

Re-examining Martin
Luther's response to the
Problem of Evil:
A Project of Theological
Revisionism and
Construction

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Abstract

This research attempts two things. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate that dominant interpretive models have held sway in Luther scholarship, and that these readings significantly mar and frustrate attempts to explore and construct Luther's theodicy. Secondly – and free from these interpretive prisms – this research will embark on a project of theodicean construction that redresses the gaps in the literature, offering a hitherto unexplored aspect of Luther's work.

The problem of evil is *the* human aporia; confronting its nature leads to a riddle that touches every individual. Given Luther's lasting influence today, if scholarship has 'missed' Luther's response to the problem of evil, much may be gained through such a re-examination.

Furthermore, recent scholarship now lends itself to a '*Martin Luther: Theodicy Construction*' project. A recent scholarly trend elevates Luther's engagement with the experiential and existential dimension of being human (the 'Pastoral Luther'). Reorienting Luther's message in the service of others is a vital new perspective on Luther. But the 'pastoral' Luther has not been taken far enough: this interpretive prism has not been explored in relation to Luther's response to evil.

A suspicion exists that philosophically abstract theodicies are, today, theologically bankrupt. Yet reading the 'pastoral' Luther with an original interpretive lens that asks the reformer one central question – '*given that evil exists, how should I live and 'be' in the world?*' – speaks directly to this need for practical responses to suffering. It will be argued that far from an attitude of passivity and resignation, Luther's theodicy was rooted in active participation in this life as the very means of combating and resisting evil. This research will show that

Luther's overlooked theological approach to the problem of evil is illuminating and enriching, even and especially as a practical, twenty-first-century guide to evil in our midst.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	5
<i>THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE</i>	5
<i>Why is the problem of evil important?</i>	5
<i>What are the problems and omissions of the existing Problem of Evil scholarship?</i>	7
<i>THE METHOD OF THE STUDY AND ORGANISATION</i>	10
<i>What hypotheses will this research test?</i>	10
<i>Are there any novel aspects to the methodological approach?</i>	17
<i>THE SOURCES OF THE STUDY</i>	18
<i>What resources/evidence will be used?</i>	18
<i>CONCLUSION</i>	20
CHAPTER ONE: EXAMINING THE 'TRADITIONAL' READING OF LUTHER'S ESCHATOLOGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR HIS THEODICY	22
<i>SECTION ONE: NARRATIVE: WHAT DID LUTHER SAY ABOUT ESCHATOLOGY?</i>	23
<i>Luther's antecedents</i>	24
<i>Departures: Apocalyptic, Polemical and the Antichrist</i>	27
<i>SECTION TWO: INTERPRETATIONS: A RECEPTION HISTORY OF LUTHER'S ESCHATOLOGY</i>	34
<i>Interpretation: Luther's eschatology as a scarlet thread</i>	35
<i>Interpretation: Luther's eschatology as apocalyptic</i>	38
CHAPTER TWO: RE-EXAMINING LUTHER'S ESCHATOLOGY IN THE 'HERE AND NOW': THE CASE FOR PRESENT ESCHATOLOGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR LUTHER'S THEODICY	47
<i>WHAT IMPLICATIONS COULD LUTHER'S 'PRESENT ESCHATOLOGY' HAVE FOR HIS THEODICY?</i>	57
CHAPTER THREE: RE-EXAMINING LUTHER'S CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL.....	63
<i>WHAT DID LUTHER THINK 'EVIL' WAS?</i>	66
<i>WHAT DID LUTHER THINK 'SIN' WAS?</i>	68
<i>WHO DID LUTHER THINK 'THE DEVIL' WAS?</i>	72
<i>WHAT DID LUTHER THINK 'SUFFERING' WAS?</i>	79
<i>CONCLUSION</i>	84
CHAPTER FOUR: 'FRUIT OF FAITH THEREIN BE SHOWING' _CONSTRUCTING LUTHER'S RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL USING HIS HYMNS	85
<i>HYMNS AS AN ANTIDOTE TO EVIL</i>	90
<i>THE FRUITS OF FAITH: THE MESSAGE OF LUTHER'S HYMNS</i>	96
<i>THE PRESENT ESCHATOLOGY AND THEOSIS MOTIFS IN LUTHER'S HYMNS</i>	97
<i>THE 'JOY' AND 'FELLOWSHIP' MOTIF IN LUTHER'S HYMNS</i>	100
<i>DEAR CHRISTIANS, LET US NOW REJOICE (1523): A CASE STUDY WITHIN A CASE STUDY.....</i>	105
<i>CONCLUSION</i>	109
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION	111
APPENDIX	120
BIBLIOGRAPHY	122

Introduction

The Statement of Purpose

A scarlet thread running throughout this work is the conviction that dominant historiographical narratives or interpretive prisms have held sway in Luther scholarship, and that these approaches or ‘entry points’ significantly mar, frustrate, and hinder any discussion of Luther’s potential response to the problem of evil. Once such lenses are put aside (and new ones are employed), this research seeks to re-examine Luther’s response to evil by asking the reformer one central question: “*Given that evil exists in the world, how should I live and ‘be’?*”

Of course, to claim that Martin Luther is an under-researched theologian would be absurd. Indeed, even a cursory glance at the sheer body of scholarly literature in these years following the quincentenary anniversary of his 95 theses convincingly demonstrates the opposite. This research, however, posits that Luther’s *response to the problem of evil and suffering* is an underexplored area. One of the central aims of this thesis is, therefore, to justify a re-examination of key aspects of Luther’s theology, specifically his eschatology, using a different and new lens: the interpretive prism of the problem of evil. This research then goes one step further by re-examining one novel aspect of Luther’s works – his hymns – and argues that the reformer did, indeed, have much to say in response to the question: “*Given that evil exists in the world, how should I live and ‘be’?*”

Why is the problem of evil important?

The problem of evil – making sense of a world suffused with evil – confounds both the atheist and theist alike. Leszek Kolakowski has argued “the problem of theodicy, far from being invented for the amusement of speculative minds, has strong and unwithering roots in the everyday experience of those who refuse to admit that suffering and evil are just suffering and evil, plain facts meaning nothing, related to nothing, justified by nothing.”¹ Suffering vividly marks the presence of evil in our world. Making sense of this remains an all-pervasive human problem. Evil’s work in the world, however, carries particular connotations for theists given the type of God they believe in, and for these people, questions of ‘Why?’ and ‘How could you, Lord?’ have been raging ever since the *Book of Job* and before. This work affirms, therefore, the intimate connection between the pervasive human longing to discern meaning in life given the brute fact of evil, and – at least for the theist – the importance of, and need for, theodicy construction. Furthermore, this research argues that the problem of evil is *the* human aporia; confronting its nature is a riddle that touches every human being at some point, theist or not. Bringing this all-too-real *human* conundrum to Martin Luther continues in the tradition of scholars who “return to Luther now with new questions to ask of a Luther regard(ed) not as a figure from the past to be worshipped but as a dialogue partner for constructing theology today.”² Indeed, as a sixteenth-century reformer, Luther’s theological insights continue to enlighten and inspire many today in the twenty-first. Given his ubiquitous influence – and given that the problem of evil is an enduring human conundrum – if scholarship has ‘missed’ or overlooked Luther’s response to the problem of evil, we all stand to gain immeasurably by a re-examination of his work through this particular prism.

¹ L. Kolakowski, *Religion If There Is No God...On God, the Devil, Sin and Other Worries of the So-Called Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 35.

² C. Helmer, ‘The American Luther’, *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology*, vol 47, no. 2, summer 2008, 115.

What are the problems and omissions of the existing Problem of Evil scholarship?

Traditionally confined to the sub-section, 'Philosophy of Religion', in Philosophy Departments, 'The Problem of Evil' as a topic, has, just like Luther himself, a complicated past, and indeed, reception. Paul Ricoeur has argued: "that both philosophy and theology encounter evil as a challenge unlike any other, the greatest thinkers in both these disciplines are willing to admit."³ Yet Philosophy and Theology have tended to approach this issue independently and in ways that have demarcated one another's 'territory' along artificially delineated disciplinary boundaries. Plantinga, for example, sets out the methodological approach for his philosophical theodicy by emphasising the ways in which his research differs from a theological perspective: "The theist may find a *religious* problem in evil ... Faced with great personal suffering or misfortune, he may be tempted to rebel against God, to shake his fist in God's face, or even to give up belief in God altogether ... Such a problem calls, not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care."⁴ Indeed, it is well established that under the wing of Philosophy of Religion (the traditional 'home' of the problem of evil), a customary distinction has been made between the 'theoretical problem of evil' and the 'practical problem of evil'.⁵ The 'theoretical' problem has centred around an intellectual matter of determining the rationality of theistic belief in God in light of the facts about evil, whereas the 'practical problem of evil' concerns the existential and experiential difficulties evil creates for love and trust towards God. Traditional theodicians have tended to uphold this distinction and address the theoretical problem of evil; the practical problem is regarded as the "business of priests and healthcare workers".⁶ More recently, however, the

³ P. Ricoeur, 'Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 53, no. 4, 635.

⁴ A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 63-4, emphasis in original.

