

## FIRST DISPUTATION AGAINST THE ANTINOMIANS

**The first disputation against the Antinomians.**

**Preface of the Reverend Father Don Dr. Martin Luther to the First Disputation against the Antinomians, held at Wittenberg, in the year of Christ, 1537, on December 18.**

My dear brethren and colleagues, you observe that Satan does not cease to persecute our Mediator and Savior Jesus Christ. By means of sin, the impious teaching of heretics, and the oppression of tyrants he creates as much confusion as possible, for fear that the saving doctrine of justification will remain untainted in the Church.

Even though it has, by the overwhelming mercy of God, come to be that our church and all who agree with this teaching have a pure and definite way of explaining and teaching Christian doctrine, we must take the greatest care that it is preserved in its purity, and, insofar as we are able, is passed on as purely to posterity, and that we by no means permit an alien and new way of teaching the article of justification—especially during our lifetime—to be taught, lest by our negligence we provide an occasion for Satan to burst into the Church and to give rise to endless sects and offenses. We must not only be concerned about how we might be saved, but we also must take the greatest pains lest posterity receive lies and errors under the disguise of piety and truth. Yet let those be accursed who are, or will be, the authors of such horrible evil.

You have heard frequently that there is no better way of teaching and preserving the pure doctrine than that we follow this method, namely, that we divide Christian doctrine into two parts, law and gospel; as there are also

two things which are set before us in God's word, namely, either wrath or grace, sin or righteousness, death or life, hell or heaven. And these matters are certain and clear. There is no Babylonian confusion of opinions and abominations as was in the Papacy. The first thing, that is, sin, death, and God's wrath, is inborn and known to us on account of our first parents. The other, namely, grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and life, to be sure, is begun in us through the good work of Christ, but it is not completed. Yet it will be completed manifestly when we will be raised on that day, when the body will be utterly cleansed from all sins and will be like the glorious body of Christ our Head.

Therefore, if we remain in these two things we cannot err. For we know, even feel, that sin is present, that death utterly terrifies us, etc. This first thing is taught by the law, the knowledge of which is highly necessary for humankind, because we are not only conceived and born in sin and live in it, but the corruption and blindness of human nature is also so great that it neither sees nor feels the magnitude of sin. To be sure, all men by nature have some knowledge of the law, yet it is very weak and obscured. Therefore it was, and always is, necessary to teach men this knowledge of the law, that they might recognize the greatness of their sin, of God's wrath, etc.

It is impossible that God would encourage and exalt sin. It is necessary, therefore, that God's wrath and death be taught as the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23). Since human nature has been so corrupted and blinded in Paradise by the venom of the devil that it perceives neither the magnitude of sin nor feels and trembles at the punishment of sin, God's wrath and eternal death, that doctrine which makes these evils apparent and visible needs to be preserved in the Church. That doctrine is the law.

Likewise against those evils revealed and pointed out to us by the law, lest we despair, that other doctrine also has to be preserved in the Church, which teaches consolation against the accusation and terrors of the law, grace against God's wrath, remission of sins and righteousness against sin, life against death. That doctrine is the gospel, which teaches that God through his word has locked up everyone under sin so that he might have mercy upon everyone; that he most certainly wants to remit the sins of all, liberate from death, and give righteousness and life to those who feel their misery, unrighteousness, and perdition, and certainly freely without any merit of ours, yet only in such a way that these benefits come upon believers because of Christ.

This method is used by Paul in all of his epistles, especially in Romans. For in the first three chapters he does nothing else than drive home the point that all men are impious and unrighteous; that not only the Gentiles but also the Jews are under sin, because it is written (Rom. 3:10-12): "There is none righteous; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God; there is none who does good, no, not one." The law does not liberate even the Jews from this divine sentence, but wraps them in particular within it, "that every mouth may be stopped, and the entire world may become guilty before God" (Rom. 3:19). As soon as he has driven this home with many and certainly very serious and significant words, he shows forth the other part of Christian doctrine, namely, "that we are declared righteous freely by God's grace, by the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as propitiator by faith in his blood" (Rom. 3:24-25).

