

MARTIN LUTHER AND THE HAPPY INCONSISTENCY

BY

AARON A. SCHRIMPF

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

PROF. JOHN BRENNER, ADVISOR  
WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY  
MEQUON, WISCONSIN

MARCH 7, 2018

## ABSTRACT

This study explores some of the significant historical events in Martin Luther's life that provide insight into his understanding and application of the term "happy inconsistency." It is specific to Luther's interactions with synergists. The phrase, "application of the term happy inconsistency," means, "when did Luther consider an individual to be an erring Christian and not an unbeliever." This study is heavily dependent on Luther's own writings from various periods. Secondary sources are used in establishing consistency and providing abstract analysis. The purpose of this study is twofold: To provide Lutheran pastors who are confronted with synergism with a proper understanding and application of the term "happy inconsistency," and to guard against adulterating the gospel by a faulty application of the happy inconsistency.

*Keywords:* happy inconsistency, Martin Luther, gospel, synergism, papacy, fanatics

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
MARTIN LUTHER AND THE TERM ‘HAPPY’ INCONSISTENCY.....	3
His Writings Reflect This Term	3
Defining Luther’s Life Work	6
Luther Knew Himself	8
LUTHER ON APPLYING THE HAPPY INCONSISTENCY TO THOSE IN THE R.C.C.....	12
Luther’s Patience Toward the R.C.C. From the Beginning	12
Luther’s Attacks were not Personal	15
Luther’s Analysis of the Church Fathers	18
A Happy Inconsistency at the End of Life	19
The Issue of Reason	22
Luther and Erasmus	24
Luther’s Condemnation of the Papacy	28
The Papacy Was Always Consistent	31
What Was at Stake	33
LUTHER ON APPLYING THE HAPPY INCONSISTENCY TO THE FANATICS .....	35
A Happy Inconsistency Rarely Exists in Proponents of New Heresies	36
Luther’s Knack in Catching Deception	38
A Different Gospel	38
His Final Assessment of Zwingli and Other Fanatics	44
The Other Side of the Same Coin	45

What Was at Stake? 47

TAKEAWAY FROM LUTHER’S APPLICATION OF THE HAPPY INCONSISTENCY.....49

When the Happy Inconsistency Exists in an Individual 50

When the Happy Inconsistency Does Not Exist in an Individual 53

What is at Stake in Misapplying the Term? 56

CONCLUSION.....58

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....60

## INTRODUCTION

To be a Christian is to be inconsistent. This is not because a Christian wants to be inconsistent, but because there is a new man in him alongside of his old Adam. At the moment faith is kindled in a Christian's heart, his new man opposes, struggles, and wages warfare against his old Adam and vice versa. On the one hand, this new man believes in Christ alone for salvation. Yet on the other hand, his old Adam continues to promote work righteousness and idolatry, which manifest themselves through thoughts, words, or actions. This is called a "happy inconsistency" since the work righteous thoughts, words, or actions do not reflect what is consistently believed in the heart, namely justification by Christ alone.

This happy inconsistency is found in every Christian. However, the use of the term requires caution. Not every person who displays contradictions is demonstrating a happy inconsistency. Likewise, the term is easily misunderstood and misapplied. Failure to recognize these warnings is disastrous to a pastor and those he serves, for when the term happy inconsistency is misunderstood or misapplied, so is the gospel. This is especially true in the case of synergism.

Synergists do not display a happy inconsistency, even when crediting a great deal to the merits of Christ. Synergists are individuals who are *consistently* work righteous. A Lutheran pastor who is quick to label a synergist with a happy inconsistency demonstrates a lack of discernment, perhaps even ineptitude in doctrine. The result of misunderstanding or misapplying this term leaves a pastor open to being shamefully deceived by individuals.

However, the opposite is also true. A person with synergistic tendencies may display a happy inconsistency. A Lutheran pastor who fails to recognize the *opinio legis* within himself and his parishioners will fail to see that every Christian struggles with synergistic thoughts on a daily basis. If he does not acknowledge the happy inconsistency that exists in himself and his members, he deceives himself. In the end, he may crush the erring Christian and destroy his faith.

For these reasons, Lutheran pastors, while keeping everything and everyone subject to Scripture, should consider the practical examples given in church history. The writings of the church fathers are invaluable in understanding and applying the term. In the case of synergism, there are few better examples to follow than that of Martin Luther. His early years as a synergist provide priceless insight into his approach in helping the erring. Not to mention, he fought and debated against synergism on a more personal level for far longer than most men. His theology, wisdom, and heart make his perspective both vital and relevant to Lutheran pastors today.

Therefore, when confronted with synergism, Lutheran pastors must show discernment like Martin Luther's when applying the term "happy inconsistency" — a contradiction to a biblical truth that is not consistently defended nor believed in the heart — so that the gospel is not adulterated nor confused. I will show in this paper that Luther understood the difference between those erring against the gospel in weakness and those rejecting the gospel, and therefore was careful not to crush an erring Christian nor make a sinner secure.

## MARTIN LUTHER AND THE TERM ‘HAPPY’ INCONSISTENCY

An avid reader of Luther knows that he never used the term “happy inconsistency.” At times, he will speak of an inconsistency in the church fathers or lay people.<sup>1</sup> Yet he never used the term “happy inconsistency” as is commonly used by current WELS Lutherans. This does not mean, however, that Luther did not express its meaning or apply its truth in his writings. In bringing the church back to Scripture, Luther reminded the people that Christians are *simul justus et peccator*. He reminded them of the need to properly divide and apply law and gospel to all people according to their circumstances. In fact, Luther understood the happy inconsistency so well that it was a major reason he was able to apply law and gospel so efficiently and accurately. Those who read Luther’s writings will not search long before finding Luther expressing and teaching this concept.

### **His Writings Reflect This Term**

Francis Pieper, who is known in his dogmatics for using the term happy, (or *felicitous*) inconsistency, quotes Luther on many occasions.<sup>2</sup> These quotes were not derived from obscure offhanded comments Luther made; rather they were substantial points Luther was making in his well-known writings, such as “Of the Abuse of the Mass,” “Of the Councils and Churches,” “The Bondage of the Will,” and “the Smalcald Articles.” In these writings, Luther does not

---

<sup>1</sup> See Luther, M. (1999). *Luther’s works, vol. 32: Career of the Reformer II*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 32, p. 151). Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Luther, M. (1999). *Luther’s works, vol. 22: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 22, p. 394). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> See Pieper, F., *Christian Dogmatics vol. 1*, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 6, 26, 86-91.

specifically use the term, but the concept is clearly described and Pieper nowhere gives indication that Luther is intending some other meaning. For instance, when Pieper discusses the felicitous inconsistency found among theologians, he says,

Luther writes in his dissertation ‘Of the Abuse of the Mass’ (1521): ‘No doubt it still happens to many pious Christians that in the simple faith of their heart they observe Mass and regard it as a sacrifice. But because they do not [before God] rely on the sacrifice, yea, hold that all they do is sin, and cleave solely to the pure mercy of God, they are preserved, so that they do not perish in this error.’<sup>3</sup>

This is a typical example found in Pieper’s quotes from Luther. He noticed Luther would point out both sides of the inconsistency and then highlight the positive aspect of the inconsistency (i.e. the person’s faith in Christ alone) as the basis for why an individual should still be considered a Christian. This pattern is evident throughout Luther’s early, middle, and final writings.

At the beginning of his career, Luther thought the Catholic Church and the fanatics were simply erring Christians, as will be proved in the course of the paper. Later on, in 1535, when Luther wrote his Galatians commentary, he said of those saints who fall into many sins (including sins of work righteousness), “On no account, therefore, am I to jump to the conclusion that those who are weak in faith or morals are unholy, when I see that they love and revere the Word, receive the Lord’s Supper, etc.; for God has received them and regards them as righteous through the forgiveness of sins. It is before Him that they stand or fall.”<sup>4</sup>

By the year of his death, he confessed, “I can bear with a less hateful spirit those who cling too pertinaciously to the papacy, particularly those who have not read the sacred Scriptures . . . since I, who read the sacred Scriptures most diligently so many years, still clung to it so

---

<sup>3</sup> Pieper, F., *vol. 1: Christian Dogmatics*, 87.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians*, 82.



tenaciously.”<sup>5</sup> Luther held a lifelong belief that many people were simply displaying weak faith. In patience and love he put the best construction on those who had only known what the Catholic Church taught. His understanding of the invisible church grounded his conviction that, in spite of all the synergistic errors, the church existed on account of Christ’s promise. Professor Arnold Koelpin pointed out, “We must not forget that the Middle Ages also knew faith in Christ as the only Savior and the comfort derived from that faith. Luther himself was deeply convinced that it was this faith by which the saints of all times, the church of all ages, had lived.”<sup>6</sup> It is this truth that is apparent in many of Luther’s writings, regardless of the time he wrote. He often reserved judgment on the basis of charity, hoping people were simply speaking inconsistently from what they believed.

This doesn’t mean that Luther never got close to speaking of the happy inconsistency. Perhaps the closest example in which Luther expressed the term was from the *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*. He said, “It is inconsistent, on the one hand, to say: ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is true God and that I am saved through Him,’ and, on the other hand, to claim that the pope is also right when he preaches about cowls and tonsures. These two statements are contradictory.”<sup>7</sup> Luther continued by saying the person has not necessarily lost faith, provided the person relies on the pure Word of Christ alone in that temptation.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that few Lutheran theologians other than Pieper picked up on Luther’s knowledge and application of this concept. He speaks of it often when utilizing and applying law and gospel to those caught in synergism. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how Luther’s life work demonstrated his knowledge and application of the term.

---

<sup>5</sup> Luther, M., vol. 34: *Career of the Reformer IV*, 334.

<sup>6</sup> Koelpin, A., *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, 1983. Web), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Luther, M., vol. 22: *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4*, 394.

### Defining Luther's Life Work

During this 500<sup>th</sup> celebration of the Reformation, there are many famous scholars publishing their analysis of Luther's life and historical significance. However, there is one small book written in the late 1800's that has already done this. August Nebe correctly identified Luther's life work in one sentence, "Luther's entire reformatory activity may be regarded from a single point of view, *i.e.*, as an admonition of the erring."<sup>8</sup> Luther never set out to be a reformer and make a name for himself.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Luther confessed that, had he known beforehand what evil he would be confronted with for preaching the gospel, he would never have opened his mouth.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in ignorance of the future, Luther went about admonishing the erring. He hoped they could be won over for the truth as he had been. In his open letter to Pope Leo X in 1520 he said, "I acknowledge my indebtedness to my Christian brethren, whom I am duty-bound to warn so that fewer of them may be destroyed by the plagues of Rome, at least so that their destruction may be less cruel."<sup>11</sup> Luther called them *Christian brethren* in spite of the errors that he saw would eventually condemn so many of them. He also acknowledged that it was his duty to warn them. He was called to help those in error. Nebe said,

Throughout his entire life, the Reformer was, to a most extraordinary extent, brought into contact with people who cherished erroneous opinions, or whose consciences were perverted, especially with people who, unable to find the right way, wandered about in uncertainty or had actually started upon some course that was utterly wrong."<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of the sect or church body, Luther's writings reflect a man who began with Christian charity. He assumed their error(s) was of weakness, not unbelief. Yet even when he did condemn

---

<sup>8</sup> Nebe, A., *Luther as Spiritual Adviser*, (Lutheran Publication Society, 1894), 106.

<sup>9</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, 328.

<sup>10</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 288.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, 336.

<sup>12</sup> Nebe, A., *Luther as Spiritual Adviser*, 103.

and accuse of unbelief, he often did so for the sake of those erring against the gospel in weakness. He did not want “happy inconsistencies” to become “unhappy consistencies.”

Luther knew error meant an individual was in a very dangerous condition spiritually. Nebe said, “He had been compelled to teach thus, that he might not make himself a partaker of other men’s sins, and suffer those entrusted to his care, misled by soul-destroying error, to rush blindly into the pit of destruction.”<sup>13</sup> For Luther, a happy inconsistency did not mean, “Christ is still mentioned so no need for sharp polemics and rebuke.” On the contrary it meant, “Take action! Souls are being led to a different Christ!” Had Luther ignored the rampant errors of synergism, he would have considered himself to be responsible should the errors become their consistent beliefs. This is one reason he wrote, debated and preached harshly against synergism throughout his life.