⁵ N.N. Trakakis, 'The State of Play: The Problem of Evil Today' in N.N. Trakakis (ed), *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

⁶ *Ibid*, 128.

work of the ‘anti-theodicyists’⁷ argues that this dichotomy is artificial and even pernicious; it reduces the problem of evil to an abstract and disinterested exercise that discredits philosophy and philosophers in the process.⁸

One of the anti-theodicyists’ central criticisms of the existing scholarship lies, therefore, in its overwhelmingly abstract, theoretical ‘solutions’ to the problem of evil, which remain inaccessible, obscure, and alienating to those who are suffering. Rowan Williams has suggested that “perhaps it is time for philosophers of religion to look away from theodicy – not to appeal blandly to the mysterious purposes of God, not to appeal to any putative justification at all, but to put the question of how we remain faithful to human ways of seeing suffering, even and especially when we are thinking from a religious perspective.”⁹ Schemas that engage practically with evil are in dire need in the twenty-first century.¹⁰ In response, the ‘anti-theodicyists’ are increasingly engaging with the practical problem – the very territory that has, traditionally, been left to the ‘priests’. Thus, those who would count themselves as ‘philosophers’ emphasise the need for a more holistic methodological approach that fundamentally allows for an alternative way of thinking about, and *practising*, philosophy in relation to the problem of evil. In short, philosophers are increasingly calling for more

⁷ Zachary Braiterman introduced the term ‘anti-theodicy’ in *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 31, in order to reject the project of theodicy because of its perceived inherent flaws (specifically, its tendency towards passivity and fatalism in the face of evil). The most influential thinkers in this school include K. Kilby, ‘Evil and the Limits of Theology’, *New Blackfriars*, vol 84, no. 983 (January 2003), and J. Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (London: SCM Press, 2018).

⁸ See Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*.

⁹ Quoted in C.T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 39.

¹⁰ Calls for ‘practical theodicy’ can be found, for example, from W. Farley, ‘The Practice of Theodicy’, in M.E. Mohrman and M.J. Hanson (eds.), *Pain Seeking Understanding: Suffering, Medicine, and Faith*. (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1999), 103-14.

‘practical *theology*’ approaches to the problem of evil, which engage with (and take more seriously) the experiential element of suffering.¹¹

Indeed, confining ‘pastoral’ and ‘theoretical’ theodicy to ‘theological’ and ‘philosophical’ branches of Problem of Evil scholarship respectively, might, in fact, be illusory and unhelpful. This thesis agrees with the anti-theodicy claim that the way in which the traditional problem of evil is approached, is open to critique and then recasting. This thesis’ freshly constructed Luther theodicy, therefore, draws from the work of the anti-theodicyists in reframing the issue by asking Luther *different questions* about the problem of evil, and it is these questions, and Luther’s answers, that have been overlooked. This new approach to Luther’s thought may offer a genuinely holistic interpretation of the problem of evil that encompasses both theological and philosophical elements.

Contemporary scholars who protest against theodicy as an intellectual exercise put praxis first, calling for practical, response-driven theodicies that serve the community with a pastoral purpose. What is needed today, they argue, is a way of addressing evil that has practical meaning. “We require a different mode of understanding,” says Swinton, “a mode of theodicy that is embodied within the life and practices of the Christian community. Such a model of theodicy does not seek primarily to *explain* evil and suffering, but rather presents ways in which evil and suffering can be *resisted* and *transformed* by the Christian community and in so doing, can enable Christians to live faithfully in the midst of unanswered questions as they await God’s redemption of the whole of creation.”¹² In terms of worldview there is, undoubtedly, an epistemic gap between Martin Luther circa 1527 and John Swinton’s book

¹¹ E. Stump, in *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), for example, champions a corrective to the traditional analytic philosophical approach to theodicy that includes the use of exploring biblical narratives in relation to suffering.

¹² J. Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 4, emphases in original.

of 2007, but Luther's *response* to evil may be closer to us than we think. Could it be that Luther's overlooked and undiscovered theodicy of the sixteenth century meets this clarion call from the twenty-first?

Luther's theological approach to the problem of evil is, in fact, illuminating and enriching. Yet Anglophone Luther scholars have not fully engaged with the project of uncovering and constructing his response to evil, or the implications for today. This body of research will adopt a fresh perspective on Luther's thought that takes seriously the clarion calls from both the 'anti-theodacists', who cry out for more practical guidance in the face of evil and suffering,¹³ as well as from theologians such as Rowan Williams who, in a similar fashion, also call for a response to evil that is grounded in the 'real world'. This thesis will demonstrate that Luther's theological insights were intended to be 'lived out' in practice by the common person, and that his pastoral concerns for the experiential dimension of an individual 'Christian-in-community' underscored his entire theology (and philosophy) as a consistent and foundational concern. Anchoring his more abstract insights in the problem of evil, this research intends, therefore, to show the ways in which Luther envisaged Christians meeting and responding to the challenge of evil and suffering in their everyday lives. Re-examining Luther's theology through this prism addresses gaps in the literature in ways that move the dialogue forward for both Luther and the Problem of Evil scholarship.

The Method of the Study and Organisation

What hypotheses will this research test?

In brief, this research seeks to test and challenge two central methodological approaches that dominate the scholarship on Luther. First, it will test the theory that certain interpretative

¹³ As a further example, see K. Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 59-60 and Ch. 4.

models – and one case study in particular: Luther’s Eschatology – have driven and influenced scholarship on Luther, and that these mainline roads of enquiry have subsequently marginalised or obscured other promising, but less well travelled, routes. Second, this research will test the hypothesis that such perspectives have led to and facilitated the easy assumption that Luther did not, therefore, have a theodicy¹⁴ – or that if he did, it ran along ‘traditional’ lines: the ‘solution’ to evil was found in the promise of the afterlife.¹⁵ Such a position will be critiqued and through a project of theological construction focusing specifically on Luther’s hymns, it will further be argued that his counsel and teachings on this aporia do, in fact, amount to a unique ‘Luther’ theodicy.

If there are several dominant interpretive prisms that represent a barrier to accessing Luther’s theodicy, one such lens has been to regard Luther through the prism of the Enlightenment.¹⁶ It can be argued that post-Enlightenment scholarship has skewed readings on Luther by, for example, elevating and prioritising the role of the individual in his theological schema to the detriment of the importance of the community. Indeed, in a bid to trace the Enlightenment’s

¹⁴ For scholars who take at face value what Luther himself said on the quest for a theodicy, it is certainly the case that Luther repudiated any attempt at a philosophical theodicy. To the question ‘why would an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God allow evil in the world?’ this touches, for Luther, on ‘*the secrets of his majesty, where his judgements are incomprehensible... It is not our business to ask this question, but to adore these mysteries.*’ Martin Luther, “The Bondage of the Will, 1526,” in LW, 33,189. But this research will demonstrate that such a position does not conflict with Luther having a practical, response-driven *solution* to the problem of evil, and this, of course, is a form of theodicy.

¹⁵ George Forell has suggested: “in many ways Luther’s eschatology reflects the traditional teaching of his day. One dies; one was raised in the body to come before God for final judgement; some were clothed in the grace of Christ and brought to salvation; others perished eternally.” George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (New York, 1954), 156. Luther himself states: ‘*This whole insoluble problem [of God’s injustice] finds a quick solution in one short sentence, namely, that there is a life after this life, and whatever has not been punished and rewarded here will be punished and rewarded there, since this life is nothing but an anticipation, or rather, the beginning of the life to come.*’ Luther, “The Bondage of the Will, 1526,” LW 33, 293.

¹⁶ The argument that a pervasive nineteenth-century ‘reading’ of the Reformation that sought to establish a firm causal link between sixteenth-century church reforms and modern liberalism, and that this continues to exert its influence in Luther scholarship, is made by T.A. Howard, *Remembering the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

antecedents, many scholars are alive to the ways in which Luther has been exalted retrospectively as someone who prepared the way for reason and freedom of conscience; as someone who led humanity out of the Middle Ages.¹⁷ Whilst Luther scholars have highlighted the dangers of overemphasising such a perspective (Oberman, for example – particularly in his rendering of Luther’s Devil¹⁸ – makes a compelling case for the extent to which Luther was indebted to the medieval worldview, rather than breaking free from it to usher in a more ‘enlightened’ frame of mind), this significant interpretive prism remains a barrier to uncovering Luther’s theodicy. Indeed, the propensity for a heightened emphasis on individualism has significantly affected Luther scholarship, across the confessional divide, and shows no sign of abating. *Luther And His Progency*, for example, was published in 2017 amidst fears that the occasion of the quincentenary would turn 2017 into a year-long celebration of Luther’s accomplishments (the express intention of the research was to serve as a stern corrective so that Catholics were ‘aware of what an historical, theological, and socio-political travesty such a celebration would be’¹⁹). To that end, Ignacio Barreiro-Carambula points to a nascent and destructive theme of individualism running through, and corrupting, Luther’s entire theology: “Luther’s disrespect for the supernatural order of things also works progressively to break down the proper natural order of society and promotes the fiction that man is an autonomous individual, without any roots grounded in his family, regional and national traditions, or in his Creator.”²⁰ Similarly, Orthodox Greek and Russian theologians accuse Luther and the Reformation of having introduced an unnecessary new principle into theology that elevates and prioritises a sense of self, resulting in an over-

¹⁷ H.-M. Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment* (Augsburg: Fortress Publishers, 2013), 20.

¹⁸ H. A. Oberman. *Luther. Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel*. Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1981; English: *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.

¹⁹ J.C. Rao (ed.), *Luther and His Progency* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2017), 2.

²⁰ I, Barreiro-Carambula, ‘Negative Liberty, Protestantism and the War on Nature’, in J.C. Rao (ed), *Luther and His Progency*, 228.

evaluation of the individual and subjectivism.²¹ Such (remarkably modern) mindsets continue to accept uncritically that Luther was the de facto father of individualism. Such a reading colours Luther's understanding of Eschatology, specifically (examined in Chapter One), and this 'Enlightenment-bias veil' remains a significant barrier in the quest for an authentic Luther theodicy.

