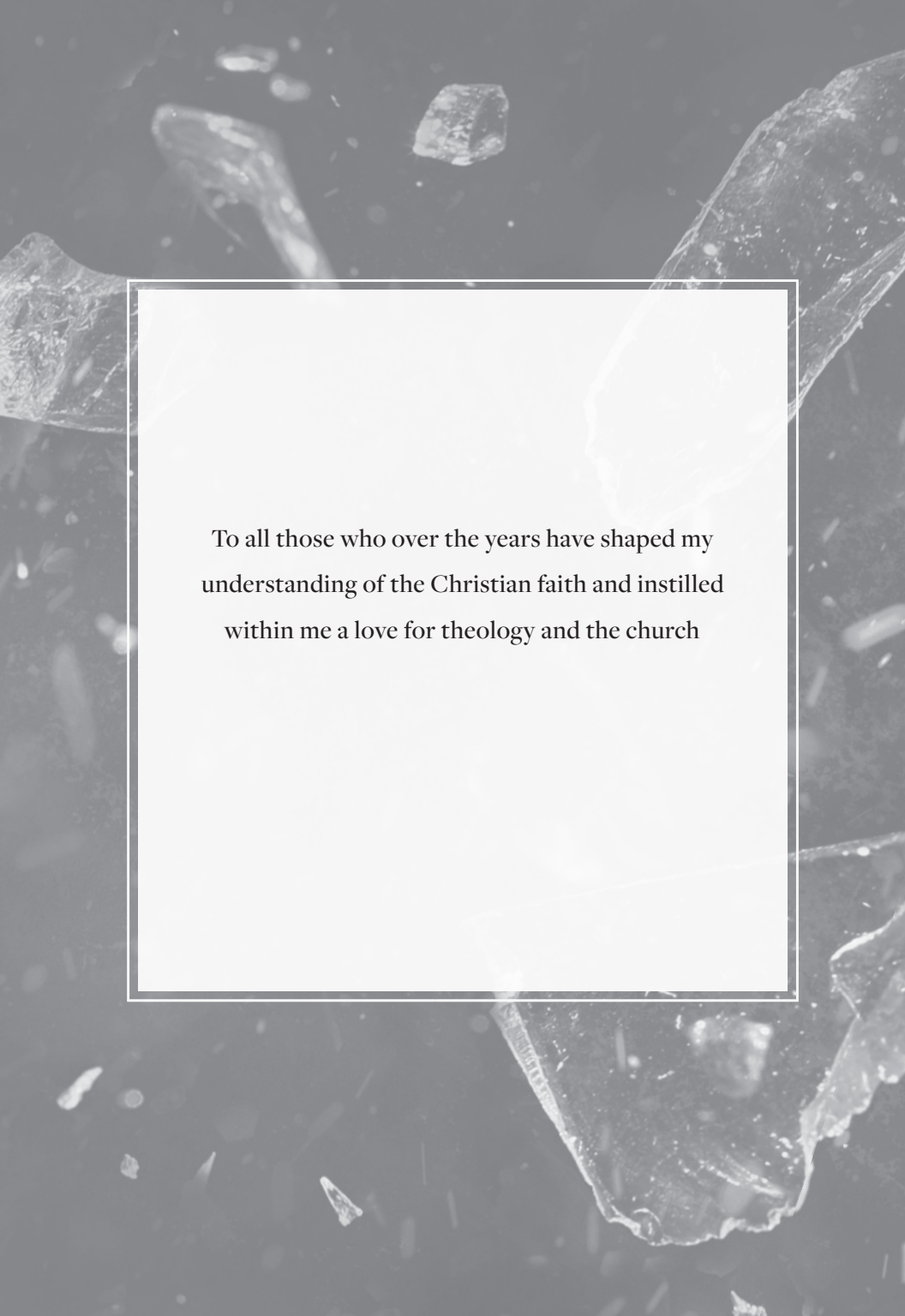
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The background is a dark, almost black, surface with a complex, crystalline texture. It appears to be composed of many small, irregular, translucent fragments or shards, some of which are larger and more prominent than others. These fragments have a glassy or mineral-like appearance, with some showing internal structure or facets. The overall effect is one of depth and complexity, resembling a microscopic view of a mineral or a close-up of shattered glass.