Another reason was because he was forced into the fray by those who were out for blood (such as Johann Eck and the Roman Curia).<sup>14</sup> Nebe said, “He was, in the ordering of Providence, driven further step by step by the assaults of his enemies.”<sup>15</sup> These assaults were not private matters. They were made public either through writings or debates. Thus, their challenges forced Luther to speak up and not hold anything back. It was a matter of souls becoming convinced of synergism by the speeches and persuasions of Eck and the Roman Curia. He needed to take an unwavering stance on the truth against synergism for the sake of weak brothers.

For reasons like these, there can be no question whether Luther knew of the happy inconsistency or applied it. To admonish the erring is to consider an individual as a *Christian* in need of help. Luther’s first thought wasn’t to judge the person in error as an unbelieving heretic. In the Catholic Church, “They used the *Kyrie* and *Agnus Dei*, the words of the Holy Communion

---

<sup>13</sup> Nebe, A., *Luther as Spiritual Adviser*, 104.

<sup>14</sup> See Luther, M., *vol. 31: Open Letter to Pope Leo X*

<sup>15</sup> Nebe, A., *Luther as Spiritual Adviser*, 103-104.

and baptism formula . . . They constantly referred to the thief on the cross. All these things, according to Luther, have preserved the church in the Middle Ages.”<sup>16</sup> Luther’s goal was to admonish the Catholic Church, not convert it. He knew the gospel had not been entirely lost in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. However, it was severely overshadowed by synergism. Therefore, Luther’s entire reformatory activity may be regarded as an admonition to the happily inconsistent believers. This is often what a reformation of the church is about.

### **Luther Knew Himself**

Any truthful theologian who understands the necessity of always judging his thoughts and words on the basis of Scripture knows he has spoken contradictions in his life. I am not referring to seemingly contradictory teachings that Scripture calls all believers to hold in tension. Rather, I am referring to the sinful opinions a Christian may think or speak against the truth. As each Christian grows in wisdom and discernment of his Savior’s teachings, he comes to realize that at times he displayed a happy inconsistency. The same was true of Luther.

Luther’s personal reflections are the strongest evidence indicating Luther expressed and taught the concept of the happy inconsistency. On multiple occasions Luther acknowledged his own inconsistencies within the Catholic Church. In his *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings*, he makes a confession to those reading his works. He implores them to read “judiciously” and with “great commiseration,” since they would pick up on his inconsistencies. He said,

May he be mindful of the fact that I was once a monk and a most enthusiastic papist when I began *that cause*. I was so drunk, yes, submerged in the pope’s dogmas, that I would have been ready to murder all, if I could have, or to co-operate willingly with the

---

<sup>16</sup> Koelpin, A., *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 5.

murderers of all who would take but a syllable from obedience to the pope. So great a Saul was I, as are many to this day.<sup>17</sup>

On the one hand, Luther began *that cause*, preaching and teaching faith alone justifies; on the other hand, he still affirmed the dogmas of the pope. His personal confession indisputably proves he knew of the happy inconsistency. What he said about faith in Christ alone in one place demanded that he reject all the teachings of the pope. However, in his early years he had not yet drawn that connection. He said further, “You will find how much and what important matters I humbly conceded to the pope in my earlier writings, which I later and now hold and execrate as the worst blasphemies and abomination. You will, therefore, sincere reader, ascribe this error . . . to the time and my inexperience.”<sup>18</sup> Many of these errors included synergism, since what is included in the teaching on the authority of the pope is all the works that the pope determines to be articles of faith, i.e., the Catholic Church commanded the individual to follow the work righteous teachings of the church fathers. Luther’s early concessions to the pope indicates he still valued some of these works that the pope approved of for achieving salvation. This is apparent in his assessment of Nestorius in which he reflected on his own inconsistency. He said,

But I shall take myself by the nose too, lest I prove so ungrateful as to forget my own folly. Twenty years ago I taught— as I still do—that faith alone, without works, justifies. But if someone had arisen at that time and taught that monkery and nunning ought to be called idolatry and the mass a veritable abomination, I, though I would not have helped to burn him, would at least have said that it served him right. And I—thoughtless fool— could not see the conclusion that I would have had to concede, that if faith alone does it, then monkery and mass do not. And still worse, I knew that these were nothing but human works and doctrine, and yet I did not ascribe such value to the good works commanded by God and performed in faith.<sup>19</sup>

Notice, Luther confessed to being ungrateful, if he had ever forgotten his own happy inconsistency. Worse still, he would have been a hypocrite. These personal reflections are

---

<sup>17</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, 328. Emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, 328.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, 111.

invaluable in ascertaining what he knew of the happy inconsistency. His honest confessions confirm that he spoke of the happy inconsistency, even though he did not use the term *per se*.

Along with these self-reflections was his understanding of how law and gospel applied to himself. He believed that he could not carry out the law perfectly, for as much as he tried he could not even master the catechism as he wished.<sup>20</sup> But he also believed that no matter how much the law condemned him, Christ's atoning sacrifice freed him from all guilt and punishment. Both truths applied to Luther and he never lost sight of those facts. He saw within himself and every other believer *simul justus et peccator*.

Lutheran pastors are familiar with this expression and they have Luther (in part) to thank for this. Luther reminded the saints of their dual condition. In his commentary on John chapter 7 he said,

For a proper Baptism, the true Word of God in the Sacrament of the Altar, Holy Writ, the Holy Spirit, and other gifts of God are holy. By means of these *we* are made holy . . . In *our* daily life *our* saintliness may progress falteringly; *we* may creep or crawl along. In *our* daily life *we* may be imperfect saints, full of shortcomings; for example, *we* do not trust, fear, or love God sufficiently. But *we* abstain from public vices, from whoring, adultery, and usury. And even though *we* fall victim to these, *we* rise again in the Word of God and stop sinning.<sup>21</sup>

The happy inconsistency was always taught by Luther when he spoke of all believers as both saints justified before God by word and sacrament, and also as imperfect sinners, who fall into all sorts of sins. This wasn't something new Luther thought up. It was clearly taught in Scripture. Luther simply highlighted this truth. For example, after Noah had obeyed all the directions of the Lord, and walked on dry ground again, Moses records an instance where Noah became drunk. Luther commented,

---

<sup>20</sup> L.C., Preface (1530), paragraph 8, *Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (R. Kolb & T. J. Wengert, Eds.) (C. Arand et. al., Trans.) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000,) 380.

<sup>21</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8*, 235. Emphasis mine.

But the intention of the Holy Spirit is familiar from our teaching. He wanted the godly, who know their weakness and for this reason are disheartened, to take comfort in the offense that comes from the account of the lapses among the holiest and most perfect patriarchs. In such instances we should find sure proof of our own weakness and therefore bow down in humble confession, not only to ask for forgiveness but also to hope for it.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout Luther's life, he taught, preached, and counseled people from personal experience, since the truths of Scripture brought home his own personal struggles. Yet his personal struggles didn't override Scripture; rather they were governed by Scripture. This explains why his written works are so highly valued. He was relatable. He spoke the truth about the people's happy inconsistencies.

Now that it has been sufficiently proven that Luther both expressed and taught the concept, it is necessary to consider *when* he applied it to the greatest proponents and purveyors of synergism – the Roman Catholic Church. His experiences within and outside of the church make his perspective both relevant and vital to pastors today.

---

<sup>22</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 2: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14*, 166.

## LUTHER ON APPLYING THE HAPPY INCONSISTENCY TO THOSE IN THE R.C.C

To understand when Luther applied the happy inconsistency to Catholics, (that is, when he considered them to be Christians, not unbelievers) we must consider three historical facts. The first is the dates of his writings. These are essential in understanding his application of the concept. For in his early writings, he shows patience, reservation, and a humble desire to teach his brothers. However, as the years dragged on, Luther's attitude changed toward those who opposed him and continued to disagree with what he taught. Length of time is one indicator that must be considered if we are to regard a person as displaying a happy inconsistency.

Second, we must note the people to whom Luther was writing. Luther did not talk the same way to all people. He was discerning. He was mindful of his addressees: were they scholars or peasants, pope or princes? Certain individuals could be excused for their lapses while others could not be.

Third, we must examine how Luther interacted with his opponent's arguments. He listened. He inquired. He asked questions. He looked to see if he was being fair to the person's own confession. This was a crucial indicator for Luther on how to apply the happy inconsistency. All three of these facts will be emphasized in this chapter.

### **Luther's Patience Toward the R.C.C. From the Beginning**

A key aspect of applying the happy inconsistency is patience; for example, not rushing to conclusions. When Lutheran pastors consider Luther's interactions with the pope, the first



thought that comes to mind is probably not Luther's patience. But in 1517, before Luther nailed the famous 95 Theses to the church door, he was certainly patient with the pope. To be fair, this patience was partly due to his own ignorance of the scheme behind the indulgences (e.g., Pope Leo X was getting a share of the sales). Nevertheless, it helps us understand that Luther put the best construction on the facts he had and therefore honestly thought Pope Leo would be on his side concerning the sale of indulgences. He said, "I certainly thought that in this case I should have a protector in the pope, on whose trustworthiness I then leaned strongly."<sup>23</sup> Even after he published the 95 Theses, he said that he also published the explanations of the Theses "to the pope's honor."<sup>24</sup> If one looks at the Theses themselves, he will notice how many times Luther defended the pope, e.g., Theses 9, 38, 50, 51, 53, 55, 78, and 82-89. While granting Luther's defense was partly due to his incomplete theology, this cannot be said of all the theses, especially those mentioned here. He took the road of charity toward the pope. He thought the pope was innocent of what was happening and was simply misinformed. However, should Luther have been charged with being naive? No. This is often the case with applying the happy inconsistency. If you don't know enough of the facts, then in good faith, you put the best construction you can on a person's words and actions. You consider them to be a Christian.

Nevertheless, as Luther's understanding of the pope's teachings started to become clearer, along with his stance on indulgences (and thereby works for salvation),<sup>25</sup> Luther began questioning the pope's office. In a letter Luther wrote to George Spalatin on March 18, 1519, he said,

I am studying the papal decretals for my disputation. And, confidentially, I do not know whether the pope is the Antichrist himself<sup>16</sup> or whether he is his apostle, so miserably is

---

<sup>23</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, 329.

<sup>24</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, 330.

<sup>25</sup> Pope Leo X issued a papal decretal in 1518 making a declaration on indulgences and a veiled threat against Luther.

Christ (that is, the truth) corrupted and crucified by the pope in the decretals. I am extremely distressed that under the semblance of laws and the Christian name, the people of Christ should be so deluded.<sup>26</sup>

Luther considered it to be one thing for an individual to be stuck in certain heretical teachings while desiring to move away from them. On the other hand, it was quite another matter to remain in those teachings, defend them, uphold them, and press them further. Nevertheless, Luther still held out hope for the pope.

After the Leipzig debate in June of 1519, Luther began writing three important works: *The Address to the German Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*. He finished these in 1520, and in each one he explained areas in which the pope's decrees were wrong. However, he still refrained from condemning the pope. Robert Rosin stated, "Luther expected those in authority to pick up on what he wrote and to live up to their responsibility to make changes so others would see the evangelical truth even as whatever clouded it would begin to pass away."<sup>27</sup> Luther knew that not all the decretals came from Pope Leo X, since many were from his predecessors. Therefore, he was not about to rush to conclusions concerning Leo X's personal convictions. It was not Leo X who was directly attacking him. It was the Roman Curia, people like Eck and Cajetan. These men jumped to the conclusion that Luther was personally attacking Leo X. In response to their accusations, Luther wrote in that same year of 1520, the *Open Letter to Pope Leo X*. In it, he explains that he was not personally attacking anyone.

---

<sup>26</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 48: Letters I*, 114.

<sup>27</sup> Rosin, Robert. *The Papacy in Perspective: Luther's Reform and Rome*, (Concordia journal, 29 no. 4, Oct 2003), 416.