Imbuing into Luther's works a heightened significance of the role of the individual has had important ramifications for how scholars have understood Luther's response to the collective suffering humankind endures. It is a popular assumption that Luther's primary concern was with the question: 'How can I, the individual, find a gracious God?' But the assumption that salvation, for Luther, is primarily orientated solely towards the individual has been subject to criticism. J.A. Bussie, for example, states: "Luther fails to express any desire to combat social injustice and to heed the persistent biblical injunction to care for the poor, the widow, and the oppressed ... My colloquial translations reveal the pastoral failure of Luther's discourse ... Luther's theological sleight-of-hand legitimises suffering. It allows us to exonerate ourselves of the guilt or shame caused by our complicity with present injustice."²²

In contrast with the assumption that Luther's sole interest was the focus on the individual's search for grace, this research will show that Luther's response to the problem of evil was, in fact, anchored in, and driven by, the relational aspect of humans-in-community. Luther emphasised that the Christian always lives *in relatione* with other people. "You see, now we are talking about a Christian *in-relatione*: not about his being a Christian, but about his life and obligation in it to some other person, whether under him or even over him or even

²¹ See Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 22.

²² J.A. Bussie, 'Luther's Hope for the World', in C. Helmer (ed.), *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2009), 117.

alongside him, like a lord or a lady, a wife or children or neighbours, whom he is obliged, if possible, to defend, guard and protect. Here it would be a mistake to teach: ‘turn the other cheek and throw your cloak away with your coat.’”²³ Within the framework of Luther’s ‘take’ on the problem of evil and suffering, scholars are yet to engage fully with his views on the individual’s place *within a society*. It will be argued here that Luther’s views on participation in the community, in light of his insights on how best to meet evil and suffering head on, dispel the myth of a dominant theme of Protestant individualism running throughout his entire theology. Furthermore, it will be argued that Luther did indeed have a response-driven ‘solution’ to the problem of evil centring around a communitarian spirit that was anchored in, and embraced, the here-and-now world. Far from an attitude of passivity and resignation (often associated with the Reformation’s leading figures’ messages of predestination) Luther’s theodicy was rooted in active participation in this life as the very means of combating and resisting evil.

In addition, a scholarly tendency to prioritise the ‘systematic’ theologian in Luther over Luther, the ‘practical theologian’, is a further interpretive lens that frustrates attempts to uncover Luther’s response to the problem of evil. Explored further in the chapters that follow and that focus specifically on the reception history of Luther’s Eschatology, this research seeks to test the idea that, in the context of the schismatic shifts of the Reformation, scholarly interest has tended towards a preoccupation with sharp breaks and points of departure; focus and emphasis has been on the historically and theologically ‘new’. Given this interest – and considering the subsequent impact such facets of Luther’s theology had – it is unsurprising that Soteriology and Eschatology have become the obvious, and indeed, *principal* subject matter for Luther scholars. It is certainly the case that thorough research on, for example,

²³ Luther, “Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), 1532,” WA 32, 390, 33.

Luther's understanding of grace and free will has proved indispensable for understanding the entire Reformation message. But in highlighting fundamental methodological difficulties in gaining access to Luther, scholars such as H.-M. Barth have suggested that abstract Lutheran ideas such as the grace of God have made it almost impossible for the 'everyday' individual to read Luther. Barth suggests that "the eschatological horizon that was taken for granted by Luther and most of his contemporaries, which oppressed them on the one hand and consoled them on the other, has vanished".²⁴ Despite this contentious claim (many of today's Christians have certainly not altogether dispensed with eschatological hope), Barth's perspective is representative of a dominant interpretation of Luther's own thought: that a central concern in Luther's theological insights was with the eschatological 'next' life. This research will argue that such prioritised readings are *to the detriment of* more practical modes of being and living in the here and now, which we certainly do also find in Luther. This is evidenced by Barth's conclusion that "... no self-reflective person focused on his or her own self-realization is able to be fully open to the fundamental concern of Luther's theology: the idea of the grace of God as the basis of all things and controlling all things... What we regard as important is not what may happen after death but what happens before it... what we are looking for is help with living not 'forgiveness of sins.'"²⁵ This thesis will argue that in relation to the problem of evil, Luther *did* offer humanity help with the business of living. In this regard, Luther 'the practical theologian' has been sidelined and ignored because of a dominant assumption that he was, first and foremost, a 'systematic theologian' (in fact, by these definitions, Luther was both, and it is worth noting that to a large extent this division is a post-Enlightenment one). Unwittingly reinforcing the notion that Luther's central preoccupation was otherworldly, that his was a theology aimed predominantly (or even

²⁴ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 6.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

solely) towards the teleological ‘end game’ of salvation, is a perspective that has significantly obstructed the quest for Luther’s response to the problem of evil. A project of constructing Luther’s theodicy, therefore, illustrates the ways in which Luther remains an illuminating conversational partner despite the five hundred years that separate the ‘everyday’ individual of today with the reformer of the sixteenth century.

Challenging a dominant reading of Luther’s Eschatology is, therefore, an important part of this work, and one that carries with it significant ramifications for accessing Luther’s theodicy. But alongside this challenge, the scholarship surrounding Luther has also recently travelled in a direction that points towards a different *kind* of Luther – and a different understanding of his message – and these insights, too, open up new lines of enquiry, particularly an exploration of his theodicy. Unprecedented perspectives on Luther’s understanding of the Christian ethical life and love for the neighbour, for example, has done much to highlight the dangers of prioritising ‘Luther the systematic theologian’ to the detriment of more ‘pastoral’ elements in Luther’s message.²⁶ In consequence, there has been a noticeable spike in scholarship focusing on the ‘pastoral’ Luther.²⁷ Indeed, H.-M. Barth has suggested that Luther’s work is an “...altogether pastoral theology. It is in service of liberation from sin, death and the devil and is meant to encourage toward life, action and the joy of living.”²⁸ There is unquestionably nuance, balance, and even tension in both Luther’s thought and scholars’ interpretation on this issue of Luther’s priorities. Kolb, for example, who readily highlights the centrality of Eschatology in Luther’s thinking, *also* argues that “as

²⁶ See A. Raunio, ‘Natural Law and Faith: The Forgotten Foundations of Ethics in Luther’s Theology’, in C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jenson (eds), *Union With Christ. The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 116.

²⁷ See R.K. Rittgers, ‘How Luther’s Engagement in Pastoral Care Shaped Luther’s Theology’, in R. Kolb, I. Dingel, and L. Batka, (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 462, as one example.

²⁸ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 15.

important as they were for him, Luther's faith focused neither on the afterlife nor on the individual's relationship with God alone. Trusting God – listening to him – enables faithful people to focus their lives on service to others.”²⁹ Openly acknowledging tensions in Luther (and Luther scholarship), rather than elevating one dominant reading over another, underscores this entire research. Indeed, appreciation that Luther did ground his message in the service of others, to be lived out in this *present* life, is now a well-established (although not uncontested) perspective on Luther. But the ‘pastoral’ Luther has not been taken far enough; this reading is still overshadowed by a dominant, apocalyptic reading of Luther's works, and it has not been explored in relation to Luther's response to suffering. Broadly accepting this pastoral perspective on Luther, and alongside calls for a more practical or ‘pastoral’ forms of theodicy, this research seeks to bring these two insights, developments, and, indeed, disciplines, together, in relation to a project of Luther theodicy construction.

Are there any novel aspects to the methodological approach?

First, I will need to demonstrate that the scholarship on Luther's Eschatology does, indeed, obfuscate Luther's theodicy. This necessitates a reception history of his Eschatology to show how, why and where the literature does in fact do what I suggest it does. Second, a chapter then follows that outlines the ‘new’ perspectives and readings of Luther, specifically with regards to ‘Present Eschatology’ and a more recent trend for the ‘Pastoral Luther’. This research posits that it is in light of these current lines of enquiry that great potential for re-examining Luther's theodicy may be discovered. Third, in order to begin a project of theodicy construction, a chapter then follows that explores Luther's conceptualisation of ‘Evil’, ‘Sin’, ‘Suffering’ and ‘The Devil’. In light of how these abstract ideas connect for

²⁹ R. Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith. Christian Theology in Context* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2009), 135.

Luther (plus the novel, and oftentimes, startling, discoveries he unearthed at the nexus at which these concepts meet), a final chapter then seeks to re-examine certain aspects of Luther's writings, specifically his hymns, using a unique '*problem of evil prism*'. But what is a *problem of evil prism*? Attempts to frame theodicy as an intellectual quest for the origins of evil typically lead down dry and abstract rabbit holes. Tracing Luther's understanding of the origin of evil is, similarly, not a central aim of this study. Rather, the focus will lie in uncovering what Luther thought evil *was*; *why* it exists in the world; what it *does* to human beings, and how best human beings can mitigate its effects. In this context, a useful *problem of evil prism* asks Luther one central question: '*given that evil exists, how should I live and 'be' in the world?*' This represents an original interpretive filter through which to read Luther even though, ironically, Luther himself was entirely familiar with this question and, moreover, went to great lengths to communicate his answer. Indeed, making sense of the disconnect between God and mankind was the driving thrust of Luther's entire theology. Implicit in such a starting position *is* the problem of evil; it is a question woven into any and every possible response from Luther. This research will take the problem of evil as its starting point as well as arguing that this was, in fact, Luther's *own* starting point.

The Sources of the Study

What resources/evidence will be used?

A central aim of this thesis is to bring one field of scholarship (the Problem of Evil) in constructive dialogue with another field (Luther's theology), on the basis that both will be enriched following a project of Luther theodicy construction. Given the overwhelming literature available on these subjects, this would seem an ambitious project indeed! It is therefore vital that both primary and secondary sources are chosen with care and singled out for study either because they are representative of a scholarly consensus, or because they best address the questions the *problem of evil prism* asks of Luther.