To all those who over the years have shaped my
understanding of the Christian faith and instilled
within me a love for theology and the church

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FOREWORD

We are saved by God's grace through our faith in Jesus Christ alone: *sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus*. God does it all. We know this and rightly treasure the sweet Gospel truth at the center of our Christian confession and life. The centrality of God's gracious work of salvation is good and right and animates and shapes all that we preach, teach, and practice as Christians.

But now what?

Some suggest there is nothing else to say, that once the Gospel has been declared and received then everything else pretty much takes care of itself. But the Bible and Christian teaching point in a different direction. The truth is that, basking in the warmth and light of the Gospel's glorious truth, we are now to do what the Bible tells us to do: embrace God's continuing work in our lives as His Holy Spirit daily leads and shapes us to live as the forgiven, holy people He says we are. Now that we have the Gospel, we get busy doing the work of living like saints.

And it is work. It is work because while our old, fallen human nature may have been drowned in Baptism, that corrupt, rotting, old nature—that old Adam—refuses to stay dead. With embarrassing regularity, he leaps back to life and with breathtaking power wreaks destruction in our lives and the lives of those around

us. The *peccator* that still lurks in each Christian is a monstrous opponent who does not fight fair and does not fight alone; he has the rest of the fallen creation and even Satan himself reinforcing the fight against us. And it is our fight. It is our task to fight with all we've got against the old man and the world and Satan. It is hard work.

Of course, we do not fight alone; we fight in the power of the Spirit. And in truth, it is Christ, our champion, who finally does all the fighting that needs to be done. And yet today, the Bible makes clear, we are still each charged to take up the fight ourselves. So fight we must. Luther knew this fight well and wrote often and forcefully about his warfare against the forces of evil arrayed against the new man he sought to be. He knew that a delightful, ringing, pure proclamation of the Gospel does not cancel or make irrelevant the call into pitched battle against sin and evil in the forms of our own flesh, the world, and the hordes of hell. Both realities—the fight already won by Christ and the fight ongoing in our daily existence—continue simultaneously as present and tangible experiences in the life of a Christian.

The Lutheran tradition has not always been as deliberate or adept as Luther at emphasizing both facets of the continuing reality of our Christian existence. The Gospel is too often arrayed against the ongoing battle as if fighting against sin somehow calls into question the power or reality of the Gospel. Much has been written about this false contrast, and the effort to reclaim a more prominent place within Lutheranism for the work of formation to the Christian life, the work of fighting against sin and evil, indeed

for the work of discipleship, has made some headway. But while this effort has been mounted with a degree of vigor, there has been too little attention devoted to thoughtful Lutheran explorations of the actual content of such warfare against sin.

In other words, while there has been a fair amount of effort invested in arguing for the place of character formation, training in discipleship, and the pursuit of moral and pious behavior within a Lutheran theological framework, there has not been a great deal of work committed to spelling out, teaching, and encouraging the specifics of what it might look like to engage in the actual warfare against sin and the old man. Mike Fiebertorn has worked hard to fill this void.

I know that Mike has worked hard; he was my graduate student. But hard academic and doctrinal work was perhaps not the most significant part of the work that drove the present book into publication. Rev. Dr. Fiebertorn is first Pastor Fiebertorn. He serves a flock of real sheep. His love for his people and his striving to help those real people receive the Gospel and then learn to live like the Christians God declares them to be are perhaps the most significant factors shaping this book. On a weekly if not daily basis, a pastor sees the bitter reality of the battle against the old man and the damage inflicted by sin in the lives of Christian people. It is not intellectual theory, philosophical reflection, or doctrinal speculation that animates this book. It is the suffering of real people, the yearning of actual saints to live more faithfully and more fully in accord with God's plan, and the need for real people to have concrete guidance in their fight against their own sinful flesh,

the world, and the devil that give this book a tone that is relevant, vibrant, and urgent.