### **Luther's Attacks were not Personal**

In the *Open Letter to Pope Leo X*, Luther demonstrates that he still considered Leo X to be innocent of the heresies surrounding him. He believed it was the Roman Curia, not Leo X, who was responsible for the attacks against the gospel. Now this wasn't the only reason Luther wrote this letter. In part, Luther wrote it to instruct Leo X in the truth, and give sound advice. He acknowledges it might seem presumptuous for a monk to instruct the head of the Catholic Church, yet the benefits of receiving such advice outweighed the lack of dignity. He said, "I do not consider it absurd if I now forget your exalted office and do what brotherly love demands. I have no desire to flatter you in so serious and dangerous a matter. If men do not perceive that I am your friend and your most humble subject in this matter, there is One who understands and judges."<sup>28</sup>

It is questionable whether Leo X ever received this letter. Yet to all who read it, it was impossible to deny Luther's intentions were proper and good. As Rosin said, "The preface [Open letter] was good form and a generous gesture, giving Leo the benefit of the doubt."<sup>29</sup> Consider also that before Luther wrote this letter, he had already received the papal bull that threatened him with excommunication.

In the end, Luther had gone the extra mile for Pope Leo X. However, he could go no further. There comes a point where hope turns into a refusal to acknowledge the facts. Pope Leo X's actions, along with many others, proved he would not listen to the gospel. Leo X was no longer innocent of the synergistic teachings that plagued the church. He was in a position to speak up for the gospel, yet he refused. Shortly after this letter, on December 10, Luther burned the bull. He was convinced that the papacy was the Antichrist.

---

<sup>28</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, 343.

<sup>29</sup> Rosin, Robert. *The Papacy in Perspective: Luther's Reform and Rome*, 415.

The patience Luther demonstrated toward Leo X was unique to the circumstances. Luther did not exhibit this same patience toward Eck and Cajetan. This was because Luther had direct contact with them. He had debated Eck at Leipzig and Eck's behavior and defense of the pope's authority was a blatant rejection of the gospel. It also became apparent to Luther that Eck was only defending the pope's position of authority so he might receive praise from the pope.<sup>30</sup> Luther held that those who defended the papacy's authority stood in the way of justification by faith alone. Rosin said, "Rome brought Luther's ire on itself when it impinged on the central interest in justification."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Eck's position was a total disregard for the true matter at hand. In Luther's judgment, he was no Christian, since he completely disregarded the gospel for the sake of power and glory.<sup>32</sup> There was no happy inconsistency to be found in Eck.

Cajetan also attacked Luther on the basis of the pope's authority. Cajetan stated that the papal bull of 1343 (*Unigenitus*) declared that indulgences gave people the ability to tap into Christ's storehouse of merit. Luther refused to accept this unless it could be proved from Scripture. In effect, Luther was stating that if the pope does not need to submit to Scripture, then he is setting up a false kingdom. "Luther offered, if Cajetan continued to defend such a false kingdom, one might wonder if he were truly a Christian."<sup>33</sup> Neither Cajetan nor Eck would back down from their positions. Instead they fumed and raged against Luther all the more. They lied while trying to act truthfully. They denied him peace while pretending to keep peace, "they" as Luther said, "glorified Christ who in every way curse him."<sup>34</sup> Luther concluded that lies and self-glorification carried more weight than did the words desiring peace and truth. Cajetan and Eck did not display a happy inconsistency. They were not Christians.

---

<sup>30</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, 333.

<sup>31</sup> Rosin, Robert. *The Papacy in Perspective: Luther's Reform and Rome*, 409.

<sup>32</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, 338.

<sup>33</sup> Rosin, Robert. *The Papacy in Perspective: Luther's Reform and Rome*, 419.

<sup>34</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, 338.

Luther was certainly sharp in his words, but he had reason to be. The gospel was being assaulted. Some attacked the gospel by *relentlessly defending* indulgences and the authority of the pope. Some not only opposed the gospel, they personally attacked Luther. Alveld wrote a treatise to the German laypeople calling Luther a “wolf among sheep,” “stupid,” “a madman,” “someone he wanted to pierce with seven swords.”<sup>35</sup> Luther would not spare Alveld for seeking to distance the people from the proclamation of the gospel. For the sake of the common folk, Luther responded harshly against Alveld and explained to the laypeople the reason for his polemical style,

I ask every devout Christian to understand that my words, though they are perhaps mocking and cutting, come from a heart which must break with great sorrow and turn seriousness into mockery, in view of the fact that this blasphemer [Alveld] publicly speaks and writes in Leipzig, where there are indeed devout people who would save Scripture and the word of God at the cost of their body and soul.<sup>36</sup>

Luther did not see a happy inconsistency in Catholics who *publicly* sought to lead people away from the truth, especially since Luther had already tried to correct Alveld. Thus, Luther was careful to make a distinction between Catholics like Alveld and Catholics who had a different attitude towards the Scriptures, people who – as Luther saw by their actions, desired to know the truth and cling to it.

Nevertheless, the conclusion should not be drawn that Luther saw no happy inconsistency in scholars who at first disagreed with him. At the Heidelberg Disputation, in which Luther made a very strong and unmovable stand on the gospel, Luther exhibited patience with a willingness to listen. He wasn't harsh or critical. He wanted to win scholars over for the gospel. Martin Bucer, who happened to be observing the debate, wrote about Luther to his mentor Beatus Rhenanus,

Although our chief men refuted him with all their might, their wiles were not able to make him move an inch from his propositions. His sweetness in answering is remarkable,

---

<sup>35</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 39: Church and Ministry I*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 39: Church and Ministry I*, 56.

his patience in listening is incomparable, in his explanations you would recognize the acumen of Paul, not of Scotus; his answers, so brief, so wise, and drawn from the Holy Scriptures, easily made all his hearers his admirers.<sup>37</sup>

Bucer went on to say that he had supper with Luther, during which they talked about doctrine and Luther answered whatever he asked. It is clear from Bucer's letter, that he became very fond of Luther on account of his patience and love toward people. Luther himself was not willing to immediately accuse anyone of unbelief. He sought to teach and instruct. It was with those who relentlessly opposed what Scripture said that Luther drew the line. Their positions as theologians in the Catholic Church could in no way make for an inconsistency since their public confessions remained consistent. However, in those who had grown up learning false views but desired to listen and learn the truth, Luther time and again viewed them as Christians displaying happy inconsistencies.

### **Luther's Analysis of the Church Fathers**

One of the ways in which Luther's opponents attacked him was by appealing to the church fathers. They challenged Luther on grace alone through faith alone by stating the church fathers never talked that way. Their charge against Luther was this, "Is it possible that those who have always been the church, the successors of the holy apostles and fathers, all err and are all in the wrong?"<sup>38</sup> According to Luther, this was their best armor and strongest defense against him.

Now Luther knew that their argument was not entirely correct. He had looked at many of the writings of the church fathers and had sufficient evidence in the church father's writings that condemned the teachings of the papist. But it was necessary for Luther to consider their writings and comment on their inconsistencies. After all, he was not like the wild fanatics who were all

---

<sup>37</sup> Smith, Preserved. *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters Vol. 1: 1507-1521*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 82.

<sup>38</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 324.

too eager to start their own religion or sect. Luther analyzed the writings of the church fathers to show that what he had been proclaiming was consistent with the church fathers, but where the church fathers had erred, this was due to their own happy inconsistencies.

### A Happy Inconsistency at the End of Life

No one should think that the church fathers were perfect in speech or life. There were many teachings they set down that set the stage for greater heresies in the future. Yet in 1533, Luther said, “Although the fathers were often wrong, they ought nevertheless to be honored on account of their testimony to faith. So I venerate Jerome and Gregory and others inasmuch as one can sense [from their writings], in spite of everything else, that they believed as we do, as the church from the beginning believed, and as we believe.”<sup>39</sup> Following the command of Scripture,<sup>40</sup> Luther put the best construction on the writings of the church fathers. He didn’t do this blindly, for he admits they were often wrong. Yet they still confessed what the invisible church believes: only through faith in Jesus Christ are we holy. Luther proved that the church fathers were demonstrating a happy inconsistency. Yes, they erred against faith in Jesus Christ by their writings, but at the same time they upheld faith in Christ *alone*. How can this be? Luther said,

And so the saints sin, fall, and even err; but they do so through ignorance. For they do not *want* to deny Christ, to lose the Gospel, to cancel their Baptism, etc. This is why they have the forgiveness of sins; and if through *ignorance* they err in doctrine, this is forgiven, because at the end they *acknowledge* their error and *depend solely on* the truth and grace of God in Christ. This is what Jerome, Gregory, Bernard, and others did.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 54: Table Talk*, 104–105.

<sup>40</sup> Hebrews 13:7

<sup>41</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians*, 85. Emphasis mine.

First, what constitutes a happy inconsistency for Luther is the motivation. By having a desire not to *want* to deny Christ or lose the gospel, means the person knows the truth. How else could they not *want* to go against the truth if they don't know the truth?

The second part Luther points out is they are ignorant of their error in doctrine. Luther never states in his writings that a person who knows their error and refuses to recant is a Christian. The third point made by Luther is that finally, many of the church fathers acknowledged their error. They did not go to their grave upholding or defending their error. Instead, they abandoned the error and depended solely on the gospel. What else can "depend solely on" mean, other than at their end, they believed in Christ alone for salvation? This last point deserves further attention.

In Luther's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, he speaks of people in monasteries (where the Scriptures were still being used), who were finally driven mad because the works that they hoped in finally could not quiet their conscience at the last hour. Knowing no other remedy (the gospel), they died in unbelief. He said this despair led St. Bernard, whom everyone thought led a most blameless life, to acknowledge at his deathbed, "'Oh, I have lived damnably and passed my life shamefully!' 'How so, dear St. Bernard? Have you not been a pious monk all your life? Are not chastity, obedience, preaching, fasting, and praying something valuable?' 'No,' he says, 'it is all lost and belongs to the devil.'"<sup>42</sup> Luther used this example more than once to demonstrate that faith in Christ *alone* saves. For to some synergists, the gates of death led them further into despair since their good works were not a true foundation of hope. When death drew near, the confidence Satan provided them in life left. Their foundation was shattered. However, to other synergists, death's door was a wake-up call. Death could not be stopped by any of their works, efforts or free will. With their foundation of works shattered, they rejected

---

<sup>42</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, 283.



synergism and clung to the one and only foundation that is solid: Christ Jesus. Luther said of St. Bernard, “Therefore he would have had to be damned eternally by his own judgment if he had not come to his senses through his loss, turned around, walked away from monkery, taken hold of a different foundation, clinging to Christ, and being preserved in the Creed that the children pray.”<sup>43</sup> Notice that Luther does not grant the possibility of a happy inconsistency had he not come to his senses. He says elsewhere,

It is hard for a man who has devoted his entire life to this self-made holiness and has depended on it to tear loose from it in one hour and to cast himself only upon Christ. Hence He [Christ] warns and admonishes us to take hold of His teaching and to do it while we still have time, before the agony and the death pangs come over us.<sup>44</sup>

Synergists, who at their end depend upon themselves to attain heaven, do not have the gospel nor Christ. They do not display a happy inconsistency. For it is impossible for synergists to abandon what they cling to all their life, *except* where God in his grace, converts the synergist and preserves that Christian’s faith. Thus, God creates in them a happy inconsistency. Luther says of Augustine, “Do we not see in Augustine many errors, which he retracts, which would all have damned him if he had not been preserved by his faith? Most of them are contrary to faith, but his confession and fear of God made them harmless to him.”<sup>45</sup> Luther demonstrates the seriousness of the matter. True faith, if it is not confessed against cooperation with God, is no faith at all. Had these men gone to their graves with their synergistic confessions, writings, and teachings, there could be no hope for them. They would only have been consistently affirming work righteousness. However, because God in his mercy had brought them to faith in Christ alone, they realized their errors and they confessed the truth against their former statements. Their final confession was the reason they displayed a happy inconsistency.

---

<sup>43</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, 283.

<sup>44</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, 283.

<sup>45</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II*, 188.