Given that Luther wrote in Latin and German, and his works have since been translated into English, it is important at the outset to clarify which of Luther's primary works this research will engage with. The traditional formulations of the problem of evil have been grounded in Anglophone analytic Philosophy of Religion. Critics of this approach, such as the anti-theodicyists, have also tended to come from the Anglophone world. This research seeks to bring to this debate such resources from Luther as will further challenge a narrow theodicy and provide material for a much richer pastoral approach. As such, this thesis will (for the most part) engage with arguments about Luther's theology which are accessible in English. This will include important works translated into English. It will examine important trends in this scholarship on Luther in order to show that, although some readings of Luther conclude that he does not have a theodicy,³⁰ others open up vital new perspectives. This thesis will thus show that Anglophone scholars writing on the problem of evil have missed some important insights from Luther, as well as highlighting the ways in which Anglophone scholars writing about Luther have missed some important insights about his theodicy. Using relevant scholarship on Luther and a close reading of Luther's hymns, this research will challenge both Anglophone theodicy and Anglophone Luther scholarship to take note of these important insights.

Martin Luther was driven to his writer's desk to offer responses to the burning issues of his day. That he was, therefore, largely a reactive thinker rather than a systematic theologian in the style of the second-wave reformers, presents significant methodological challenges.

Imposing systems or themes on the prolific writings of Luther is, however, both an accepted

³⁰ Luther himself was at great pains to condemn those who would seek to question God's will (see Luther, "The Bondage of the Will, 1526", LW 33, 293).

and inevitable methodological approach; traditionally, for example, there have been two broad approaches to studying Luther: the historical-genetic and the systematic-theological.³¹ Moreover, there is precedent for a much more pinpointed and selective approach to Luther's works in an attempt to construct key aspects of his entire thought. Albrecht Peters, for example, attempted to develop Luther's central theological approach in terms of the principle articles of the catechism.³² Similarly, Gerhard Ebeling developed a comprehensive Lutheran theology by examining and commenting solely on the theses of the 1536 *Disputatio de Homine*.³³ The *problem of evil prism* as outlined, therefore, can be justified as a guiding methodological framework, in conjunction with a highly selective approach to Luther's pastoral writings – a focus on his hymns.

Conclusion

This research is important because in re-constructing Luther's overlooked response to evil, it argues that a schema can be discovered that addresses academics' concerns – one that offers practical and meaningful guidance to evil – and, moreover, that this resonates with, and has relevance for, *all* human beings who suffer today. This will not, however, be a project of harmonising Luther. Whilst it is certainly anticipated that a tension will emerge in Luther's thought (the oscillating emphasis on the individual and the community, for example), so too might a theology-rich response to our sense of self, and the interplay between self and other in the context of meeting the challenge of evil head on. This more 'communitarian' stance in

³¹ For an outline on these positions, see B. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology, Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark Ltd, 1999), 6.

³² Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Creed*, trans. Thomas Trapp (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990-1994).

³³ Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, vol. 2: *Disputatio de homine. Part 3: Die theologische Definition des Menschen. Kommentar zu These 20-40* (Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1989).

Luther may have been overlooked or marginalised and offers a fresh perspective on both Luther and potential responses to the problem of evil.

Chapter One: Examining the ‘traditional’ reading of Luther’s Eschatology and its implications for his theodicy

If misinterpretations have arisen over Luther’s response to the problem of evil, why is that the case? What is the ‘traditional’ reading of Luther’s response to the problem of evil and upon what is it based? In scholarly circles, well-established and accepted answers to these questions rely heavily upon a particular reading of Luther’s eschatology, which this chapter seeks to demonstrate has significantly hindered any progress in uncovering a closer, more accurate understanding of Luther’s response to the problem of evil. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to chart the interpretative shifts in the reception history of Martin Luther’s eschatology, with an eye to the implications these shifts may have had for the interpretation of Luther’s theodicy. How scholars have interpreted and framed Luther’s eschatological message continues, to a large extent, to determine and direct their understanding of Luther’s entire theological schema. Reviewing these scholarly changes in emphasis and trajectory is important and necessary given this thesis’ central aim: the quest for Luther’s theodicy.

Eschatology has, traditionally, had a clear relationship with theological accounts of evil; indeed, many theodicies rely, ultimately, on an eschatological resolution. But if Luther scholarship has misunderstood or restricted its understanding of one aspect of Luther’s thought (eschatology) – and because his entire theological framework must be considered holistically, in the knowledge that key tenets feed and inform one another rather than existing independently – then scholars may have misinterpreted, underestimated or even neglected other areas of his thought (theodicy). One of the central arguments put forward here does, in

fact, seek to demonstrate that within the historiography, one particular dominant reading of Luther's eschatology has held sway and this, in turn, has marginalized other interpretative prisms, as well as obscuring a clear line of sight towards accessing Luther's theodicy.

This chapter attempts, therefore, two things. First, a narrative outline of Luther's eschatological position will be sketched. This includes an overview of two influences on Luther, Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, two thinkers whose insights help make sense of Luther's own position on the Last Times. Additionally, this first section will then explore the ways in which Luther's eschatological views broke decisively from his antecedents. Secondly – and beginning with Albert Schweitzer's seminal book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, published in 1901 – it will examine influential shifts in emphasis within the Protestant literature on eschatology throughout the twentieth century. These general currents will be examined for the impact they have had on subsequent 'Luther Eschatology' interpretive models in particular. This second part will also assess one of the more intriguing points of departure over Luther's eschatology, which came in the 1980s from historians of Luther's thought. Their arguments have advanced lines of enquiry that have had significant ramifications for the 'theological' direction scholarship has taken when it comes to understanding Luther's eschatology, and this has had knock-on implications for understanding and even accessing Luther's response to evil and suffering.

Section One: Narrative: What did Luther say about Eschatology?

The primary focus of this section is to determine Luther's eschatological position. This section looks at the theological context and climate in which Luther emerged and the ways in which previous thinkers' eschatological positions influenced Luther's own. Additionally, it examines the extent to which Luther's eschatology can be termed 'traditional', alongside the ways in which he may have broken free to construct a unique eschatological position.

Luther's antecedents

One possible entry point into understanding Luther's eschatology has been to look to his antecedents by way of tracing in his thought continuity and development from those who preceded him. For some Luther scholars, Luther's eschatology represented a continuation of the large body of eschatological insights that already existed throughout the Church's history. Indeed, Forell has suggested: "in many ways Luther's eschatology reflects the traditional teaching of his day. One dies; one was raised in the body to come before God for final judgement; some were clothed in the grace of Christ and brought to salvation; others perished eternally."³⁴

Both Weber and Oberman have argued that Luther's eschatological insights were informed by the fifth-century Church Father, Augustine, and the twelfth-century mystic and preacher, Bernard of Clairvaux.³⁵ Luther drew on both of these thinkers' eschatological insights early in his teaching to justify and bolster significant elements of his reforming message. For example, previously, a 'two-ages' theory of history had been important to both Jewish apocalypticism and Pauline theology. (In the latter, the present age was the age of Satan; the second age was the age of Christ's victory.) Joachim of Fiore and Bernard both added a third age³⁶ and Luther would make use of this schema too. In his *Supputatio Annorum Mundi* ('Reckoning of the Years of the World') of 1541, Luther developed a salvation-historical

³⁴ G.W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (New York, 1954), 156.

³⁵ Oberman argues that in these two thinkers Luther "found a true rendering of the New Testament evidence of what would happen in the Last Days, as well as an adequate interpretation of these events" (Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 66). Weber suggests that "Luther more or less followed Augustine's view of the millennium." T.P. Weber, 'Millennialism' in J.L. Walls, (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 373.

³⁶ For more on Joachim see E.R. Daniel, 'Exodus and Exile: Joachim of Fiore's Apocalyptic Scenario', in *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (eds) C.W. Bynum, and P. Freedman. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

schema beginning with Adam and leading in a first period to Abraham, in a second to Pentecost, and in a third to the last day; each of these ages lasted two thousand years.

In addition, Luther's understanding of 'the enemy within' and his growing willingness to declare the Pope the Antichrist are both attitudes that were influenced by Bernard's eschatological approach. Viewing time as divided and characterised by the persecution of the Church, Bernard's 'three-ages' of history argued that in the first era, the Church had suffered at the hands of outside persecutors such as the Roman Empire; in the second, it had faced on-going threats and attacks from heretics, such as the Cathars; and in the third, Bernard predicted that the Antichrist would emerge from within the Church itself.³⁷ Framing the course of history in this way, Bernard believed this final stage - or 'Last Times' - was by far the most perilous; no longer was the threat to God's Word an identifiable 'outsider', but instead, this danger would insidiously spread from within the very heart of the Church, infecting followers like a disease whilst operating under the guise of the very thing that purported to safeguard and guarantee spiritual health. Bernard warned emphatically against this corruption from within that would usher in the Last Times; he viewed it as a campaign spearheaded by the Devil who would send into the world the great and terrible adversary: "that is, the Antichrist, the deceitful liar ... whom only the Lord Jesus can kill with the flaming Spirit of His mouth, and whom He will destroy at the time of His glorious return."³⁸ Bernard believed he was living in the era of internal hypocrisy, in which the Church was rife with falsehood. In one of his sermons he reiterated this position: "I have given you sufficient warning to protect you from the wiles of three kinds of foxes, namely flatterers, detractors,

³⁷ Weber, 'Millennialism', 373.

³⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons super Cantica Canticorum*, 1-35, Sermon 33, in S. Bernardi Opera, vol. 1 (Rome, 1957), 245.

and seducers of the spirit, who are skilled and practised in representing evil in the guise of good.”³⁹

The effect this had on Luther is clear. Oberman has argued that in 1514, when Luther first raised his voice against indulgences, Luther invoked Bernard’s epochal sequence, adopting a mindset that located the biggest threat to the Gospel as coming from within the Church itself.⁴⁰ In March 1518, when Luther answered Eck’s *Obelisci* (Eck’s critical comments on Luther’s own ninety-five theses), he was not so much shocked by Eck’s error in defending the indulgences, as by the fact that the time had come for a *Catholic* theologian to take up the side of the Devil: “It is a horror for me to hear such, not from a Jew, nor a Turk, nor a Bohemian, but by a Catholic theologian.”⁴¹ In his analysis of this comment, Oberman suggests, “when one is familiar with apocalyptic language, then the sequence of the persecution by the Jews, the Turks, and the heretics make one look for the next and decisive step or phase of the persecution ‘from within’ – no longer just by the enemies (*inimici*), but now also by ‘friends of God’ (*amici*), by Catholics.”⁴²

To a large extent, therefore, Luther was aware of, and to a degree informed by, the tradition of prophetic interpretation of the patristic fathers and the early and medieval church. But in keeping with the myriad ways in which Luther broke decisively with the past to usher in a

³⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 65.1.1, *On the Song of Songs III*, trans. Kilian Walsh and Irene M. Edwards (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1979), 179

⁴⁰ Oberman, *Luther Man Between God and the Devil*, 69. For Luther, “exactly those times of external peace and glittering prosperity are extremely dangerous to the Church”. Lecture on Psalms, 51, WA 3.417.

⁴¹ “Horror mihi est audire, non a Iudaeo, non a Turco, non a Bohemo haeretico, sed a Theologo catholico”. Quoted from H.A. Oberman, ‘Teufeldreck: Eschatology and Scatology in the “Old” Luther’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1988), 440.

⁴² *Ibid*, 440.

new understanding of the Christian life in relationship to God, scholarship has also suggested that in important respects, Luther's eschatology, too, was no less distinctive and unique.

Departures: Apocalyptic, Polemical and the Antichrist

Paul Althaus has argued: "Luther proved to be very original and daringly revolutionary in his interpretive approach ... he did not merely repeat the old traditional answers to the central questions of eschatology. In this doctrine, too, he is a Reformer."⁴³ Charting the changing trajectory of the reception history of Luther's eschatology must, necessarily, also include a discussion of the extent to which scholars regarded his insights as new, revolutionary, and in some senses, genuinely representative of a paradigm shift. Luther himself, of course, would not have recognised any aspect of his theology as anything so blasphemous as 'new'.

Sounding the clarion call for *sola scriptura* and *ad fonte*, this 'reformation', to Luther's mind, always entailed the concept of renewal: revisiting the original Scripture in search of God's truth, and stripping away the Church's subsequent layers of (as the reformers perceived it) self-serving narratives. But subjecting Scripture's two overtly 'apocalyptic' texts to serious scrutiny – *Daniel* in the Old Testament, and *Revelation* in the New Testament – presented Luther with some stark interpretative challenges. The scholarship that examines how he worked through these eschatological 'kinks' to arrive at a distinctly new eschatological position is the focus of this section.

Examining Luther's preface of the *Book of Revelation* in 1522, Winfried Vogel has argued that Luther almost entirely rejected *Revelation* because it did not reveal Christ to him.⁴⁴ "My

⁴³ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schulz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 404-405.

⁴⁴ W. Vogel, 'Luther's Exposition of Daniel and Revelation', *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 190.

spirit cannot fit into this book,” Luther wrote, because, “Christ is not known or taught in it”.⁴⁵ Alongside other canonical texts such as *Hebrews*, *James* and *Jude*, Luther struggled with messages that he believed violated the principle of salvation by grace and faith alone (*sola gratia* and *sola fide*). *Revelation*, for example, appeared to depict people who had earned salvation through martyrdom. In this early preface, Luther acknowledged that he felt himself to be in the dark regarding John’s visions and descriptions and could not interpret them. In addition, Luther seems keen to avoid being classified alongside those who claimed an array of speculative and divergent meanings as to the correct interpretation of *Revelation*.⁴⁶ Indeed, Hofmann has gone so far as to suggest that at this point in Luther’s thought, he regarded *Revelation* as apocryphal.⁴⁷

Vogel has argued, however, that over time, Luther’s appreciation for *Revelation* grew. The particular circumstances of Luther’s day and the corruption of the Church emboldened Luther to re-interpret *Revelation* anew. In his second preface to *Revelation* in 1529/30, Luther acknowledged the striking relationship with the *Book of Daniel*, insofar as both seemed to him to speak of prophetic denunciations of the papacy, as well as offering the comfort of the Last Times. In this way, Vogel highlights Luther’s new hermeneutical approach to the Apocalypse in this second preface to *Revelation*: “in it Luther distinguishes between certain types of prophecy: first, in clear words; second, in pictures and dreams with their interpretation: and third; as in the Apocalypse, only in pictures and symbols, without an accompanying interpretation. As long as this last type of prophecy is not interpreted, it is,

⁴⁵ Luther, “Preface to the Revelation of St John, 1530,” in WADB 7, 406.

⁴⁶ According to Luther, numerous interpreters of *Revelation* have “brewed it into many stupid things out of their own heads.” Luther, “Preface to the Revelation of St. John, 1530/1546,” LW 35, 400.

⁴⁷ H.-U. Hofmann, *Luther und die Johannes-Apokalypse* (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1982), 296.

says Luther, ‘hidden’ and ‘mute’. Nevertheless, it is ‘given by the Holy Spirit’, a statement that is in sharp contrast to Luther's first preface of 1522.”⁴⁸

The particular historical circumstance of his day can account for this shift in Luther’s own interpretation. What emerged as unique and distinctive about Luther’s eschatology was deeply rooted in the highly volatile and transient climate in which he was living and writing. Waging war with the Holy See itself had become a daily battle for Luther, framed, to his mind, as nothing short of *the* great cosmic battle between God and the Devil; a battle that had its denouement in the Last Times. Unlike Augustine’s *City of God*, which made little attempt to find current fulfillments or identify signs of the time in specific contemporary events, Luther examined Scripture through the prism of unfolding current events, and with an eye to fulfilling the prophecies he found there. In this way – and revealing a deep desire for prophetic reassurance – Luther shared with the apocalyptic books of the Bible, *Revelation and Daniel*, a perception of crisis – the sense of the world on a precipice – and he read church history through these books’ pages. Indeed, Amy Fryholm has argued that for Luther, “the Turks were the historical fulfilment for the last beast in *Daniel 7*; in *Revelation 8*, the angel with the censer was the Council of Nicaea, and the angels with plagues were the Montanists and Origen, and anyone who preached righteousness through works.”⁴⁹ Similarly, the disorder in Wittenberg in 1521 by Karlstadt’s supporters could only be viewed, according to Luther, eschatologically: as a tool of Satan to frustrate and hamper the spread of the gospel in the Last Times.

⁴⁸ Vogel, ‘Luther’s Exposition of Daniel and Revelation’, 184.

⁴⁹ A. Fryholm. *Christian Understandings of the Future* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2016), 215.

In a medieval religious atmosphere steeped in the idea that the end of the world was just around the corner, Luther was by no means the first theologian to stress the apocalyptic nature of eschatology, as Joachim and Bernard show. That scholars have singled out and emphasised the apocalyptic tenor of Luther's eschatology is neither hard to substantiate nor particularly illuminating to scholars in search of Luther's distinctive voice. On what grounds, therefore, does Althaus contend that Luther's eschatology was 'daringly revolutionary'? He asserts that Luther's eschatology was new and distinct in two respects and both insights are anchored in the unique circumstances of Luther's day. First, Luther added to the body of existing Church literature a novel interpretation of the Antichrist, and second, Luther made *use* of his eschatological convictions as a form of 'weaponised polemics' with a deliberate and distinctive pedagogic edge.

Luther's understanding of the Antichrist represented a genuine paradigm shift, newly ushered in by the reformer. What made Luther's apocalypticism important doctrinally was his utter conviction that the scriptural meaning of the Antichrist – the 'man of sin, the son of perdition' – whose coming was to be the principal sign of the end, was not some emperor or false prophet but the head of Christendom himself. "Beware of the Antichrist, the Pope" wrote Luther, replying to the Pope's ex-communication bull, *Exsurge Domine* of 1521, "I have virtually no doubt that the pope is really and truly the antichrist for whom, by the commonly accepted view, the world is waiting."⁵⁰ Furthermore, Pope Leo X's death in 1521 convinced Luther that the antichrist was not a single individual but the papacy itself: an institution not a person. The uniqueness of Luther's teaching on the Antichrist did not lie in his referring to the papacy as such, for this accusation had a long history, shared notably with the Hussites of Bohemia. The Hussites' main objection, however, was with the unchristian

⁵⁰ Luther, "Defence and Explanation of all Articles," LW 32,42.

life of the pope,⁵¹ whereas Luther focused on the pope's – and Church's – *teachings*. This was a far more explosive and damning view, as well as being a revolutionary one. Everything the Pope stood for was the work of the devil; not just the way he lived his life personally but, far more dangerously, the way he advocated *being* a Christian to all Christian followers. Everything he said was a lie, and all those who followed the papal decrees were being led not towards God but emphatically and fatally away from Him. In Luther's *Defence and Explanation of All the Articles* in 1521, for example, Luther called the Pope Antichrist and comprehensively condemned him through all the Pope's interactions with the world. This included giving people false assurance through indulgences, for denying that belief was required for forgiveness of sins, and for spreading "errors throughout the world" in exchange for "the wealth of the nations, and for imposing on people a system of contrition, confession, and satisfaction."⁵² Identifying the Antichrist with the Pope's teaching in this way, Vogel has gone so far as to call this Luther's "concrete building-block within his overall theological concerns."⁵³

Once this eschatological 'building block' had been firmly laid into its foundational position, it became the cornerstone upon which new interpretations could be built, including the distinctly polemical turn Luther's eschatology would take. Luther felt himself called to address the 'heresies' of the papacy and to expose this insidious institution to the laity. He believed that the Antichrist could only operate secretly, without public exposure, until he himself had completed his mission to reveal the papal facade for what it really was: evil,

⁵¹ Bernard McGinn quotes Hus responding to charges that he said the pope was the Antichrist: "Another error: that the pope is Antichrist. Response: I did not say this, but I did say that if the pope sells benefices, if he is proud, avaricious, or otherwise morally opposed to Christ, then he is the Antichrist. But it should by no means follow that every pope is Antichrist; a good pope, like St Gregory, is not the Antichrist, nor do I think he ever was." B. McGinn, *Visions of the end: apocalyptic traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 263.