This method was used by Christ himself, John the Baptist, the apostles and prophets. For Christ says in Matt. 5(:17): "I have not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it," which means: My office is not to eliminate the law but to fulfill it, and to fulfill it in such a way that those who believe that they are redeemed from the curse of the law because of this, my fulfillment of the law, might also know that the law is now to be fulfilled by them, especially since they have already received the first fruits of the Holy Spirit. Thus Paul says in Rom. 3(:31): "We do not destroy the law by faith but establish it," and (Rom.) 8(:3, 4): "What was impossible for the law etc., that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us."

The law, therefore, cannot be eliminated, but it remains, prior to Christ as not fulfilled, after Christ as to be fulfilled, although this does not happen perfectly in this life even by the justified. For it requires that we love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Matt. 22:37, 39). This will happen perfectly first in the coming life.

Since therefore the prophets, Christ, and the apostles used this method we must imitate them and exhort all men, especially the callous and impenitent, that they might learn to acknowledge the magnitude of sin, because of which they have merited God's wrath and eternal death. As soon as we have done this by the law, we have a divine mandate to console the fainthearted again so that we might receive and lift up those terrified by the law and support them. Thus, it is the true and proper work of the law to accuse and kill; that of the gospel, to vivify.

These disputations, however, are held for your benefit, my dear brothers, that you might be confirmed in sound doctrine and might receive a certain method of teaching it to others, which would not allow you to err or fail, if you observe these two matters, sin and righteousness, life and death, to which the entire human race is subject because of the fall of our first parents. This doctrine teaches true repentance, which lasts throughout our entire life.

This I wanted to state by way of preface. Those who would like to debate are now free to do so.

### **First Argument**

Against the entire disputation.

*We are not obliged to do the impossible. The law is impossible. Therefore we are not obliged to do it.*

Response: It is said improperly, that is, not rightly and not fittingly, that we are obliged to do what is impossible by the law. When Adam was first created, the law was for him not only something possible, but even something enjoyable. He rendered the obedience the law required with all his will and with gladness of heart, and did so perfectly. Yet what now, after the fall, is impossible, is so not by fault of the law, but by our fault. It is not the fault of the one binding, but of the one sinning, hence this statement, *The law urges us to do what is impossible*, needs to be understood fittingly, for if you want to preserve the strict sense of the words, it sounds as if God himself is being accused of burdening us with the impossible law. Yet it is sin and Satan, who made the possible and enjoyable law impossible and terrifying, who are to be accused.

Christ, however, by willingly submitting himself to the law and enduring all its curses, earned for those who believe in him the Spirit, being driven by whom they also in this life begin to fulfill the law; and in the life to come the most joyful and perfect obedience will be within them, so that they will do in body and soul as now do the angels.

## Second Argument

Against thesis 24. [“And they taught dangerously that the law of God is to be removed from the Church, which is blasphemy and a sacrilege.”]

*Whatever is annulled is no longer valid nor in effect. The law is annulled. Therefore it is no longer valid. The minor is proved, since the law and the prophets were until John (Luke 16:16).*

I respond to the minor: The law is annulled, this means, the curse of the law. For since Christ came it has no power to accuse us. Or: The law is abrogated, hence it is not to be preached.

I respond: There is more in the consequence than in the premise. The premise speaks only about the ceremonial [law], not the moral, which was from the beginning and is born with us.

Response of Dr. Martin Luther: This is one of the chief arguments which can move even a sensible man. When Christ said: “The law and the prophets were until John,” these words sounded as if the law was no longer to be taught after the appearance of Christ. Yet the meaning of these words is: If John, who pointed to the Lamb, had not come, man would be unable to render what the law requires and the prophets promised. This is the true meaning of this passage. The law required righteousness; it required perfect obedience. Later, the prophets preached this fulfillment—the Coming One, that is—and by it they confirmed the demands of the law. Not even the prophets were able to render what the law required, much less the law itself, but John, when he came, was able.