Thus, Luther proved three things by his analysis. First, only by faith alone, without works, is anyone saved. Luther would rather condemn highly esteemed men in the Catholic Church than create any concessions in the gospel. Of the two, Luther sided with the gospel. He was not a tricky rationalist who would try to affirm that both synergism and the gospel could somehow coexist in an individual. His conviction was that faith in Christ alone is always at odds with synergism, it can never coexist with it. As he says in his commentary on Galatians, “Unless they took hold of Christ in the hour of death and trusted solely in His death and victory, their ascetic life was of no use to them at all.”<sup>46</sup> Second, Luther taught nothing but what the church fathers had believed and confessed in their last will and testament. Third, if there is to be a happy inconsistency there must be a confession of the true faith against works and against cooperation with God.

### The Issue of Reason

In Luther’s analysis of the church fathers, he concludes that reason can be a cause for a happy inconsistency. This can happen when reason fails to function properly. This was Luther’s judgment when he gave his own assessment of Nestorius. Now the error with Nestorius was not specifically about synergism, it was rather about the two natures of Christ. However, the same principle Luther applied to Nestorius is also true of the happy inconsistency found in those with synergistic tendencies. In the case of Nestorius, the early Christian Church concluded that he denied the two natures of Christ and thought of Christ as only a man. Yet Luther did not believe Nestorius was guilty of this heresy. He held that Nestorius truly believed in the two natures of Jesus in one person according to the testimonies written about him. Nevertheless, his error was a logical error. According to Luther, Nestorius would not ascribe the *communicatio idiomatum* of

---

<sup>46</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians*, 83.

the two natures to the same person of Christ. Thus, he affirmed the premise, but denied the conclusion. Logically, Luther states, Nestorius would have to admit that Christ was a mere man and two persons. However, Nestorius' pride kept him from seeing his logical fallacy. He did not understand what he was denying. The same can be said of those who fall into synergistic tendencies. It was in this writing that Luther reminds his hearers that in his early years he taught that faith alone, without works, justifies. But if someone had told him the mass was an abomination, then he would have said that person would deserve to be burned at the stake.<sup>47</sup> Luther acknowledged that sinful reason can keep a person from connecting the dots – that if faith alone justifies, then monkery and mass do not. In this case, faulty reason is one instance in which there can be a happy inconsistency.

Now it is often the case that when we hear a truth we like, we run with it beyond its proper limits. Therefore, there are two cautions worth noting here. First, Luther says, “One might, however, allege that Nestorius had dishonestly confessed that Christ was God and only one person.”<sup>48</sup> As if to say that Nestorius told his accusers what they wanted to hear to get them off his case. Luther denies this was so because he cites instances where Nestorius affirmed the two natures of Christ in one person.<sup>49</sup> While there are certainly cases where people will try to deceive us (as I will point out later), we should consider Luther's approach. What else has the person said while not under scrutiny? Have they consistently taught the truth in other places at other times? Luther is stating that we should consider more than just the immediate debate or conversation we are having with a person to help determine what they believe.

The second point is equally important. A happy inconsistency involves two things: a confession of the truth and a denial of the truth. The denial of the truth, in this case caused by a

---

<sup>47</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, 102.

lapse in reason, is in no way to be tolerated. Luther says about Nestorius, “So the verdict should have been, ‘Although Nestorius confesses that Christ, true God and true man, is one person, but does not ascribe the *idiomata* of human nature to the same divine person of Christ, he is in error, just as much as if he denied the nature itself.’<sup>50</sup> Luther concluded Nestorius was still guilty of a sin, so it was right of the church to point out his error (a denial of the truth) and condemn it. Luther continues, “Now if Nestorius and Eutyches stubbornly and proudly clung to their opinion (as I neither can nor should judge from the histories I read) after the bishops had instructed them, they were justly condemned not only as heretics but also as silly fools.”<sup>51</sup> Here you see that a happy inconsistency ceases to be so after a person has been confronted with the error. This may take more than one rebuke, but for Luther, even a lapse in reason is no longer a happy inconsistency when the one in error *stubbornly* and *proudly* refuses to acknowledge their error. Therefore, when a person’s happy inconsistency is pointed out to them and they refuse to acknowledge the inconsistency and repent of it, this demonstrates inexcusable stubbornness and pride. In that case there ceases to be a happy inconsistency.

### **Luther and Erasmus**

When people misapply the happy inconsistency to synergists, it might be due to a misconception about synergism. Synergism consists of two parts. The first part is the opinion that God’s grace or Christ’s merit has helped the individual to some degree and without that grace or merit freely given to the individual, he or she would be entirely lost forever. In that sense, it is believed Christ has done everything for one’s salvation. The second part is the individual’s response to this grace and merit through good works, a decision, etc. If not careful,

---

<sup>50</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, 104.

<sup>51</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, 115.

a Lutheran pastor might be led to think that this definition is equivalent to the happy inconsistency. However, it is not. As close as the first part is to being gospel, it is anything but the gospel. Luther held that the gospel is this: God has declared the whole world justified because of Jesus' death and resurrection; whoever believes this promise is righteous. A gospel that is anything short of declaring a person's salvation as totally completed and apart from anything the person says, thinks, or does, can in no way be considered the gospel. Either God has completely achieved salvation for humanity, or there is no gospel. For no matter what a manmade gospel offers, even if it grants 99.99% of the credit to Christ, there is still a work or choice to be done by man that is totally beyond his ability to do. Thus, Christ left an insignificant work undone and that insignificant work condemns all mankind.

Luther believed that only someone who is brought to total despair of himself and his works, rejects the smallest contribution. For instance, if some individual thinks there is even a shred of good within him to contribute to his salvation, to be applied in response to the gospel, then he is neither conscious of his own sinfulness nor of what the gospel is. This highlights much of what Luther says in response to Erasmus in the *Bondage of the Will* (1525). Luther said,

First, God has assuredly promised his grace to the humble, that is, to those who lament and despair of themselves. But no man can be thoroughly humbled until he knows that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, devices, endeavors, will, and works, and depends entirely on the choice, will, and work of another, namely, of God alone. For as long as he is persuaded that he himself can do even the least thing toward his salvation, he retains some self-confidence and does not altogether despair of himself, and therefore he is not humbled before God, but presumes that there is—or at least hopes or desires that there may be—some place, time, and work for him, by which he may at length attain to salvation. But when a man has no doubt that everything depends on the will of God, then he completely despairs of himself and chooses nothing for himself, but waits for God to work; then he has come close to grace, and can be saved.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 33: Career of the Reformer III*, 61–62.

Luther continued by saying others resist this humiliation. They despise this teaching of self-despair because they want to contribute something, be it ever so small, to their salvation. A synergist cannot believe in the true gospel.

However, this does not mean that a person is not a Christian, when at times he thinks he can contribute something to his salvation. Even in the *Bondage of the Will*, where Luther unapologetically disarmed humanism and free will of all their weapons, he showed his pastoral heart for the weak and troubled Christian. For it is the nature of a Christian to struggle against synergistic thoughts, free will toward grace, and works that contribute to one's salvation. In fact, Luther by God's grace proved how the happy inconsistency is an argument against synergism. He said,

In fact, I can prove to you the exact opposite of your position: namely, that whenever such holy men as you boast of approach God to pray or deal with Him, they approach Him in utter forgetfulness of their 'free-will;' in self-despair they cry to Him for pure grace alone, as something far other than they deserve. Augustine was often thus; so was Bernard when, at the point of death, he said; 'I have wasted my time, for I have lived a waster's life.' I see no mention here of a power that could apply itself to grace; all power is here condemned, because it was entirely turned away from grace.<sup>53</sup>

What Luther is proving is that if cooperation with God is necessary, then why did the church fathers abandon their 'free will' when in total despair? Or to say it another way: If synergism constituted the happy inconsistency, then good works and free will would never be denied. On the contrary, a happy inconsistency is such that the person in weakness speaks of his endeavor contributing something, yet in faith he contradicts such thoughts or words by trusting in Christ *alone*. He confesses that Christ has done everything and he confesses that his works, free will, and contribution have done nothing. By his happy inconsistency, a Christian confirms the gospel truth that nothing he does contributes to salvation, not even in the slightest. The Christian speaks *against* his error.

---

<sup>53</sup> Luther, M., *Luther's works, vol. 33: Career of the Reformer III*. 114.

Perhaps one truth that can easily be overshadowed by the behemoth arguments in the *Bondage of the Will* is Luther's pastoral heart toward Erasmus. Yes, Luther was harsh and critical of Erasmus. He had every right to be. However, Luther asked that both pardon each other for their heated words. He prayed that Erasmus would become wiser than he in the truths he defended.<sup>54</sup> But it was not to be. Erasmus responded to Luther's work with a two part *Hyperapistes* and defended free will all the more. According to Luther's testimony, Erasmus never came around. He only grew worse in his view of Luther and his teachings. In 1533, Luther repeated against Erasmus some of the same concerns he had voiced in the *Bondage of the Will*. He said Erasmus was not really concerned about theological affairs. He concluded that Erasmus did not understand the gospel and did not believe in the true God since he had said of Luther's teachings, "If there were a God, he wouldn't tolerate such things." Luther then said,

In all his writings there is no statement anywhere about faith in Christ, about victory over sin, etc. Second, he persecutes our cause with choice scurrility and in doing so employs words and ideas which would not occur to a stupid fool, though they are carefully thought out. In defending his own cause, however, he shows his true colors, otherwise he wouldn't always be shielding Epicurus. Here the words apply, 'I will condemn you out of your own mouth, you wicked servant!'"<sup>55</sup>

Luther had hoped that Erasmus would come around. Yet, the more Luther spoke the gospel truth to Erasmus, the more he despised it in favor of free will. His actions and writings were enough for Luther to see there was no happy inconsistency. The happy inconsistency does not consist in willfully despising and condemning what you hold most dear. Time had shown where Erasmus stood.

---

<sup>54</sup> Luther, M., *Luther's works*, vol. 33: *Career of the Reformer III*. 272, 320.

<sup>55</sup> Luther, M., vol. 54: *Table Talk*, 78.

### Luther's Condemnation of the Papacy

A Lutheran pastor will have a difficult time knowing how to apply the happy inconsistency if he does not understand how Luther could condemn those supporting the papacy. In fact, how can a Lutheran pastor grasp the significance of the Reformation if he thinks synergism had not destroyed countless souls at the hands of the Catholic Church? On the one hand, we don't want to consider it. On the other hand, we must. Denying the damning effects of synergism on many in the Catholic Church will always cause one to have a cavalier attitude toward synergism, error, and the unadulterated gospel, not to mention a terribly skewed manner of applying the happy inconsistency. Therefore, it is necessary first of all, to consider Luther's understanding of Scripture.

Luther believed God's Word spoke of Christ both *categorically* and *antithetically*. So that apart from Christ there is only Satan and error. Apart from truth, only lies. Apart from grace, only wrath. When it came to the gospel, Luther saw only absolutes and opposites. No middle ground that allowed for compromise between Christ's work and man's work. If there was any middle ground, anything that could be claimed as neither truth nor error, right nor wrong, good nor bad, would inevitably destroy the necessity of Christ and all that the prophets and apostles had spoken. He said to Erasmus,

If you grant that the Scriptures speak antithetically, you will be able to say nothing about free choice but what is contrary to Christ, namely that error, death, Satan, and all evils reign in it. If you do not grant that they speak antithetically, then you enervate the Scriptures, so that they lose their point and fail to prove that Christ is necessary. Hence, inasmuch as you maintain free choice, you cancel out Christ and ruin the entire Scripture. Moreover, although verbally you may make a show of confessing Christ, yet in reality and in your heart you deny him.<sup>56</sup>

According to Erasmus, Scripture spoke of sin and grace, Christ and free will, in a manner that was both equivocal and reconcilable. This was completely opposite to Luther's approach toward

---

<sup>56</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 33: Career of the Reformer III*, 282.



Scripture. He saw no need for Christ if free will was not entirely bad, but could apply itself toward righteousness and eternal life. Consequently, if free will could apply itself toward grace then it must be a good thing and then certainly Christ didn't die for it since it was good. Then, if free will was good then in every man it must be good. Then, if God would condemn anyone to hell, he would be condemning those who had some good within them, which would be unjust. In the end, if man had some good in himself to apply toward salvation, then Christ was not absolutely necessary for salvation. Then, the Scriptures were wrong that set up Christ alone as absolutely necessary. Likewise, the prophets and apostles were wrong for speaking antithetically of Christ, grace, and faith.