⁵² Luther, "Defence and Explanation of all Articles," LW 32, 36.

⁵³ Vogel, 'Luther's Exposition of Daniel and Revelation', 185.

execrable, and emanating straight from the devil (Luther was a prolific author who extolled the virtues of publishing: he argued “I have no other way of opposing the devil”⁵⁴). Oberman has argued that, in this way, Luther envisaged the Gospel’s primary function not as it is assumed today – to change *obvious* injustice by introducing social legislation to establish biblical justice – but to unmask *hidden* injustice, thus saving the souls of duped Christians.⁵⁵

Such a mission, as Luther understood it, meant that conveying these eschatological messages to the laity and ‘opening their eyes’ was a matter of some urgency. To this end, Luther was once more a product of his historical time, but in this respect, he was able to capitalise on the changing environment he found himself in. Making good use of the revolutionary new printing press, and thanks to his collaboration with long-time friend and artist, Lucas Cranach, Luther also drew upon existing pedagogical practices to ensure his distinctive eschatological message was abundantly accessible, clearly depicted and easy to understand. Even before Luther, as the Bible came into the hands of the laity, it often came laden with eschatological images that interpreted the meaning of the words for them, instructing them about God’s unfolding plan for history and fomenting apocalyptic beliefs. Luther promoted his eschatological agenda by hijacking this pedagogical tradition and choosing deliberately inflammatory (and memorable) language and images to ensure his message hit home. Luther believed that art should communicate a strong didactic message to the illiterate by both clarifying and simplifying the biblical message of salvation by faith alone.⁵⁶ Alongside his new insights about the nature of the Antichrist, therefore, Luther’s eschatology also took on a uniquely didactic quality. His decision to collaborate with Cranach on an illustrated version

⁵⁴ Luther, “Against the Antinomians, 1539,” LW 47,109.

⁵⁵ Oberman, ‘Teufeldreck’, 444.

⁵⁶ For more on the role of art as a didactic tool in the Reformation see S. Ozment, *The Serpent & the Lamb: Cranach, Luther, and the Making of Reformation* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011) and J.L. Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

of *Revelation* – the only book of the Bible that Luther chose to illustrate – reflects a choice that was taken, at least in part, to ensure that the images of the book would further his polemic against the papacy in as accessible a medium as possible for the general laity. Guided by Luther, and in addition to visually depicting the Pope as the Antichrist, Cranach’s skill as an artist included designing woodcuts that reinforced the message that the papacy rose from a pit of monsters.⁵⁷

As presented thus far, the reception history of Luther’s eschatology would appear to be characterised by a pleasing chorus of like-minded Luther scholars, all in unison and faithfully following the same score. Agreement has centred on a conviction that Luther drew upon existing traditions to bolster and justify his eschatological readings of certain Scriptural texts, and additionally, that his own unique reforming voice succeeded in transforming the eschatological landscape in significant new ways. In this respect, too, Luther’s eschatological influence was unprecedented. As has been demonstrated in this chapter, the use – and success – of Luther’s polemical tools and tactics, combined with his new interpretation of the Antichrist, arguably further fomented fear and fanned the flames of the impending apocalypse. Indeed, it is one scholar’s conviction that, “the discoveries and pronouncements of the Wittenberg Reformer went far to sanction among his followers the most consistently pronounced apocalyptic atmosphere anywhere in sixteenth-century Europe.”⁵⁸ Such a view has undoubtedly shaped research on Luther’s eschatology and remains the dominant interpretive lens.

⁵⁷ In 1521, Luther and Cranach collaborated on *Passional Christi und Antichristi* comparing the passion of Christ with that of the Antichrist. Thirteen pairs of woodcuts distinguished Christ’s behaviour from that of the Pope’s, and using this simple and effective ‘compare and contrast’ depictions, Luther and Cranach had created a visually powerful didactic tool.

⁵⁸ R. Barnes, ‘Reforming Time’, in U. Rublack (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 117.

Yet it has not been the only interpretive model of Luther's eschatology. Even a cursory glance at the rich and varied wealth of Luther literature reveals that Martin Luther is not a figure whose life and theology typically tends to court unanimous, scholarly agreement. These past five hundred years, virtually every aspect of the reformer's work has been subject to scholarly disputes and disagreements – to many minds, to the great benefit and advancement of Luther scholarship. His eschatological insights are no exception and neither do they emerge from the theological and historiographical battleground unscathed (although Luther's own polemical vitriol, directed like daggers against those he disagreed with, has been wisely eschewed by scholars in favour of respectful debate). The purpose of the following section is to explore how a proliferation of eschatological interpretive models, beginning in the twentieth century, affected, modified, and even challenged scholarship concerning Luther's views of the Last Times. Very few scholars today would deny the central importance of Luther's eschatology in his theology. But many disagree on why it was important and in what ways, and on Luther's underlying assumptions. What Luther *said* about eschatology and what he may have *meant* has depended in large part on precisely these interpretations and it is these interpretative prisms – especially if they have become the dominant lens – that have had, in turn, a lasting effect on further accessing other areas of Luther's thought, including what he thought about the problem of evil.

Section Two: Interpretations: A Reception History of Luther's Eschatology

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century theological scholarship has seen a revival of interest in eschatology. Attempting to sketch a brief outline of these changing trajectories and the scholarly 'lie of the land' is important for the impact key thinkers (particularly Protestant) have had on determining and influencing reflections on, and interpretations of, Luther's eschatology. Inevitably, charting the entire historiographical narrative of eschatological

interpretation within this timeframe falls well beyond the scope and remit of this study. Instead – and because the priority lies in understanding interpretations of *Luther's* eschatology – the ‘story’ of eschatological interpretation has been selectively chosen to reflect those positions and thinkers whose views have shaped Luther scholarship. One of the more intriguing aspects of this much more refined and directed story is the interplay between ‘historians’ and ‘theologians’, and the extent to which work in one subject discipline area has reflected or shaped the other.

Interpretation: Luther's eschatology as a scarlet thread

Spearheaded by Albert Schweitzer's 1901 book, published in English in 1906 as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, questions about the centrality of the kingdom of God – especially the fact that in Matthew's gospel, the kingdom is now ‘at hand’⁵⁹ – were framed in such a way that suggested the coming kingdom was integral to the message Jesus brought, and that scholarship had been guilty of ignoring it. Schweitzer argued that turning away from the eschatological messages of Jesus in the Age of Reason had made the Gospels all but unreadable.⁶⁰ Schweitzer's insights ushered in a new way of engaging with biblical eschatology that would have significant and long-lasting ramifications. On the one hand, his work critiqued Enlightened thinkers who sought to distance themselves from anything as intangible and therefore mistrustful as the ‘Last Days’; indeed, he advanced a compelling and influential line of thought that viewed eschatology as *indispensable* to a Christian framework. On the other hand (and at the same time), Schweitzer drew the emphasis away from notions of eschatology as future reward or punishment, and instead, towards reinterpretations of what eschatology might mean for present times. Such

⁵⁹ ‘From that time Jesus began to preach and say “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand”’ Matthew 4:17.

⁶⁰ J. Brabazon, *Albert Schweitzer: A Biography* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 200), 53.

perspectives found fertile ground in the years following the First World War when the idea of heaven as a comforting recompense for the horrors of the war seemed increasingly illusory, dissatisfactory and offensive. Scholars were increasingly looking for ways in which eschatology could be reimagined and put to good use for the here and now and in this, the influence Schweitzer had on Bultmann is clear. Such an influence has, likewise, proved profound for scholars of Luther: a reassessment of both the importance of eschatology in Luther's thought and what his eschatological stance might mean for today is easily discernible. In this respect, Frykholm's claim that Schweitzer would "change drastically how Christian eschatology was taught, understood and fought over in the twentieth century"⁶¹ is more than borne out.

Schweitzer's redirecting of theology's remit to adopt, prioritise, and champion an eschatological framework was so successful that as early as 1927, Karl Barth argued that "a Christianity that is not wholly and utterly and irreducibly eschatology has absolutely nothing to do with Christ."⁶² Such a backdrop inevitably affected Luther scholarship. Gustaf Wingren showed in 1942 that Luther's eschatology is the key to the ultimate hope that upholds the Christian in his vocation.⁶³ Similarly, Ulrich Asendorf convincingly argued in the late 1960s the extent to which the 'teaching of the last things' was intimately related to all other facets of Luther's theology, including Christology, the doctrine of justification, sanctification, the sacraments, and ecclesiology.⁶⁴ For Asendorf, even Luther's doctrine of creation is "eschatologically warped, so to speak"; Luther does not

⁶¹ Frykholm, *A Christian Understandings of the Future*, 296.