To provide the specificity and applicability needed, Dr. Fiebert-korn revives a rich and deeply rooted tradition within the church: the identification and consideration of the vices and the virtues. However, he does this from a Lutheran perspective. Given the commitments and proclivities of these distinct ecclesial traditions, it perhaps goes without saying that bringing them together is no small feat. But Mike has good counsel and guidance in the endeavor: Luther himself leads the way. The pages that follow tell the story of Martin Luther's role and the correlation of vice and virtue with the reformer's explicit teaching on the Decalogue. But more important, in the pages that follow you will find exactly the sort of concrete and specific direction, encouragement, and strategies you need for the very real fight that must define and propel your daily Christian walk.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, perhaps this book will have the best result of all: one more life more closely aligned with the reality of redemption already fully accomplished by Christ.

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PREFACE
**THE BATTLE IN EVERY
BELIEVER'S SOUL**

Many Christians mistakenly think that following Jesus will be relatively easy. Children complete confirmation instruction and feel as if a very large part of their work in the faith is now complete. A newly married husband and wife join a congregation and are baptized, expecting life to run more smoothly now that they are part of a church and worship regularly. Adult Christians who have been believers since the day they were baptized as infants assume they don't have to do anything, because they are saved by grace alone and Jesus has already done it all. We might get the impression that faith, once begun, can be set on cruise control until eventually we arrive at the intended destination.

Experience shows that little could be further from reality.

Far too often, confirmands quickly drop the habit of weekly worship once they enter high school, and by college many have abandoned the faith altogether. The newly Christian couple soon experiences some unexpected adversity in their lives, and then they are largely absent. Lifelong Christians repeatedly give in to sins they dismiss as minor while their faith erodes until at some point they admit they no longer really believe. Perhaps you have had moments when you felt as if your faith was starting to slip away.

Why does this happen?

In instances like these, we must recognize that many Christians are not prepared for the battle that ensues within every believer's soul following faith.

Jesus explains these different experiences in His parable about a man sowing the seeds of faith (Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23). A seed

that lands on the hard path (a hardened heart) never takes root. It is not understood, and the devil snatches it up immediately. But other seeds fall into different kinds of soil and begin to grow. Seed that lands in rocky, shallow soil might shoot up quickly, but without deep roots, it is easily scorched when the troubles of life inevitably come. Seed that lands in thorny soil does well for a time until the thorns of worldly cares and deceitful riches eventually choke it out; in the end, it proves unfruitful.

Satan does not waste his time on those already in a state of unbelief. So if you do believe, you should expect to fight for your faith to endure over the long run. Roaring lion that he is, the devil persistently prowls around looking for another soul to devour, enticing you with the things of this world, seducing you to surrender to your own sinful desires, and hoping these repeated forays will ultimately obliterate your faith.

It's no surprise, then, that Paul exhorts young Timothy to "fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Timothy 6:12). Peter warns the entire church to "abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). The Bible teaches that a daily battle takes place inside the soul of everyone who believes. On one side stands the Holy Spirit, desiring to form us into the new people we have been made through Baptism. On the other side stand our sinful desires, the world, and the devil himself, and they fight vehemently against the work of the Spirit. As the Holy Spirit labors continually to renew us in the image of God, the allures of the world and the desires of the flesh distract us, and Satan wants to use them to do nothing less than destroy our souls.

Martin Luther tied this ongoing battle directly to Holy Baptism. In his Small Catechism, Luther first taught clearly about the benefits that Baptism gives: “It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.”¹ These simple words convey so much. In your own Baptism, your sins were washed away, you were promised that one day you would be raised with Christ and overcome death, and you were given the gift of faith and eternal salvation. All of this is possible because when you were baptized, you were snatched from Satan’s kingdom and made God’s child and an heir of His heavenly kingdom. Being baptized means you are saved without a doubt. It is certain assurance for the soul. But it also means that Satan is going to do everything in his power to get you back. The battle of the soul is now begun.