A partial reason Erasmus and others did not like Luther's categorical and antithetical approach to Scripture was because it forced human reason to be subordinate to Scripture. It did not allow reason to dispense with the contradictions and absolute truths by way of synergism. Luther, however, did not mind contradictions and absolute truths to remain in tension with each other. He concluded that if there was no tension, then there were no absolute truths and if there were no absolute truths, *then there was no certainty of salvation*. This is the reason Luther would not budge an inch. He knew the papacy (and Satan for that matter) never had an issue with the terms: Christ, grace, faith, or Scripture. They would certainly grant them to the people. However, they would never allow the people to have Christ *alone*, grace *alone*, faith *alone*, and Scripture *alone*. If they had, then all works for salvation would be condemned and true faith begun. Luther knew that if the antithetical nature of Scripture was ever compromised, then there was no Christ, no gospel, and no hope.

Therefore, Luther condemned the teachings of the Catholic Church and those who supported them. For they never talked about the gospel alone or faith alone and thereby, never

talked about the gospel or faith. The papists said that believing in Christ wasn't enough to be saved. You must live in such and such a way and do various works. Thus, Luther concluded about their idea of faith, "in the past our papists understood and taught nothing at all about faith; now they have learned this little word "faith" from us. They are ashamed of their former doctrine and are beginning to touch it up. Now they do speak of faith; but they append the doctrine of meritorious works, thereby nullifying faith."<sup>57</sup> A faith that necessitates something being added to it, was no faith at all for Luther. The antithetical nature of the gospel proved this. So when Luther revealed the gospels incompatibility with the papist's synergistic doctrine, it only furthered their lies and deception. In 1521, when Luther spoke of how faith and monasticism cannot coexist, he said,

But when at this point these blasphemers, since they are incorrigible and without faith, see they are caught in such patent blasphemy, they devise distinctions, of which they have an abundance. They say that they had never taught anything but that Christ and the grace of God are the main points in their orders and are regarded as the holiest of all things.<sup>58</sup>

Had this been true, then why were people hearing it for the first time? Why were so many people confused? If the people all knew that salvation was through faith in Christ alone, then why did the people pour into the monasteries? Luther said that if they really taught it was better to be a Christian than a monk, then how many people would remain in the monasteries?

In truth, the papists did not even know what they confessed about Christ. Luther made the comment on the Athanasian Creed that it didn't matter if an individual said he believed Jesus was God and man if he did not believe Jesus had become everything and done everything for him. He said, "If one article is lacking, then all are lacking, for the faith is supposed to be and must be whole and complete. Although it can be weak and afflicted, nevertheless it shall and

---

<sup>57</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 217.

<sup>58</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*, 321.

must be whole, and not false. To be weak does no harm, but to be false—that is eternal death.”<sup>59</sup> If the papists had believed Christ had done everything for their salvation, then they would have confessed it. They may still have had a weak faith that struggled against works, but that would not have been a false faith, it would have been a weak faith and therefore, a happy inconsistency. However, the papists did not understand faith in Christ alone. They only knew of a faith and Christ that were incomplete and needed human effort to finish. The fact that they held fast to work righteous teaching proved this. Therefore, there could be no happy inconsistency where there was no understanding of faith alone.

### The Papacy Was Always Consistent

When Luther talked about the church fathers finally abandoning their work righteousness, he came down hard on those who picked up the father’s work righteous teachings and held it as their confession and creed. He said, “Whoever follows them [their errors] now does so to his ruin, which is the case with many who follow the sayings of the fathers indiscriminately as if they were divine truth.”<sup>60</sup> Luther acknowledges that all saints err at times, even while they believe. Nevertheless, their faith in Christ alone prevents them from falling into the same judgment of those who accept the errors as truth and persist in them. Such people, according to Luther, should not be despised or condemned, since their sin comes from ignorance and weakness. However, the priests held to the errors of the church fathers and though they were told of the errors and recognized them as such, they held to them nonetheless. He concludes that they

---

<sup>59</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, 211.

<sup>60</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II*, 188.

will not end up in the place the fathers went, since they persist in what the fathers abandoned and consider to be an article of faith.<sup>61</sup>

The strongest argument Luther made for not recognizing a happy inconsistency in the papacy was the persecution he received for telling them the truth. Luther said, “Indeed, by their refusal to tolerate this article concerning the knowledge of Christ and the true faith but by raging against it with excommunication and murder, they actually prove that their boasting of faith and of Christ is altogether false and contrary to the truth.”<sup>62</sup> Luther was no fool. He knew what had happened to previous men who confessed the truth. He knew that unless he received armed guards he would not travel for debate. He had been excommunicated, threatened with death, verbally abused, hated, slandered. So how could such an institution champion Luther’s cause when they treated him so poorly for that same cause? This was not a happy inconsistency on their part, it was a consistent evil that opposed the gospel.

Now Luther’s condemnation was not towards a few men, but towards many who supported and defended the papacy. Such a broad condemnation is unacceptable to human reason. It seems cold and unloving. Luther recognized that this rationalism comes from Satan,

The devil makes use of a weighty argument against us. He asks: “Do you really imagine that you are the only one who is wise? Do you dare condemn so many fine, prominent, precious, and pious people who are, of course, also baptized and of the Christian faith? Do you dare regard them all as fools?” This, I say, is a weighty argument, whether it is directed against us collectively or individually, especially if one meditates on it and is not armed with the right counterargument.<sup>63</sup>

Luther went on to say that the papists argue incessantly that they hold to all articles of faith regarding God and Christ and that they believe everything recorded in Scripture. Yet, they say

---

<sup>61</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II*, 188.

<sup>62</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 321.

<sup>63</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 323.

(according to Luther), “Luther has the audacity to condemn them and separate from them.”<sup>64</sup> However, numbers do not establish truth. Luther argued back that if they were on the same side and believed the same, then they would join him and others in confessing that faith in Christ alone saves and that the mass, rosary, pilgrimages, indulgences, and cloisters have no part in salvation. Yet, they would not accept this. Instead, as Luther put it, they want to be called Christians but by their works they deny Christ. For they would never declare with their mouths, faith in Christ alone. Thus, a limited faith, and a limited Christ was the same as no faith and no Christ for Luther. The papacy remained consistent in its beliefs. As Rosin said, “Three more popes followed in Luther’s lifetime, three very different men, but no change came,” and in another place, “The popes did nothing to give Luther reason to expect change.”<sup>65</sup> Consider even the time after Luther’s death –the Smalkald wars, the Augsburg Interim and Leipzig Interim. The papacy wanted dominion over people’s hearts. They dug in their heels in favor of synergism because it solidified (and continues to solidify) their authority over people’s souls.

### What Was at Stake

As a reminder, Luther didn’t have a personal vendetta against the Catholic Church or the papacy. Rather, “Rome became part of the problem, not so much in its own right or because it was initially the issue, but rather because it chose to continue its support of that errant theology.”<sup>66</sup> For the sake of erring Christians and those with a happy inconsistency, Luther had to condemn the papacy. Otherwise confusion regarding the truth of the gospel would spread. He said, “They call themselves Christians, believers, the church, and boast of having God and His Word, etc. We do the same thing. Both of us use the same words. Here we are in agreement. *But*

---

<sup>64</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 324.

<sup>65</sup> Rosin, R., *The Papacy in Perspective: Luther’s Reform and Rome*, 421, 422.

<sup>66</sup> Rosin, R., *The Papacy in Perspective: Luther’s Reform and Rome*, 409.

*when it comes to substance and understanding, we are as far apart as possible.*"<sup>67</sup> Had Luther not taken such a strong stand in condemnation, he would have been denying the Scriptures himself. He would have given the impression that salvation can be achieved through works and that their way to salvation can be tolerated. He would have given the impression that grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, and Scripture alone are only an opinion. He would have been stating that Scripture does not speak categorically and antithetically. He would have been stating that he did not care for the salvation of their souls. He would have given the impression that the happy inconsistency is a meaningless term. For if there is no clear distinction between a false faith and true faith, then there is no distinction between law and gospel. Therefore, *when condemnation is carried out according to the principles laid out in Scripture, it only affirms the gospel.* It protects and helps those with a happy inconsistency.

---

<sup>67</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 330. Emphasis mine

## LUTHER ON APPLYING THE HAPPY INCONSISTENCY TO THE FANATICS

There was a point when it appeared to Luther that all the people were being won over by the gospel. The papacy was being shown for what it was. Faith in Christ alone was being published as fast as Luther could write. The Reformation was making progress and changing both minds and hearts. Yes, there was a point where it seemed the whole world would be won over. However, as history unfolded, it almost appears Satan was anticipating a Reformation and knew how he would combat it. His weapon: the fanatics. This term includes: The Enthusiasts, Anabaptists, Zwingli, Schwenckfeld, Karlstadt (along with their disciples), and various others. Sometime around 1521 or 1522, Luther wrote his commentary on *the Magnificat* and expressed his deep frustration over the sects that started. He said, “There were so many who originally supported us and joined the cause of the Gospel against the pope that it might have seemed for a while that we were going to have the whole world on our side. Just when everything seemed to be in full swing, our own people went ahead to cause us more anguish than all the princes, kings, and emperors could have done.”<sup>68</sup> They were the knife in the back. While confronting the papacy, the fanatics caused confusion and so much disorder that it provided more than enough ammunition for the papists. Luther found himself fighting on two fronts. He said, “I am plagued by both sides, for the fanatics and Anabaptists are more hostile to me than the Pope. And the Pope is more hostile to me than they are. On both sides, all are enemies of the Gospel.”<sup>69</sup> On this front Luther was equally careful in applying the happy inconsistency. His writings show

---

<sup>68</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, 249.

<sup>69</sup> Koelpin, Arnold. *Luther Battles the Fanatics*. (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, 1983. Web), 2.

discernment and careful observation. He was patient, hoping the fanatics would come around. He distinguished between teachers and hearers. He was watchful and alert in making distinctions. He looked to see if their teachings were grounded in the chief article on faith in Christ alone. In the case of the fanatics, Luther demonstrated his keen awareness between weakness in faith, and deception.

### **A Happy Inconsistency Rarely Exists in Proponents of New Heresies**

Luther was a history buff and his knowledge of church history was impressive. He knew many of the church fathers, the councils and the heretics whom the fathers and councils had condemned. He was well aware of how heretics had fared in the Christian church and if the fanatics had paid more attention to history, they may have fared better themselves. This knowledge was of considerable benefit to Luther when he applied the happy inconsistency to the fanatics.

In church history, Luther noticed that proponents of new heresies rarely demonstrated a happy inconsistency. He acknowledges this fact on many occasions throughout his life. In his Psalms commentary he said, “I have never read of false teachers and instigators of heresy being converted. They remain obdurate in their own opinions. The oil has soaked into their marrow and bone; the water has become flesh and blood, part of their nature. They will not listen or discuss.”<sup>70</sup> In 1527, he reiterated the same problem when making his defense of the Lord’s Supper, “I have no hope that the teachers of a heresy or fanaticism will be converted . . . It has never been reported that an author of false doctrine was converted.”<sup>71</sup> Was it truly impossible for such people to be converted? Certainly not. All things are possible with God. However, Luther

---

<sup>70</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 14: Selected Psalms III*, 271–272.

<sup>71</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 37: Word and Sacrament III*, 19–20.



wasn't arguing that point. He was emphasizing that historically, it doesn't happen that originators of false teaching are converted and saved. Scripture does not record an instance where a prophet of God converted the false prophets or where the Apostle Paul converted the false apostles (at least not explicitly).<sup>72</sup> Therefore, when teachers like Zwingli and Karlstadt started teaching new things. Luther was mindful of what the outcome had been for those who went before them.