⁶² Quoted in G. Sauter, *What Dare We Hope? Reconsidering Eschatology* (Harrisburg: PA, Trinity Press International, 1999), 69.

⁶³ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl R. Rasmussen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957), 87.

⁶⁴ Ulrich Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967).

see creation as it is, instead, he sees *through* it “to the future form of all things.”⁶⁵ In a similar spirit, in his seminal work on Luther and the Apocalypse in 1982, Hans-Ulrich Hofmann took on the painstaking task of reviewing Luther’s use of the *Book of Revelation* throughout his entire body of work, so convinced was Hofmann that this was the most accurate approach to gaining insight on Luther’s relationship with the last book of the Bible and the ensuing view of eschatology.⁶⁶ In a similar vein, Vogel argued: “Apocalyptic prophecy was not something the Reformer dealt with only from time to time; it was not simply one interesting feature of Scripture among others. I would propose that Luther in his daily activity and ongoing theological enterprise was continually driven by his fervent desire for the consummation of all things and by his firm conviction that events and developments in church, society, and the political arena were the direct fulfilment of biblical prophecy.”⁶⁷

Eschatology as a central theme in Luther scholarship was, from the mid-1940s onwards therefore, a new concept. Such a systematic search for the eschatological connotations in Luther’s theology represented a significant departure from previous attention either to the biographical Luther, or focus on particular areas of his theology (such as soteriology) in isolation.⁶⁸ Luther scholarship is now united in its contention that eschatology is both an overriding and driving theme in his theology. Indeed, some scholars have argued that neglecting the eschatological dimension renders all other aspects of Luther’s thought

⁶⁵ Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther*, 146. For Luther, one can read into creation how life is made possible only through death. He uses the example of a seed grain, which appears to rot in the ground – “is a little wet thing, gets a little tail” – but then transforms into barley and even beer! M. Luther, “Sermons on 1 Corinthians 15, 1533,” WA 36, 655.

⁶⁶ Hans-Ulrich Hofmann, *Luther und die Johannes-Apokalypse* (Tiibingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1982).

⁶⁷ Vogel, ‘The Eschatological Theology of Martin Luther, 198.

⁶⁸ Both B. Lohse and H.-M. Barth discuss this methodological trend in Luther scholarship in more depth. Lohse’s work, *Martin Luther’s Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), justifies a connection of the systematic and historical-genetic reading of Luther.

entirely inscrutable.⁶⁹ Identifying eschatology as a scarlet thread in Luther's thought was, and is, both illuminating and problematic: whilst such an approach allows for an holistic integration of Luther's thought, it also raises significant methodological challenges for the historian and theologian given that Luther was not a systematic thinker in the modern sense (as well as drawing into sharp focus the on-going debate between the 'young' and the 'old' Luther⁷⁰). These complications notwithstanding, Luther scholarship continues to lay great emphasis on the overarching eschatological framework and orientation in Luther's thought, and in this, there is a clear line back to Schweitzer.

Interpretation: Luther's eschatology as apocalyptic

If, since Wingren in 1942, scholars have agreed that Luther's eschatology plays both an overarching and underpinning role in his entire theological schema, the precise nature of his eschatological insights have caused some controversy. In the 1980s, historians Mark Edwards and Heiko Oberman debated the extent to which Luther's eschatology could be seen as consistently 'apocalyptic'. Besides the fact that a closer examination of this debate sheds light on the nuances of Luther's eschatology and takes us closer to an authentic rendering of his thought, this dispute also warrants particular attention as a case study since it epitomises the extent to which disagreement over one aspect of Luther's thought can implicate (or obfuscate) an entire perspective on Luther's theology, so entangled are all major facets and tenets of his reforming message. This debate has shaped an interpretive prism that has become the dominant lens through which to view Luther's

⁶⁹ "The Reformation understanding of the righteousness of God and the justification of the sinner is unintelligible apart from its eschatological context." Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 325.

⁷⁰ Extended comments of this debate include H. Bornkamm, 'Probleme der Lutherbiographie', in *Lutherforschung Heute*, edited by V. Vajta, (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlaghaus, 1958), 15-23, and H.A. Oberman, 'Teufeldreck', 435-450.

eschatology and, as such, outlining in some detail the parameters of this debate will be necessary.

Oberman cites “three basic elements in the tradition usually referred to as ‘apocalyptic’ eschatology: the struggle between God and the devil, the approaching end of time, and the appearance of the antichrist.”⁷¹ Countless examples from Luther's works serve to illustrate all three and show that Luther did, indeed, believe the devil’s skullduggery had reached its apogee; the Antichrist was a real presence here on earth and a sure sign of the world’s Last Times. His autobiographical fragment of 1545, for example, includes this burning admonition: “Reader, be commended to God, and pray for the increase of teaching against Satan. For he is powerful and wicked, today more dangerous than ever before because he knows he has only has a short time left to rage.”⁷² Luther became convinced that his own time was the decisive one: “For my part,” Luther wrote, “I am sure that the Day of Judgment is just around the corner. It doesn’t matter that we don’t know the precise day ... perhaps someone else can figure it out. But it is certain that time is now at an end.”⁷³

Debate between Oberman and Edwards centres on the timing and extent of this apocalyptic understanding in Luther. In 1983, Edwards wrote a book entitled *Luther’s Last Battles. Politics and Polemics, 1531-1546*. The title itself is revealing: Edwards made plain his intentions for a thorough analysis of Luther’s eschatology, whilst also drawing a line in the sand in terms of a timeframe; the last fifteen years of Luther’s life were taken to be Luther’s

⁷¹ Oberman, ‘Teufeldreck’, 440.

⁷² Luther, “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings, 1545,” WA 54, 187, quoted in Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 154.

⁷³ Luther, “Preface to Daniel, 1530” LW 35 294-316, quoted in Gerald Strauss, ‘The Mental World of a Saxon Pastor’, in *Reformation Principle and Practice: Essays in Honor of Arthur Geoffrey Dickens*, (ed.) P. Newman Brooks (London: Scholar, 1980), 169.

most ‘apocalyptic’ and most significant in terms of his eschatology. In this way, the question of the ‘old’ and the ‘young’ Luther once again emerged as a theme of central importance – but in this context, as a way of tracing the origins and evolution of eschatology in Luther’s thought. Edwards begins by setting out the reasons for the relative neglect of the ‘older’ Luther. He points to the ‘revolution in theology’ after the First World War, when theologians such as Karl Barth read Luther in search of insights to enrich the state and situation of contemporary Christianity, given the horrors of the war and in an attempt to make sense of them. Edwards states, “in this quest their [theologians’] most fruitful source has been the young Luther, who gradually broke away from medieval Catholicism and who, in a struggle easily seen as heroic, hammered out a new understanding of the Christian faith. In contrast, the old Luther’s theology is thought to differ little from that of the younger and, in its lack of development and perhaps in its greater dogmatic rigidity, to be less interesting and suggestive.”⁷⁴ In addition, many of Luther’s more ‘distasteful’ tracts to today’s sensibilities – particularly, *On The Jews and Their Lies*, 1543 – were written in his later life and draw on a deep well of acidulous polemics. Edwards argues that these tracts were seen to reveal an unpalatable, and, to scholars and theologians post-World War One, an indefensible side of Luther, and thus they were increasingly marginalised in subsequent Luther scholarship.⁷⁵

Edwards’ concern, therefore, lies in a proper understanding of the role and purpose of polemics and eschatology in Luther’s writings in his later life. His primary intention in his

⁷⁴ M.U. Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 1

⁷⁵ Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles*, 5. Anecdotally, on a recent trip to Luther’s home town, this author was struck by the heavily curated picture of Luther painted in the museum dedicated to his life in Wittenberg. Traditionally, the scholarly norm has tended to paint a positive picture even of Luther’s negative traits: “Excesses of language and argument that cannot be explained by Luther’s theology or by his apocalyptic worldview are generally attributed to ill-health and the effects of ageing” (Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles*, 4). Lyndal Roper’s more recent *Martin Luther Renegade and Prophet* (London, Vintage, 2016), however, gives in this respect a much more honest account of the theologian’s life (see for instance her Ch 18 ‘Hatreds’, especially 381).

study is to redress the balance of the, “common description and explanation for the polemics of the older Luther – that they are the product of an ill and aged man” – and instead, to show that the explanation for his polemics “is found not in his health but in his view of the world.”⁷⁶ Citing Luther’s apocalyptic conviction as the true cause and source of Luther’s polemics, rather than the somewhat dismissive tendency of some scholars to put this down to cantankerous old age, is a point on which Oberman and Edwards come close to agreeing on. Edwards suggests that “it cannot be denied that the passion of Luther’s polemics was increased by his conviction that he was living in the last times ... an apocalyptic mood suffuses nearly all of the older Luther’s polemics.”⁷⁷ Likewise, conveying something approaching exasperation at the supposed need to justify Luther’s use of polemical language, Oberman says, “Luther’s so-called ‘polemics’ are to be equated with his intentions, and his vocabulary can only be translated – and if one feels the need, *then* to be excused – after it has been acknowledged that it is part and parcel of the total apocalyptic ‘framework.’”⁷⁸

Disagreements arise, however, with regard to Edwards’ concluding argument. Edwards suggests that there *was* something unique and ‘heightened’ about the polemics of Luther’s last years, and that personal factors as well as external circumstances and challenges may have compounded Luther’s general apocalyptic expectations in later life. He posits that Luther was sorely disappointed by the progress of the Reformation from the mid-1520s onwards, which, from the Peasants’ War of 1525 to the establishment of the Protestant League of Schmalkalden in 1531, marked, for Luther, an unpalatable transition from the movement’s initial ideological purity to a more conservative and ruler-led safeguarding of territories and city-states. Edwards draws on such disappointment in Luther to explain how

⁷⁶ Ibid, 183.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 132.