“If you want to see,” he said, “and have what the law requires and the prophets promised, behold, here is the Lamb of God” (John 1:29). Whoever would not receive this pointer to the Lamb and would not believe that Christ, the end of the law (Rom. 10:4), had come, this one would perish, as the Jews: To this present day John has not come to them, and they remain under the law. Or so: Yet people were unable to fulfill it until John came, who also was unable to fulfill or to satisfy the law. Yet he spoke in this way: “Listen. The law, which formerly required of us what is impossible, no lon-

ger has any right to demand anything from us, because we have Christ, the already present and revealed Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world; he rendered abundantly what the law required. After sin has been taken away, the law has no right to accuse us, so that he now ‘is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes’ (Rom. 10:4).

It is therefore impossible for men to render what the law demands and what the prophets preached concerning the future fulfillment of the law, unless they have and by faith lay hold of Christ, etc. The believers, however, have what the law requires and the prophets promised. It is therefore no longer necessary that the law require its fulfillment and the prophets preach about Christ the future Fulfiller of the law, because he appeared in his time and was made a curse in order to free us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13). He also gave us the Holy Spirit “that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom. 8:4).

For the impious, however, the demands of the law remain. To be sure, it also accuses and threatens the pious, but it is unable to drive them into despair and damn them. Therefore, when Christ appeared at the time of John, the law and the prophets ceased.

This happens to each man individually. As long as he does not believe the finger and voice of John who testifies that Christ, the Lamb of God, has fulfilled the law, he serves under the command and tyranny of the law. The law says to a certain person: “Render what you owe; God has given the law that you might fulfill it, yet you have not fulfilled it, therefore you have an irate God and strict Judge.” Meanwhile the law does not say in what way or by whom that person can fulfill it. It cannot show him who fulfills it, until the Gospel comes and says: Christ has done it.

### **Third Argument**

Against thesis 4. [“The first part of repentance, sorrow, is caused solely by the law. The second part, the good intention, cannot be caused by the law.”]

*By God’s grace alone repentance is worked in us. Therefore no part of repentance can be ascribed to the law. I prove the antecedent from Jeremiah 31(:18): “Turn to me and I will be turned” etc. Likewise, Ps. 51(:10): “Create a clean heart in me, O God.”*

Response: We do not deny that it is God who works repentance in us. Our theses certainly confess this openly. Nonetheless it is improper to say, God's grace works repentance in us. For grace is properly the fulfillment of the law, the forgiveness of sins, righteousness and life in Christ. Yet actually the following proves that God works repentance in us: Many hear the law, and still they are not moved by its threats and terrors because they do not feel the force of the law. This is why I do not convert anyone by virtue of my preaching, unless God is there and cooperates with his Spirit.

Does this mean that the law is not to be preached because God moves and converts the heart only out of mercy? This consequence is ridiculous. For the same reason I could say, the gospel is not to be preached because few hear it, and even fewer believe it. Yet God wants us to teach the law. Wherever we do this, he will see to it that he certainly converts those by it unto repentance who are converted by it, whomever and whenever he wills. Thus we also ought to preach the Gospel which is a teaching common to all; yet "not all have faith" (2 Thess. 3:2).

Thus the law pertains to all, yet not all have repentance. Yet those who have it, have it by means of the law. Yet the prophet speaks about true repentance that lasts the entire life. He says (more or less): "Humble me and lead me to true repentance that I might loathe perverted and impious doctrine, but especially that most holy one of the hypocrites who do not understand the law, and much less are able to teach it to others, but bristle with its righteousness and their own wisdom" (cf. Is. 5:21). Yet a disciple is not better than his teacher (Matt. 10:24). Therefore, they too certainly convert their disciples, but to idolatry and perdition.

All have the gospel, but not all have faith. All have the law, but not all have the force and experience of the law. Thus, I repent when God strikes me with the law and the gospel. We cannot tell the time and hour. He who wills to convert me knows it. He speaks about the entire life.

#### **Fourth Argument**

Against thesis 25. ["For the entire Scripture teaches that repentance must be initiated by the law, which is what the order of the matter itself and also experience shows."]