Luther went on to address this. As he concluded his discussion on Baptism, he finally asked,

What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.²

This is a picture of the daily war being waged within the soul. Here Luther taught us that the Christian must daily fight against the old Adam (that is, the sinful nature that dwells within each of us from conception) as part of the ongoing battle of faith. Simply

put, if we do not repeatedly drown and put to death our sins and evil desires, the new man is never permitted to emerge. In time, even our trust in Jesus can be abandoned.

Luther treated the nature of this battle in more detail in his Large Catechism—with a twist. He described the daily battle of the baptized soul specifically in terms of the believer's movement from vice to virtue:

A Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth. What is the old creature? It is what is born in us from Adam, *irascible* [*angry*], *spiteful*, *envious*, *unchaste* [*lustful*], *greedy*, *lazy* [*slothful*], *proud*—yes—and unbelieving; it is beset with all *vices* and by nature has nothing good in it. Now, when we enter Christ's kingdom, this corruption must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more *gentle*, *patient*, and *meek* we become, and the more we break away from *greed*, *hatred*, *envy*, and *pride*. This is the right use of baptism among Christians, signified by baptizing with water. Where this does not take place, but rather the old creature is given free rein and continually grows stronger, baptism is not being used but resisted.³

As Luther showed, living out our Baptism entails not only the active slaying of various vices (things like anger, envy, and greed) but also the daily rising up of dispositions characteristic of the new man (virtuous qualities such as gentleness, patience, and meekness). When we neglect this task, we are choosing not to make use of our Baptism—even to resist it! In other words, those who have been baptized must engage each waking day in the battle of the soul. Failure to do so fights against the work the Spirit is trying to accomplish in and through us and even against the very promises that have been granted us in our Baptism! Luther consistently talked this way about how Baptism ought to shape our lives.

Now, about those vices Luther used to describe the sinful nature—that list happens to include six of the seven vices known as the seven deadly sins, a specific grouping of vices that has existed in the tradition of the church for over fourteen hundred years. Originally, these were called capital or chief vices, rather than “deadly sins,” a term which came much later. They were considered source sins, the evil habits of the inner heart from which all other sins ultimately arise. The commonly recognized seven deadly sins are pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust.

In the quotation above, Luther mentioned all but gluttony. He used this list as a time-honored way to depict the essence of what sin looks like in the life of a Christian. However, if you know much about Luther, you might be surprised that he would evoke the cultural memory of such a list. Luther often lamented how earlier theologians had used the vice and virtue tradition to obscure the clear truth of the Gospel. However, when it came to the task of

engaging in the battle of the soul, Luther found the categories of vice and virtue to be most helpful, and he employed these terms frequently.

This book will show how Luther reformed our understanding of vice and virtue and was able to make use of a revered theological tradition, despite his antagonism toward its problematic aspects. The old understanding of vice and virtue had indeed undermined the Gospel. Luther had to reimagine the concepts of vice and virtue before using them in the context of sanctified living. Part 1 of this book tells how he did so, reenvisioning vice and virtue in light of the Reformation tenet of salvation by grace alone and making use of this enduring tradition in a manner consistent with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Luther's reforming of vice and virtue also enhances our understanding of what it means to daily live baptized. Part 2 of the book considers how various vices and virtues vie for control of our hearts in the battle that takes place in every Christian's soul. We will explore how practically to slay vice and cultivate virtue that we might increasingly be freed from the bondage of unholy habits and be enabled to turn our attention toward the needs of our neighbor.

I pray this book will serve as a helpful guide as readers endeavor to shun the desires of the flesh and walk according to the Spirit. Through Luther's reformed understanding of vice and virtue, I trust readers will not only grow in their understanding of Christian truth but also be strengthened in the fight of their own daily

battle with sin, and that by learning how to better engage in this battle, they will be able more faithfully and consistently to live out God's holy commands in their lives, that God would be honored and the neighbor served in love.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to
abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage
war against your soul.