However, Luther was still patient with the leaders of the fanatics at the beginning of their dialogue. He warned them multiple times.<sup>73</sup> He admonished them in his writings.<sup>74</sup> He agreed to meet with them at a colloquy in Marburg "in the hope that they would make a complete change for the better."<sup>75</sup> This was in spite of the fact that they had already spoken maliciously of him and the Lutherans in their writings. They called Jesus a "baked God, a God made of bread, a God made of wine, a roasted God, etc. They called us cannibals, blood-drinkers, man-eaters, Capernautes, Thyesteans, etc. Yet they *knew* that they were doing an injustice to the Lord and us intentionally and in an exceedingly blasphemous way and that they were inventing scandalous lies about us."<sup>76</sup> On account of Luther's own writings, they knew that what they were saying was not true. Yet they refused to speak correctly about Luther's beliefs and teachings. In spite of all this, Luther was willing to talk and debate with them in the hope that they could be won over. Luther said, "Yet we let it pass at Marburg (as has been said) in order that we might fully demonstrate Christian love. For (God knows), how we were obliged to hear that we possessed no Christian love, that we despised the ministers of Christ, grieved and confused the church, etc."<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Luther, M., vol. 37: *Word and Sacrament III*, 20.

<sup>73</sup> Luther, M., vol. 38: *Word and Sacrament IV*, 296 & 299.

<sup>74</sup> See Luther's works: *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper of 1528, Against the Heavenly Prophets of 1525, and That These Words of Christ, "This is my Body," etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics of 1527*

<sup>75</sup> Luther, M., vol. 38: *Word and Sacrament IV*, 292.

<sup>76</sup> Luther, M., vol. 38: *Word and Sacrament IV*, 291–292. Emphasis mine

<sup>77</sup> Luther, M., vol. 38: *Word and Sacrament IV*, 293–295.

Luther's knowledge of their impending attacks and charges at the colloquy demonstrate Luther's patience toward them. He left open the possibility that they were simply inconsistent. Yet as was said before, there was only so much error Luther was willing to put up with before his hope would become a denial of the facts.

### **Luther's Knack in Catching Deception**

In the section on "*What Was at Stake*," it was pointed out that the papacy was deceptive in their attacks on Luther. They made it appear they taught the same things Luther did by using the same terminology. But, as Luther pointed out, they were simply trying to deceive the people. The debates Luther had with the papists led him to understand that he needed to be on guard against deception. The same was true of the fanatics, if not more so. True, Luther was often deceived by the papists and the fanatics as he himself pointed out. Yet, this taught him not to be gullible, nor tossed about by every word they uttered. He learned to see the wolf under sheep's clothing and to call them what they really were: liars who were self-condemned.

### A Different Gospel

Luther's knack in catching deception started with his understanding of God's name. He knew that to understand God a person must understand that which *pertains to his name*. If for example, a person said, "I believe in Christ." Luther would respond with, "What do you mean by this term 'Christ?' How does Scripture speak of him? What does Scripture say of him?" Even in 1516, Luther understood that the gospel was about more than shouting out "Christ, Christ!" The gospel was about all that Scripture said about the name "Christ." In his commentary on Romans 3:22 he said, "Since the faith in Christ by which we are justified is not a matter of believing only

in Christ or in the Person of Christ, but in all things which pertain to Christ, the proud and the heretics are deceived and yet pleased in their deception that they believe in Christ but are unwilling to believe the things which pertain to Him.”<sup>78</sup> This is a bold statement, but Luther knew church history. There were many heretics who confessed the name of Christ, but as far as the things that pertained to Christ, they refused to believe. Luther made the charge that those who said they believed Christ was born, suffered, and died, yet refused to listen to and believe the one who correctly taught of Christ, did not truly believe in Christ, since he was following his own imagination.<sup>79</sup> Luther was wary of those who confessed to believe in Christ but refused to listen to sound doctrine and instruction. The person who confessed the historical aspects of Christ, but went their own way of interpreting the meaning of those facts was trying to divide Christ. The result, according to Luther, was this, “if you fail to believe even one word, you no longer are living in the Word of God. For the whole Christ is in every word and wholly in each individual word. When He is denied, therefore, in one word, He is totally denied, for He is in every word.”<sup>80</sup> Luther never abandoned this truth. In fact, he affirmed it on more than one occasion.<sup>81</sup> In his commentary on John 16:3, he said that the enemies of God claim to have Christ and want to be called Christian but according to Christ’s words they do not have him. The name “Christ,” is not an empty word to be filled with whatever imaginations a person may think up. Instead, it is a word that is expounded by Scripture alone. Luther said,

It is the true and living faith, which understands the words of the Gospel and, in accordance with those words, knows Him and the Father’s will and heart. It knows that the Father sent Christ, His Son, to deliver the world from sin, God’s wrath, and eternal death through His blood and death. It tells man that Christ accomplished all this, gained

---

<sup>78</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 25: Lectures on Romans*, 237.

<sup>79</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 25: Lectures on Romans*, 237.

<sup>80</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 25: Lectures on Romans*, 238.

<sup>81</sup> See Luther, M., *vol. 14: Selected Psalms III*, 271-272. See also vol. 38: “Brief Confession concerning the Holy Sacrament.”

forgiveness of sin and eternal life, and surely bestows this on all who believe in Him. Thus the knowledge of God and of Christ are bound together and are one knowledge.<sup>82</sup>

Although the fanatics had acknowledged the historical aspects of Christ, they abandoned the meaning and interpretation of the historical Christ in favor of their own opinions. They would not believe all that pertained to his name. This was a different gospel. In the case of those fanatics who held to their own opinions, they did not display a happy inconsistency.

Now a different gospel means deception is at work. In Luther's commentary on Matthew chapter 7, where Jesus tells his disciples to be wary of wolves in sheep's clothing, Luther draws a connection to the Anabaptists. He said, "Right now the Anabaptists are bearing our name outwardly. They even acknowledge that we have the Gospel in our word and proclamation; but they say, "The fruit does not follow." With this phrase, "no fruit," they divert people from faith to works, and they remove the chief item, which is faith in Christ."<sup>83</sup> Notice the conclusion Luther draws: they acknowledged that the Lutherans had the true gospel, but then they said there was no true fruit that followed this gospel. So, they led the people to follow a gospel that produced the fruit they wanted emphasized. This was, according to Luther "removing" the chief item, faith in Christ. Thus, he would not say they were simply portraying a happy inconsistency. Even though they "decorate their dreams with Scripture and with statements from the Gospel."<sup>84</sup> They could certainly speak of the gospel, but then they turned around and directed the people to a gospel that emphasized particular works.

It was this kind of deception that Luther was on guard against. Many of his adversaries used terminology that he used, but in their application of those terms, they demonstrated very

---

<sup>82</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 319.

<sup>83</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, 257–258.

<sup>84</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, 258.

different meanings. He said of those who denied condign (rewarded) merit, yet promoted free will,

Although they protest both in speech and writing that they do not seek to obtain grace by condign merit, and in fact do not use the term, yet they are only playing a trick on us with the word, and holding on to the thing it signifies just the same. For what excuse is it that they do not call it condign merit, when they attribute to it everything that belongs to condign merit? When they say that the man who endeavors finds favor with God, while the one who does not endeavor does not find favor, is not this plainly a case of condign merit? Are they not making God a respecter of works, merits, and persons? They say that one man lacks grace by his own fault, because he has not striven after it, while the other, because he has striven, obtains grace, as he would not have done if he had not striven. If this is not condign merit, I should like to know what there is that deserves the name. You could play about with any word in this fashion, and say: It is not, of course, condign merit, but it has the same effect as condign merit; the thorn is not a bad tree, but only produces the fruit of a bad tree; the fig is not a good tree, but it produces what a good tree usually does.<sup>85</sup>

These synergists had denied a word that they affirmed with many other words. Their conclusion for how a person is saved, finally came down to work righteousness. Thus, the terminology they denied was irrelevant, since a person's acceptance or rejection of a word depends on if he holds to or rejects *the thing(s) that word signifies*. Therefore, Luther did not see this as a happy inconsistency. In fact, he said they were simply trying to "play a trick on us with the word." He continues,

In their anxiety not to agree with the Pelagians, they start denying condign merit, and by their very denial they establish it more firmly than ever. They deny it in the words they speak and write, but affirm it in fact and in their hearts, and they are on two accounts worse than the Pelagians. First, because the Pelagians confess and assert condign merit, simply, candidly, and ingenuously, calling a spade a spade and a fig a fig, and teaching what they really believe. These friends of ours, however, though they believe and teach the same, make dupes of us with deceptive words and a false pretense, as if they dissented from the Pelagians, though this is the last thing they do; so that if you go by their hypocrisy, they seem to be the bitterest foes of the Pelagians, while if you look at the facts and their real opinion, they themselves are Pelagians double-dyed.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> Luther, M., vol. 33: *Career of the Reformer III*, 268.

<sup>86</sup> Luther, M., vol. 33: *Career of the Reformer III*, 268.

Luther would not play games with these synergists. He saw through their tactics. He considered what was really coming from their mouths and found that the end result was the same as Pelagianism. They consistently affirmed human effort and Luther would not be deceived by fine sounding counter arguments. By calling them “Pelagians double-dyed,” Luther refused to acknowledge they were portraying a happy inconsistency, since their beliefs and meaning for words were consistent. Their only inconsistency was in terminology.

Luther once said, “All misfortune begins in the name of God.” Satan is the master of making God look like himself and himself look like God. He and his followers do not come in the name of “error” or “devil.” They come in the name of Christ and the gospel. In Luther’s commentary on Galatians, Luther remarks how Satan used the papacy to attack Christians outwardly through the sword, but if he cannot damage Christians that way, he attacks them through the sectarians under the guise of correcting and edifying.<sup>87</sup> Luther said of these fanatics that they do more damage than the pope does by their deception of edifying and correcting. He said, “At first they accept our teaching and preach it in agreement with us. But later on they say that we have made a good start, but that the more sublime things have been saved until now, etc. In this way the devil impedes the progress of the Gospel.”<sup>88</sup> This was often the charge brought against Luther, as it still is today. However, this is not the fanatics’ greatest deception.

Their greatest deception was to charge Luther with a lack of love for them. They said Luther was holding back his love because he would not yield to them concerning the Lord’s Supper. They said he was quarrelsome, harsh, and intractable on account of one doctrine. Luther’s response: “A little yeast leavens the whole lump.” He illustrated from philosophy and mathematics how even a tiny error creates great problems in the end. He reminded his readers

---

<sup>87</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians*, 51.

<sup>88</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians*, 51.

that “Doctrine belongs to God . . . It cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition.”<sup>89</sup> He goes on to say that doctrine is like a golden circle. If there is a tiny crack that appears then it is no longer perfect and then concludes, “A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield—love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc.”<sup>90</sup> The fanatics’ deception was very tricky. A person who hears the word “love,” might be inclined to drop their doctrine for the sake of “love.” Luther however, saw through their deception. He knew that a love that dispensed with God’s Word was really no love at all. He said,

In the issue of salvation, on the other hand, when fanatics teach lies and errors under the guise of truth and make an impression on many, there love is certainly not to be exercised, and error is not to be approved. For what is lost here is not merely a good deed done for someone who is unthankful, but the Word, faith, Christ, and eternal life.<sup>91</sup>

Here again, Luther sees the point at issue. It’s not a lack of love that is being betrayed, it is the Christian faith. These deceivers were misusing God’s love as a way to dispense with faith in God’s grace. Furthermore, Luther reiterated his belief that “if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith.”<sup>92</sup> This is a hard teaching. In fact, many of the common people thought Luther was too firm towards the fanatics. However, Luther explained the fanatics’ deception at length so the people would understand God would not let his word be trifled with. The people needed to know that when a fanatic rejected even one article of faith, they were rejecting all articles of faith. In that case, there was no happy inconsistency.

---

<sup>89</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians*, 37.

<sup>90</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians*, 38.

<sup>91</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians*, 38–39.

<sup>92</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians*, 39.

Yet, Luther was careful not to become a hypocrite himself. He acknowledged that no one can claim to have always accepted every word of God. No one could say they have always believed perfectly. Professor Koelpin said, “He never arrogantly and defensively claimed to be immune to the spirit of enthusiasm. He had clearly identified enthusiasm in the Smalcald Articles as that which clings to Adam and his descendants from the beginning to the end of the world.”<sup>93</sup> Even when Luther said, “When he is denied in one word, he is totally denied,” he concludes by saying, “‘Who can discern his errors’ or notices them everywhere? Therefore we read: ‘Clear Thou me from hidden faults,’ O Lord.”<sup>94</sup> Luther is stating that the happy inconsistency lies in those who confess that every word of Scripture is to be believed and obeyed. Nevertheless, they also confess they have not believed in every word perfectly and they continually repent to God, asking for forgiveness. On the other hand, the fanatics confessed that not every word of Scripture is to be believed and obeyed since mankind is too sinful. As a result, they remained stubborn and persistent in their errors and they refused to repent and believe in every word. Thus, their deception was to water down God’s law so they could persist in error. Luther did not see a happy inconsistency with them, at least not with the leaders.