(1 Peter 2:11)



The background of the entire page is a dark, textured surface covered with numerous sharp, translucent shards of broken glass. The shards vary in size and orientation, creating a sense of chaos and destruction. The lighting highlights the edges and facets of the glass, giving it a three-dimensional appearance.

INTRODUCTION
**VICE AND VIRTUE
IN LUTHER**

Salvation Not by Virtue

Even the most casual student of world history knows Martin Luther for his association with the Reformation of the Christian Church. The Reformation movement centered on the answer to this question: How are sinners saved from the wrath of a holy God?

Luther believed that the answer to that question favored by the church of his day was at odds with Scripture. Over time, the Roman Catholic Church had intermingled human performance into God's free gift of grace. This introduced doubt in the hearts and minds of the faithful about their salvation. If works were part of the equation, they would always wonder, Have I done enough? Have I done enough good works in my life that I might expect God to judge me favorably in the end and thus be saved from punishment in hell following my death?

Believers had begun to lose sight of the unconditional love of God shown in Christ Jesus. They saw God not as compassionate and forgiving but rather as an almighty, righteous judge. To be sure, God is both mighty and righteous, and He will return to judge the living and the dead on the Last Day—but on what basis? The Catholic Church of Luther's day might have answered, "On the basis of how well we have loved." In their minds, grace was like a spiritual power that God gives to humans to improve themselves; the grace was indeed given freely, but what use people might make of it was up to them! As such, much was made of moral progress, and one's relative performance with respect to the works of the Law were seen as part of the equation when calculating whether

one would be saved. As a pious Christian shaped by the church of Rome, Luther grew up immersed in this concept of salvation.

But Luther eventually recognized the error of this understanding. Luther struggled to feel accepted by God and confident before the throne of judgment, continually tortured by the idea that God was angry with him. His outlook changed, though, as he studied Scripture. He began to see his God in a different light—as a God of love—as he read the New Testament, especially Paul’s letters. Luther later recounted that famous moment while studying the letter to the Romans in the castle tower when he felt as if he had been “altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”¹

He particularly recalled studying Romans 1:17, which speaks of the “righteousness of God [that] is revealed from faith.” When Luther had read this verse before, he had always considered the phrase “the righteousness of God” to refer to the righteousness which *is* God’s, with which He stands over us as our righteous judge. But through his study of Scripture, Luther came to realize that the “righteousness of God” Paul speaks of here was actually the righteousness we possess *from* God, bestowed on us through our faith in Jesus.

The more Luther studied, the more convinced he became that the biblical understanding of salvation was as Paul writes in numerous places: we are saved by faith alone, apart from the works of the Law (see Romans 3:28 and Galatians 2:16, for example). Grace is not a measurable quantity of power that God pours into

us to be used by us; rather, grace is best conceived of as God's new attitude toward humanity because of the forgiving work of His Son. Because the sins of humanity have been atoned for in Christ, God now looks upon us with favor. In this understanding, we can know we are saved, not by considering whether we have done "enough," but by trusting the reality that, in Jesus, God has shown mercy to us and has already done it all on our behalf. In other words, salvation has nothing to do with me or my performance of good works—it has everything to do with Jesus and His work of dying on the cross for the sins of the world and being raised to life on the third day for our justification. We are justified by God's righteous declaration. He renders that verdict not because our moral performance substantiates our innocence but because the blood of Jesus covers our sin.

Undoing Aristotle

Once Luther believed he had arrived at a correct understanding of the Gospel, he began to teach the laity the true nature of salvation. He tirelessly reinforced these truths in the sermons he preached to his congregation, as he taught his students in the university classroom, and as he distributed his writings. To a people who had generally lived in fear of God's judgment, the pure Gospel of salvation by grace alone was good news indeed. But old habits die hard. To help the laity avoid returning to their old mindset, Luther also worked to dismantle parts of the distorted belief system of his day that had fostered an incorrect understanding of the Gospel.

In this respect, no system drew more of Luther's ire than the teachings of the philosopher Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas had adapted Aristotle's vice and virtue tradition for use in the church in the thirteenth century, and that practice shaped the church academics (known as the Scholastics) and the development of their own theological system. The Scholastics taught, among other things, that the inner desire to sin (called *concupiscence*) was not sinful in and of itself; sin occurred only when such desires were acted upon. They considered desires to be merely the "tinder of sin" that became sinful only when engulfed by the flames of evil deeds. The Scholastics also taught that the old sinful self had to be continually cleansed until one became perfectly holy. While it was theoretically possible for this process to be completed during one's earthly life, the common understanding was that some of the necessary cleansing would remain to be completed after one's death. This was the purpose of purgatory: to purge away the rest of the sinful self so the full blessings of salvation could commence. In their understanding, God would never declare righteous someone who was still very much a sinner. A favorable declaration from God could come only when all sin had been completely cleansed.

In contrast, Luther taught that Christians are simultaneously sinner and saint our entire lives. The old, sinful self that remains in every believer would be done away with completely at death and only the saint would remain. For Luther, the reality that we remain sinners did not negate God's declaration that we are entirely innocent of those sins during our earthly lives. Indeed,

sinner's cling to that promise in Christ for the assurance of salvation, even as we daily battle against the sinful nature.

Prior to Luther, one of the ways a Christian could gauge progression toward holiness was to avoid vices and embrace holy virtues. This concept of vice and virtue was synthesized into the theology of the church primarily by Thomas Aquinas, who appropriated it from the pagan ethicist Aristotle. In his famous writings on ethics, Aristotle systematically described what he observed to be primary virtues and their related vices of excess and deficiency. Virtues were good habits, and vices were the bad habits that resulted when someone practiced a virtue too much or too little. Take the virtue of generosity, for example. Consistently giving of your own possessions for the sake of others would make you virtuous. However, you could give too excessively, to the point where you would foolishly give away too much and neglect to provide for those under your care. This would be the vice Aristotle called liberality. On the other hand, you could refuse to give away anything at all, keeping the entirety of your money and goods for yourself. This, too, would be a vice, a deficiency in giving, often labeled miserliness, like Scrooge.

Aristotle did not consider vices sinful; rather, they were simply a weakness of character that people could overcome by the repeated practice of virtue as they slowly formed a new character. This understanding worked well as Thomas Aquinas adopted these concepts to teach about morality. The way to salvation could be viewed as using the grace God has granted to gradually overcome bad habits and become better and better people so that

eventually we could be declared righteous and worthy of eternal life. The discerning reader can see how this framework hinders a biblical understanding of the Gospel—that we are saved by grace alone, not by our human performance. Because of this, Luther considered Aristotle’s ethics to be “the worst enemy of grace” and worked to diminish its influence in the church.²

Reforming Vice and Virtue

And yet, if you read Luther’s writings with an eye for the language of vice and virtue, there is more of this sentiment than you would expect. How was Luther able to use such terminology, given the threat Aristotle’s philosophy had posed to the Gospel? This book will answer that question fully, but simply put, just as Luther had to teach clearly about the nature of salvation, so, too, he had to provide clarity about the concepts of vice and virtue for the church. Luther taught that vices are nothing less than specific manifestations of unbelief that remain in the human heart. Virtues are more than good habits. They are dispositions worked in and through us by the Holy Spirit—and not just so that we become better people but rather to enable us to more consistently carry out the good works that God prepared in advance for our service to others.

If, as Luther taught, vice is not just a bad habit but rather evidence of unbelief, then failure to fight against vice could eventually result in losing our faith, as Paul teaches in 1 Timothy 1:19. That is why elsewhere he admonishes us to “put to death” our evil desires (Colossians 3:5) and why Peter encourages us to make

every effort to add virtue to our faith (2 Peter 1:5). They remembered Jesus' warning that vices related to the riches and cares of the world are like weeds that can choke out faith (Matthew 13:22) and how He exhorts us to continually watch ourselves that we might remain in faith until the day of His return (Luke 21:34).