#### His Final Assessment of Zwingli and Other Fanatics

Just as time was a factor in determining a happy inconsistency with the papists, it was also a factor with the fanatics. Luther was not quick in his judgments. He waited to see what the fanatics would write, if they would take into consideration what he wrote. Yet as time went on, Luther started to see patterns that showed consistency and persistence in error. One year before Luther died, he gave his final assessment on the fanatics in “A Brief Confession Concerning the

---

<sup>93</sup> Koelpin, A., *Luther Battles the Fanatics*, 7.

<sup>94</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 25: Lectures on Romans*, 240.



Holy Sacrament” (1544). His purpose was to separate himself as far as he could from the fanatics and their teachings, because in their teachings was the same synergism that plagued the Catholic Church.

### The Other Side of the Same Coin

Perhaps it is thought that the issues with the Lord’s Supper had nothing to do with synergism. However, such a statement would show a lack of understanding the underlying issues. Luther believed every article of faith, every doctrine and teaching in Scripture was connected to the doctrine of Christ. He said, “For all other doctrines stand and fall with this one; it includes all the others; it is all-important. He who errs in the others certainly errs in this one too. Even if he holds to the others, still all is in vain if he does not have this one.”<sup>95</sup> The fanatics error on the Lord’s Supper was the result of an error they had toward justification by faith alone. They rejected the forgiveness of sins in the sacrament because they were turned inward toward their own holiness. Professor Koelpin said, “[Luther] charged them with destroying the whole doctrine of the Gospel and turning God’s Word into a new order of law by a cunning interpretation of Scripture,” and elsewhere he says, “The fanatics had turned the Christian faith inside out. Their law preaching is murder for consciences. It makes law where there is none, breaks Christian freedom, and draws consciences from the understanding of grace to the deceptive appearance of good works.”<sup>96</sup> This deception is most apparent when they turned the sacraments into good works. Like the doctrine of the Catholic Church, the heart of their theology was a cooperation with Christ by turning inward to one’s emotions or will. Those who clung to their theology did not trust in the external Word of God alone. Professor Koelpin said, “If the

---

<sup>95</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 320.

<sup>96</sup> Koelpin, A., *Luther Battles the Fanatics*, 7.

fanatics were bent on having a pure spirit, Luther admonished, ‘Then they’ve got him, that is, the Devil, who has no flesh and blood.’”<sup>97</sup> The fact was, the fanatics were in every way the papists, and the papists in every way the fanatics. The fanatics abandoned the promises given through Scripture *alone* in order to receive them through man. It didn’t matter if they thought they had rejected the pope. They had another, themselves.

Luther recognized more than anyone else how they were the same as the papists. In his commentary on Galatians he said that the papists and fanatics alike testify that faith in Christ justifies, but just not faith alone. Along with this faith, observance of the commandments of God is necessary for salvation.<sup>98</sup> They did not display a happy inconsistency because there was no confession of faith in Christ *alone*. They turned the work of Christ into the law and the law into the work of Christ. Luther said, “The papists and the fanatics turn this upside down; and it is inevitable that they should, since they do not believe correctly about the doctrine of justification and teach the very opposite, namely, that Moses is Christ and Christ is Moses.”<sup>99</sup> Therefore, if you regard their confession, they are synergists and if you consider what they practiced, they were consistent.

Now one of the aspects of being consistent is a refusal to repent. Luther reiterates quite often their impenitence. In frustration he said, “They are not repentant; in fact, they boast about themselves in their malice.”<sup>100</sup> Professor Koelpin said, “The early church condemned the errorists, and Luther did the same with their counterparts. The fanatics had broken the fellowship, perversely, persistently.”<sup>101</sup> According to Luther, they never sought to understand his

---

<sup>97</sup> Koelpin, A., *Luther Battles the Fanatics*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians*, 143.

<sup>99</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians*, 143.

<sup>100</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 38: Word and Sacrament IV*, 296.

<sup>101</sup> Koelpin, A., *Luther Battles the Fanatics*, 5.

position but with a few words they considered Luther's position refuted.<sup>102</sup> Certainly erring in ignorance is forgiven, but being misleading and lying is not. This is why deceivers do not display a happy inconsistency. Deception involves knowledge of what one is doing. It is purposeful lying. No ignorance is involved. It is a refusal to repent of one's errors.

As previously noted, Luther hoped that after the Marburg colloquy, Zwingli would come to his senses. However, after he died in a battle, a book was published that was written by Zwingli shortly before his death. It was titled, "Exposition of the Christian Faith to the Christian King." Luther said that if Zwingli died with the disposition he made in this book, then he saw no hope for Zwingli's salvation.<sup>103</sup> In the book Zwingli went back on the concessions he made at Marburg and repeated his position that the Lord's Supper was only to be understood in a spiritual sense. This book made Luther doubtful of Zwingli's salvation. Thus, Luther confessed that he hoped Zwingli became inconsistent in the end, but if he regarded the facts, there was no inconsistency. This, according to Luther, made him exceedingly sorry.<sup>104</sup>

### **What Was at Stake?**

The gospel was at stake. This was ultimately what drove Luther to be so harsh toward the fanatics. Professor Koelpin said, "Luther's deep-seated antagonism to the fanatics' ways grew out of his grasp of the Gospel."<sup>105</sup> They confused the gospel, Christ, and the sacrament. They were caught telling lies. They falsely interpreted passages of Scripture to fit their teachings. Luther said that if he did not condemn them, then he would have to be thrown into hell himself if

---

<sup>102</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 37: Word and Sacrament III*, 19.

<sup>103</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 38: Word and Sacrament IV*, 289.

<sup>104</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 38: Word and Sacrament IV*, 303.

<sup>105</sup> Koelpin, A., *Luther Battles the Fanatics*, 3.

he gave the impression of having common cause with them.<sup>106</sup> Had he considered them to be portraying a happy inconsistency, he would have been denying the gospel. Their impenitence and shameful rebukes left no room for a happy inconsistency. Likewise, their denial of the gospel and identical teaching to the papacy would have confused the common people had Luther considered them to be displaying a happy inconsistency.

Although Luther was harsh toward the leaders, it didn't mean he wasn't compassionate toward the listeners. The souls of those following the fanatics were also at stake. He hoped Christ would deliver them from the errors of the fanatics. He said at one point, "Even if I too can convert no arch-fanatic, yet I shall leave nothing undone, God willing, to place the truth clearly and plainly before their eyes and win away some of their disciples, or at least to strengthen the simple and weak and protect them from the fanatics' poison."<sup>107</sup> Clearly, Luther saw a distinction between leaders of heresies and followers of heresies. In the case of those who followed the fanatics, Luther could see them simply being ignorant of the errors and in sincerity of heart either believed the truth or could be won over to the truth.

---

<sup>106</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 38: Word and Sacrament IV*, 305.

<sup>107</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 37: Word and Sacrament III*, 20.

## TAKEAWAY FROM LUTHER'S APPLICATION OF THE HAPPY INCONSISTENCY

It is truly a difficult task to encompass Luther's complete understanding of the happy inconsistency. Part of the difficulty is in Luther himself. He was inconsistent and not every word that came from his mouth was a perfect application of law and gospel. He was the first to admit that. Therefore, I have sought to find consistency in Luther's writings. If there was only one type of application in Luther's writings, then I refrained from using that application unless it also appeared in another place. Likewise, if what he spoke early in his career was not spoken later, I did not use it.

Another difficulty is the circumstances surrounding various events. There was vastly more information to be gleaned from the historical contexts of various events than I was able to include. Certainly, there were conversations Luther knew of that are not even recorded in his vast array of writings. As Koelpin said, "What do they know of Luther who only Luther know?"<sup>108</sup> This was a difficult challenge to overcome. Yet here too, I looked at context and consistency in his writings when coming to conclusions.

The third difficulty was in trying to be true to Luther. It is not easy to see the principle that underlies an application from a time long past in a culture not our own. There are variables and unknowns. Sometimes Luther's own writings do not even flesh out the whole picture. There were so many matters happening throughout Luther's life that even he acknowledged difficulty

---

<sup>108</sup> Koelpin, A., *Luther Battles the Fanatics*, 2.

in keeping them straight.<sup>109</sup> Once again, context and consistency were key in being true to Luther.

Nevertheless, there are priceless treasures to be gleaned from Luther's understanding and application of the happy inconsistency, not because they come from Luther, but because they come from Scripture. Therefore, we need not reinvent the wheel. Often the Holy Spirit teaches us through the wisdom he gave to previous generations. As such, what follows are some important principles Lutheran pastors must consider when applying the happy inconsistency.

### **When the Happy Inconsistency Exists in an Individual**

Luther's writings demonstrate that an individual was displaying a happy inconsistency when sinning in weakness. Sinning in weakness means: not persistently, not arrogantly, nor intentionally sinning against the gospel. A Christian is one who struggles against the desires of his flesh. He is aware of his self-righteous old Adam and he fights against it (though at times succumbing to its desires and temptations). Luther said,

Such genuine saints include ministers of the Word, political magistrates, parents, children, masters, servants, etc., if they, first of all, declare that Christ is their wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption . . . They are not all of equal firmness of character, and many weaknesses and offenses are discernible in every one of them; it is also true that many of them fall into sin. But this does not hinder their holiness at all, so long as they sin out of weakness, not out of deliberate wickedness. For, as I have already said several times, the godly are conscious of the desires of the flesh; but they resist them and do not gratify them. When they fall into sin unexpectedly, they obtain forgiveness, if by faith they return to Christ, who does not want us to chase away the lost sheep but to look for it.<sup>110</sup>

Notice Luther distinguishes between sins of weakness and deliberate wickedness. This is a matter of motivation. This does not mean an individual will be conscious of every sin (as I will point out in a moment), but it does mean that when he recognizes he sinned, he acknowledges it

---

<sup>109</sup> See Luther's Works, vol. 34: *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings*

<sup>110</sup> Luther, M., vol. 27: *Lectures on Galatians*, 82.

and will ask for forgiveness. Thus, sinning in weakness is the narrow Lutheran middle. Sins of work righteousness will happen, yet they do not dominate the Christian to the point where the individual willfully approves and persists in such sins. Those who sin in weakness display a happy inconsistency. Certainly, a pastor will not see all of these weaknesses, yet he will be aware of some of them. In such cases, a pastor will want to see the individual as a saint. He will direct that person to Christ whom he believes in.

A happy inconsistency exists where a believer confesses the true gospel, in spite of the error(s) he or she falls into. It may not be immediate or even spoken out loud, yet a saint, as long as he has faith in Christ alone, confesses such. Luther said,

Just as it is impossible for a man who depends on faith in Christ to seek salvation in his own name (for he knows the works and merits of no person save Christ alone and therefore does not have any name by which he may be saved and sanctified except that of Christ alone), so is it impossible for him who relies on works and vows not to seek salvation in his own name.<sup>111</sup>

The church fathers are a good example of this. In spite of their errors and sins, they confessed faith in Christ alone. An inconsistency exists where there is a contradiction. Therefore, in spite of a confession of works, there must be a confession of faith in Christ alone. A pastor will *not* want to interrogate his members for such a confession. Nevertheless, in the erring Christian, he will want to keep his ear open for a confession of faith in Christ alone.

The happy inconsistency also exists when a person sins in ignorance. The individual is not always aware of his work righteous thoughts, words, or attitudes. Luther once said that God often helped those who opposed the Word in their ignorance.<sup>112</sup> This applies to all the saints. The saints sin in ignorance every day, not because they want too, but because they carry with them

---

<sup>111</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*, 319–320.

<sup>112</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 288.

the old Adam. Like Nestorius, their logic is not always sound. They may be unaware of what God's word says.

All ignorance is sinful; however, in this case the sin is committed unintentionally. Thus, the ignorance does not drive out faith, rather the person confesses, Lord "who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults" (Ps. 19:12). Luther said of those like the church fathers, "Although there are many such errors on the part of the saints, yet they were not aware of them but clung to a simple, unsophisticated Christian faith; which is why God forgave them their errors."<sup>113</sup>

Also, when reading Luther, take note of his adjectives and adverbs. These are key in understanding when he considered an individual to be portraying a happy inconsistency or not. For example, Luther said the happy inconsistency exists where the person sins *unexpectedly*, who is *willing* to be instructed. However, it does not exist where the person was persisting *stubbornly* in error, or was *stubbornly* gratifying his flesh. These terms help to determine when an individual's sin is venial or mortal. Since this is a matter of the heart, a pastor can only judge their actions. He must consider if the individual is willing to listen to him and be instructed, or if he is refusing instruction and persistently defends his own position and beliefs.

Finally, consider Luther's pastoral heart. He was patient. He was not quick to condemn those who erred, even when his enemies spoke evil of him. Consider how patient he was towards Pope Leo X, even after he had received the papal bull. Consider how patient he was with the fanatics, even after they had maliciously slandered the truth. If Luther was patient towards the leaders and purveyors of synergism, how much more patient should Lutheran pastors be with one's flock? Nevertheless, as was stated several times, there is a point where hope turns into a refusal to acknowledge the facts.

---

<sup>113</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II*, 189



### When the Happy Inconsistency Does Not Exist in an Individual

The happy inconsistency does not exist where there is a different gospel being confessed consistently. Synergism is an example of a different gospel. There is nothing in synergism that constitutes the true gospel. It is through-and-through a work righteous religion. Francis Pieper said, “A consistent synergist cannot be a believer.”<sup>114</sup> This is harsh, but what is more troubling is how synergism displays Christ. It displays him as an example to follow. He is an aide, not a Savior. Luther said, “If you surrender or pervert the doctrine of faith, as the papists and other sects do, and transfer your trust from Christ to your own holiness or live in open sin and shame and yet *boast of the Gospel and the Christian name*, you are to know that you are a false branch and no part of the Vine but are condemned and rejected.”<sup>115</sup>

What the papists and fanatics have done to the gospel is more troubling than anything world religions have done. World religions deny Christ outright, but synergism denies him, while praising his name. It is not often seen as a different gospel. Recognizing it as such is crucial if pastors are to apply the happy inconsistency correctly.

The happy inconsistency does not exist when deception is being used. A person who lies in order to give the appearance of unity in faith, is not displaying a happy inconsistency. Lying is never a sin of ignorance. Likewise, a person who holds to a different meaning for like-terms is not displaying a happy inconsistency either. This may be an area where Lutheran pastors are easily misled. Instead of inquiring further into a person’s definition or understanding of a word, a pastor might *assume* the person holds to the same definition he does. However, the reality might be quite different. As was pointed out, the Catholic Church and the fanatics have very different meanings for: Christ, grace, faith, and gospel. Therefore, it is necessary for Lutheran pastors to

---

<sup>114</sup> Pieper, F., *Christian Dogmatics* vol. 2, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 30.

<sup>115</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John Chapters 14-16*, 221. Emphasis mine.

follow Luther's approach and consider if the person is holding to or rejecting the thing(s) a word signifies.

The happy inconsistency does not exist when ignorance is not justifiable. There are times when people cannot use ignorance as an excuse. Luther said of his adversaries,

We can also say of our adversaries that they cannot adduce ignorance of the Gospel's doctrine as an excuse. For we have preached it to them, painted it for them, written and sung it to them; and they have heard it and read it, yes, they themselves have attacked it in their writings . . . Therefore such ignorance will by no means excuse them before God. It will rather accuse them and aggravate their sin; yes, it will condemn them utterly.<sup>116</sup>

This ignorance is not of weakness. It demonstrates a persistent errorist. Therefore, a person who refuses to listen to instruction and the true teaching on justification by faith alone, cannot claim ignorance. Even though the person is ignorant of the truth, their error is not excusable. Wilbert Gawrisch once said,

A heretic is self-condemned. This does not necessarily mean that he acknowledges or recognizes that he is an errorist. He may very well have deceived himself. He may well be sincere in his self-delusion. But the fact that he rejects the truth in spite of the fact that it has been pointed out to him a number of times condemns him. He stands self-condemned by his act of refusal to accept correction from the Scriptures. We may think of Zwingli at Marburg, for example.<sup>117</sup>

Adolf Hoenecke calls this "conquerable ignorance." The individual does not want to listen or know the error of his ways. His intentional ignorance is an intentional and deliberate sin.<sup>118</sup> Therefore, pastors must be careful not to assume all ignorance is excusable. A person who refuses to accept patient admonition should not be considered to be displaying a happy inconsistency. This also applies to the lay people who blindly follow false teachers. They hear Scripture from those who "sit in Moses' seat." If they favor the heretic's interpretation of the

---

<sup>116</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, 283.

<sup>117</sup> Gawrisch, Wilbert. *What is Heresy?* (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, 1965), 8.

<sup>118</sup> Hoenecke, Adolf. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. Vol. 2. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), 416.

Scriptures over what the Scriptures truly say, they cannot claim ignorance. They should not be thought of as displaying a happy inconsistency.

The happy inconsistency does not exist where an individual remains persistent in any error. Persistence is not an inconsistency. It is willful consistency. Luther made this point in countless writings. He said, “Anyone who yields to his flesh and persists in smugly gratifying its desires should know that he does not belong to Christ; though he may pride himself ever so much on the title ‘Christian,’ he is merely deceiving himself.”<sup>119</sup> In another place he says, “it is one thing to err, and it is something else to persist stubbornly and to deny. ‘I shall be able to err,’ says Augustine, ‘but I will not be a heretic.’ Our sectarians simply persist in their vain opinions. Because of the flesh which we carry about we can err, but in the Spirit we must see to it that we do not persist in error when it has been recognized.”<sup>120</sup> Luther refused to see a happy inconsistency in anyone who was persistent in error, whether they be teacher or lay person. Persistence in error is a refusal to repent of sin. Thus, a pastor will not acknowledge a happy inconsistency in anyone who persists in synergistic errors and refuses to repent of it.

Finally, these truths are not an exhaustive list of understanding when a happy inconsistency exists. They are some prominent principles that will help a pastor apply the happy inconsistency. It is ultimately a matter of understanding what the gospel is and applying the law and the gospel to the needs of the people. Thus, it is important that a pastor be able to discern these differences, since it affects what Lutheran pastors hold most dear.

---

<sup>119</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians*, 81.

<sup>120</sup> Luther, M., *Vol. 30: The Catholic Epistles*, 299.

### **What is at Stake in Misapplying the Term?**

Misapplying the happy inconsistency will always have a negative impact on the gospel message. The gospel is an absolute message. To use a dramatic phrase, the gospel is selfish. It is Christocentric. It proclaims salvation as done, completed. It is not weak or insufficient for salvation. It will not settle for a cooperation with Satan's ideas or human effort. It does not cooperate with free will. It is God's one-sided covenant. It is all or nothing. It alone rules in a person's heart.

Saying that a persistent synergist is inconsistent betrays these truths. It gives the impression that works and faith cooperate for salvation. It denies the necessity of confessing faith in Christ *alone*. It confuses the laypeople about the gospel. It legitimizes false gospels. It undermines Christ, the Christian faith, and the Holy Christian Church.

Consider Luther's approach to synergists. His condemnations against them cannot be explained away by his health issues. His condemnations are too frequent throughout his life for such an explanation. Thus, it was not kidney stones that made him unrelenting, it was his theology of the cross. He called things what they actually are. He refused to call evil good and good evil.

Furthermore, misapplying the term makes a sinner secure in their sins. A pastor, who *knows* an individual to be a persistent synergist, yet calls him or her a Christian, misunderstands the gospel. It allows the sinner to think he is on firm ground. It validates that individuals work righteous beliefs. Furthermore, the individual will not see a need to repent. Worse yet, he or she will not be hearing what the gospel really is.

On the other hand, misapplying the term crushes an erring believer. A pastor who condemns an erring Christian, is being wicked. All Christians err. No one is exempt. Man's flesh is always work righteous and therefore, it will show itself as such. Luther confessed in a sermon,

I myself have now been preaching and cultivating [faith in Christ] through reading and writing for almost twenty years and still I feel the old clinging dirt of wanting to deal so with God that I may contribute something, so that he will have to give me his grace in exchange for my holiness. And still I cannot get it into my head that I should surrender myself completely to sheer grace; yet this is what I should and must do. The mercy seat alone must prevail and remain, because he himself has established it; otherwise no man can come before God.<sup>121</sup>

Are we any better than Luther in this regard? Who can say they have never had these thoughts run through their mind? It is important to be patient with the people, since pastors also demonstrate various inconsistencies. Pastors have their own work righteous weaknesses, just as their people have theirs. Bear with the weak, even when the sins are blatant. It is necessary to go the extra mile with them. Condemning erring Christians could destroy their faith. Worse still, they may not be convinced the gospel is for them, should you correct yourself and proclaim it to them. Therefore, consider Luther's approach. Some of his condemnations didn't come till after many years of trying to instruct. He admonished the erring. He was patient with those who maliciously slandered him. He put the best construction he could toward those in error. He knew that even weak faith is still saving faith. He knew himself. Lutheran pastors will want to emulate these truths so as not to crush those who err.

---

<sup>121</sup> Luther, M., *vol. 51: Sermons I*, 284.

## CONCLUSION

If history is any indication, properly applying the happy inconsistency will not make Lutheran pastors popular. In fact, just like Luther, Lutheran pastors may hear a familiar disdainful remark: “You think you’re the only ones who are going to be saved?” It is a powerful tool Satan employs to make Christians feel ashamed of the unadulterated gospel. Thus, present-day Christians have more in common with Luther than they might think. He was hated and shunned by both the papacy and fanatics for properly applying the happy inconsistency. Proper application calls out heretics. It proclaims the unadulterated gospel, which always creates enemies. At the same time, it may appear counterintuitive that refusing to see an inconsistency in some is actually promoting the gospel. Yet, this is what a minister of the gospel must do. He must preach the gospel. He cannot add or subtract to it.

Therefore, Lutheran pastors will want to follow Luther’s example. The heresies he dealt with are the same today. He boldly defended faith in Christ alone. He was patient and kind to the weak by remembering that he too was weak. He sought to instruct, not condemn. Lutheran pastors will want to read Luther often for continued insight into his application of law and gospel. He has written far more concerning the application of the happy inconsistency than was possible to put in this paper.

Finally, Lutheran pastors will want to remember Luther’s focus on Christ. A pastor’s ministry must always be focused on admonishing the erring. He must strive to perfect this, while

remembering his own inconsistencies and weaknesses, since Christ came for the lost. He came not to condemn the world, but to save the world.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Gawrisch, Wilbert. *What is Heresy?* Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, 1965. Web.
- Hoenecke, Adolf. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. Trans. Richard A. Krause & James Langebartels. Vol. 2. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009.
- Koelpin, Arnold. *Luther Battles the Fanatics*. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, 1983. Web.
- Koelpin, Arnold. *Luther's Theology of the Cross*. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Digital Library, 1981. Web.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 2: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 14: Selected Psalms III*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 22: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 25: Lectures on Romans*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.



- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 5-6; 1519, Chapters 1-6.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 30: The Catholic Epistles.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 32: Career of the Reformer II.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 33: Career of the Reformer III.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 37: Word and Sacrament III.* (J. J. Pelika, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 38: Word and Sacrament IV.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 39: Church and Ministry I.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 41: Church and Ministry III.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 44: The Christian in Society I.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 48: Letters I.* (J. J. Pelikan, G. Krodel, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 51: Sermons I.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 54: Table Talk*. (J. J. Pelikan, T. Tappert, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.), Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Nebe, August. *Luther as Spiritual Adviser*. Translated by Charles A. Hay & Charles E. Hay, Lutheran Publication Society, 1894.

Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*. 4 vols. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1950.

Rosin, Robert. "The Papacy in Perspective: Luther's Reform and Rome." *Concordia journal*, 29 no. 4, Oct 2003, pp 407-426.

*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (R. Kolb & T. J. Wengert, Eds.) (C. Arand et. al., Trans.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000.

(2011). The Holy Bible. New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.