Luther's reformed understanding of vice and virtue helps us strive each day to carefully guard and watch over our faith, exactly as Jesus teaches us to do. And the key to this transformation, this movement from vice to virtue, is for believers to actively live out our Baptism: to daily put to death the old man—those remnants of unbelief that continue to reside in the human heart—so that the new man the Spirit is creating can daily rise up in virtue, the dispositions that equip Christians to carry out God's commands.

This is the battle that plays out day by day in the souls of all who are baptized and believe.

I believe; help my unbelief!

(Mark 9:24)



PART 1

VICE AND VIRTUE REFORMED

And so you must not imagine that the Christian's life is a standing still and a state of rest. No, it is a passing over and a *progress from vices to virtue*. . . . And those who have not been *en route* you should not consider Christians either.

Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*

Would you have guessed that quote is from Luther? He is not exactly known as a proponent of virtue ethics. But by casting the vice and virtue tradition in a new light—the light of the Gospel—Luther was able to make considerable use of it. And what about the final part of this utterance, that those who are not making progress from vice to virtue should not even be considered Christians? How could Luther say such a thing—especially given his commitment to salvation apart from human performance?

Luther could say this because he rightly recognized vices as evidence of unbelief in the human heart. As such, when we do not endeavor to move away from vice and toward virtue, we essentially embrace the various idols that rule our hearts and minds. Instead, Christians must strive to slay the idols and grow in the Spirit. Luther called this movement from vice to virtue the “task of all whom [God] causes to be baptized.”¹ Part 1 will explore the theology behind this task.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

(1 John 5:21)



CHAPTER 1

SINFUL DESIRE
**THE OLD MAN THAT
JUST WON'T DROWN**

Mere Desire?

Picture yourself standing in worship. You've exchanged greetings and sung with gusto the opening hymn, one of your favorites. Your pastor made the sign of the cross over the congregation as he spoke the words of the invocation, invoking the name into which we are baptized—the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Then, prior to speaking together the corporate confession of sins, he calls upon worshipers to silently examine their hearts.

But today those few silent seconds seem like an eternity. Shame creeps in as you realize that you continue to confess the same sins of thought, word, and deed week after week. You wonder, Can't I ever get any better? As a Christian living out my faith, *shouldn't* I be getting a bit better?

As you take inventory, you realize there has been progress: I've gotten better at not yelling at my kids when I get angry, you think. That only happened once this week, and that is an improvement. It used to be an everyday occurrence. And, you recall, not once did I slam a door or pound my fist or make an obscene gesture at another driver who obviously doesn't understand the rules of the road. This, too, is an improvement—it used to happen at least once or twice a week.

Then you drop your head. You recognize that even though these things happen less frequently, what has *not* changed are the angry thoughts that simmer beneath the surface. Just because you don't yell doesn't mean you aren't as mad as you always are at

the kids when they disobey. Just because you've been gentler on the door you've refrained from slamming doesn't mean you aren't still hot under the collar. Just because you didn't gesture at the other driver doesn't mean you aren't seething with road rage on the inside. So you wonder, Have I *really* gotten any better?

A few weeks passed, but it kept bothering you, so you confided this problem to a Christian friend over lunch. He encouraged your so-called progress. He assured you that everyone gets mad; as long as it doesn't boil over into words or actions, it's nothing to worry about. You're not so sure. The words of the Confession liturgy keep ringing in your head: "We have sinned against You in *thought*, word, and deed."¹ My *church* seems to think these angry thoughts are sinful, you conclude. But why? Getting angry seems like a feeling that arises apart from our overt will. Should I be held accountable for something I have so little control over?

Humans have wrestled with that question since the fall of man—should we feel guilty for sins of the heart? Over the ages, the church has given different answers about whether "mere" desire is morally neutral. Much like the friend in the example above, the Scholastics and the church of Luther's day believed it was neutral. They taught that such desire was merely tinder that turned into sin only when acted upon. Luther himself wrestled with this answer. It turns out, getting the answer right was a key component that drove the Reformation.

Desire Itself as Sinful

Most people rightly associate the Reformation with new insights about the nature of justification—that is, understanding that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. But Luther arrived at this understanding in tandem with his recognition of the radical nature of sin, which imprisons man in complete bondage to unrighteousness. Scripture tells us that since humanity's fall into sin, “every intention of the thoughts of [our] heart is only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). Sinful desire is always with us. This inner desire (or concupiscence) expresses itself specifically, for instance, when we lust or covet. Luther came to realize that the lustful or envious thoughts that give rise to evil deeds are by no means neutral—they, too, are evil.

Luther arrived at this understanding through his study of Paul's letter to the Romans: “[Paul] clearly adduces the moral law in Romans 7[:7], ‘I should not have known that concupiscence is sin, if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”’” Luther admits that this doesn't necessarily make sense to us:

For nature did not call this wanton itching [that is, coveting] sin, but rather its evil use on the bodies of others, as in debauchery, adultery, and fornication. Similarly, it does not call anger and avarice sin, but rather their expression in theft, fraud, slander, murder—and so also for other vices.²

To our fallen human minds, it does not seem like a mere

thought, such as anger or avarice (the desire for money or possessions), would be considered sinful. Rather, it seems as if these desires would only be sinful when expressed in the world. Anger is just in the mind, but when acted out to the fullest extent, it could lead to murdering another. Similarly, a greedy thought might not seem overly problematic, but when it leads to someone stealing, then it appears sinful indeed.

But Paul clearly writes that God's command in Scripture not to covet (the Ninth and Tenth Commandments) shows us that even our covetous desires should be considered sinful. Opposing those who labeled desire as only weakness or imperfection, Luther boldly declared, "Here we stand at a parting of the ways. . . . I have Paul's term on my side."³ Contrary to what we might suppose, these inner desires—that is, habitual vices like anger, greed, or lust—are sinful in and of themselves. God's Word calls us to acknowledge the reality that sin exists, not just at the level of the outward deed, but within the deepest desires of our fallen hearts.

Vices as Evidence of Original Sin

Luther's burgeoning understanding led him to recognize that the presence of these sinful desires is evidence that original sin remains in our hearts even after we come to faith. He writes:

The last two commandments are perfectly clear. They forbid sinful lusts of the flesh and the coveting of temporal goods. These evil desires do no harm to our neighbor, and yet they persist to the

grave. . . . Nobody has ever been so holy that he never felt some evil inclination within. . . . For original sin is born in us by nature: it may be checked, but it cannot be entirely uprooted except through death.⁴

While the Scholastics taught that desires were mere defects or weaknesses, Luther found from Scripture that this was not true. Indeed, he noted that “it is contrary to Scripture, for St. Paul does not say, ‘I find in me a defect,’ but expressly . . . ‘The *sin* which dwells within me’ [Romans 7:20].” Luther also pointed out that when Paul “writes to baptized people . . . ‘The desires of the flesh are against the spirit, and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh’ [Galatians 5:17],” Paul teaches that these desires come from our “physical birth, when this original sin of evil desire is born with them.” Luther then explained that “this original sin, born in the flesh, passes away in baptism as guilt, but remains as work; although it is forgiven, nevertheless it lives, twists, turns, raves, and assails us.”⁵

Here Luther carefully articulates how it can be taught that Baptism removes original sin and yet, when we experience sinful desire in our lives, it can still rightfully be attributed to our original sin. Baptism removes the *consequences* of original sin—in other words, the baptized will no longer be damned because of our sinful nature. And yet, the removal of this consequence does not mean the evil desires that emanate from original sin no longer exist. No, they are present, and the evidence for it is the vices that