⁷⁸ Oberman, ‘Teufeldreck’, 447.

Luther could have written the tolerant *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* in 1523 and then penned such a vitriolic and violent attack against the Jews in *On The Jews and Their Lies* in 1543.⁷⁹ In this way, Edwards was able to state: “The older Luther was a man who saw the world engaged in a metaphysical struggle between good and evil. He was a man gripped by apocalyptic hopes and fears; a man who had given his name to a movement that had taken, for him, a painful and frustrating direction.”⁸⁰

Thus the stage was set for Oberman’s critique. In his eagerness to rescue the ‘old’ Luther from scholarly neglect, Edwards had, argued Oberman, gone too far in locating the source of Luther’s apocalypticism in his later years *only*. “The legacy is slow to die,” wrote Oberman in 1988 in response to Edwards’ *Luther’s Last Battles*, “that Luther in his old days became an apocalyptic, convinced he was living at the end of time amidst the struggle between God and the devil and pessimistic about the chances of the cause of the Reformation in this world. Indeed, this legend is very much alive, notwithstanding the ample evidence to the contrary throughout Luther’s works.”⁸¹ Oberman saw the apocalyptic influence on Luther’s work existing throughout his career and indeed his life. Oberman’s ‘ample evidence’, as was shown earlier, includes Luther’s reading of Bernard of Clairvaux in his prophetic visions of the apocalypse to come (c1140).⁸² and Luther’s impending sense of dread, therefore, as early as 1518, that his position on indulgences would be attacked by the ‘enemy within’ (the *Catholic* Eck) in his tract, *Obelisci*. Similarly for Oberman, Luther’s ‘last battles’, which Edwards had assigned to the years 1531-1546, ignored battles, distinctly apocalyptic in nature, that began much earlier: “For the front against the Turks on which (as Luther

⁷⁹ Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles*, 132.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 208.

⁸¹ Oberman, ‘Teufeldreck’, 440.

⁸² Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon* 65.1.1, 179.

indicates explicitly, he had started his offensive already in April 1530), the other battles can be retraced not only to the 'young' but even to the 'youngest' Luther – by which I mean the period before 1517.”⁸³

Oberman’s intention is to identify and emphasise Luther’s eschatological conviction of the Last Days as applicable to the situation of the Church of his time from the very beginning of the reformer’s message. As early as 1514, for example – and three years before the posting of the 95 theses – Luther concluded: “the way I see it, the Gospel of St. Matthew counts such perversions as the sale of indulgences among the signs of the Last Days.”⁸⁴ The insights of the traditions preceding Luther, including his reading of St Matthew, St Augustine and St Bernard, contributed to a mounting fear for him from the years 1514-1519 onwards that time was running out, as well as a sense of urgency that accompanied Luther’s preaching of the Gospel. Augustine had anticipated the unleashing of the devil in the near future and Bernard had refined the timeline by foretelling that the impending Apocalypse would be spear-headed by ‘enemies within’; for Luther – and ever since the Church had thrown its full weight behind indulgences – there could no longer be any doubt: the Antichrist’s presence was now felt on earth and the Last Days had begun. Such an attitude, argues Oberman, crystallised in these early years and then became the catalyst for all Luther’s subsequent theological pronouncements.

Luther wrote on 23rd August 1535, eleven years before his death: “I am ageing not in years but in energy, no longer able to do any useful work in the mornings. Pray for my blessed

⁸³ Oberman, ‘Teufeldreck’, 429.

⁸⁴ Luther, “Lectures on Psalms, 1515,” WA 3, 425, quoted in Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 71.

departure from this horrible age.”⁸⁵ Edwards interprets Luther’s last fifteen years of life as those of a man whose pessimism and old age increasingly led him towards an apocalyptic-eschatological emphasis. Oberman finds this ‘psychogram’ misleading.⁸⁶ An awareness that time is running out had been, argues Oberman, “the *cantus firmus* in a much larger sense of the word ever since the end of 1518, and marks the real inception of Luther’s ‘last’ battles.”⁸⁷ Oberman’s position is summed up thus: “the traditional picture of the old and therefore vile and bitterly resigned Luther is untenable and misleading... we will fail to grasp his self-understanding if we do not see him as emerging from the beginning of his public career onward as the apocalyptic prophet at the end of time, placed in the increasing power struggle between God and the Devil.”⁸⁸ In light of this reading of Luther – a reading in which the apocalyptic underpins and colours all aspects of the reformer’s message for Oberman – it is no coincidence that he chose to entitle his seminal work, *Luther Man Between God and the Devil*. For Oberman, Luther was convinced from the very outset that he stood between God and the Devil, locked in a very real battle in these, his Last Days.

Edwards’ position that external circumstances shaped Luther’s tendency towards a particular kind or heightened ‘version’ of apocalyptic eschatology towards the end of his life is credible. Indeed, Luther was a reactionary theologian from the outset; he responded to issues as they arose. Unlike the second-wave reformers he did not gift to the world a systematic body of thought in line with Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* or Melancthon’s *Loci Communes*. That Luther would have been affected in later life by the Reformation’s

⁸⁵ Luther, “Letter to Elector John Frederick: Wittenberg, August 20, 1535,” WA Br 7, 238.

⁸⁶ “Edwards’ psychogram is also delusive insofar as it tries to explain Luther’s verbal vituperation as the expression of an old, disappointed, embittered man who sees the fruits of a life’s work wasted by devilish powers and devious opponents”: Oberman, ‘Teufeldreck’, 438. Here, Oberman makes a case for rejecting a psychological reading of Luther as well as suggesting that were Luther to look at this psychogram as in a mirror, he would not recognize himself.

⁸⁷ Oberman, ‘Teufeldreck’, 439.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 446.

changing fortunes is a valid point, and Edwards does much to remind historians and theologians of the disservice we pay Luther by elevating his earlier life and marginalizing the ‘older’ Luther. Oberman’s more comprehensive position that Luther’s eschatology was apocalyptic from the very outset is, however, more convincing. Oberman is successful in demonstrating that by his definition of ‘apocalyptic’, Luther’s eschatology was preoccupied with the apocalyptic from almost the very beginning of his thinking.

Perhaps because these two scholars are first and foremost historians and concerned with uncovering the ‘historical Luther’, the ‘when’ of this question has become as important, if not more so, than the ‘to what extent’. Exactly *when* Luther’s eschatology was apocalyptic (pre-1517 or post-1530) has, to a large degree for Edwards and Oberman, driven this debate and overshadowed the question of extent. To what extent was Luther’s eschatology apocalyptic? Oberman is in no doubt that as a driving motif running throughout Luther’s entire works, an apocalyptic eschatology is paramount. This is an important insight. Oberman’s work helps reinforce a sense in Luther of the Christian life lived, as he puts it, “on the brink of eternity”⁸⁹.

The link between eschatology and theodicy emerges from this insight. In *Table Talk*, Luther himself is recorded as acknowledging that “human life is a pile of suffering” and, to make sense of this, “if this world were full of harmony, peace and justice, so that the farmers were obedient to the princes in all respects, the domestic servants to the lord, wives to husbands, no one would look to the life to come. That is why God fills the world with unrest, so that we will look to another life.”⁹⁰ Looking forward to the ultimate destiny of humanity is a

⁸⁹ Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 16.

⁹⁰ M. Luther, *Table Talk* trans and ed by C. Daudert, (Princeton: Hansa-Hewlett Publishing Company, 2009), Sept 10-28 1532, 2652a, 113.

traditional form of theodicy, and, as has been shown, in significant ways, Luther's eschatology does indeed direct us towards hope for the next life as a 'solution' to the suffering and 'evil' world we see around us. Oberman calls Luther the 'apocalyptic prophet' but is the apocalyptic element of Luther's eschatology the *only* element? Indeed, it is not; Luther *also* points us towards the 'here and now' and this aspect of his thought has been overshadowed.⁹¹ One emerging trajectory in the scholarship debating Luther's eschatology, in fact, pays particular attention to 'present eschatology'⁹² and the 'pastoral' Luther, focusing particularly on his clarion call to live and be a participant *in this life*. This calls into question the nature of hope for Luther; the difference between 'passive hope' for the future eschaton, and 'hope in action' in the here and now. Such eschatological insights have implications for Luther's theodicy, although this new perspective on Luther's eschatology has not been taken far enough; it has not been used as a prism with which to view Luther's theodicy. The next chapter will, therefore, examine the scholarship that points towards a different understanding of Luther's eschatology. Moreover, it may be the case that adopting this 'here and now' alternative interpretive prism (or even, *in conjunction with*, an apocalyptic lens) may uncover a truer rendering of Luther's response to the problem of evil.

⁹¹ The work of the Finnish School of Luther scholarship beginning in the mid-1970s prioritises in Luther not the future eschaton but rather a Christ-like transformation of the believer in the here and now. See 'Finnish Luther Research since 1979' in Tuomo, Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther's Religious World*, trans. and ed. by Kirsi I. Stjerna, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2005).

⁹² Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 392.

Chapter Two: Re-examining Luther's eschatology in the 'here and now': The case for Present Eschatology and its implications for Luther's theodicy

Oberman's interpretive model of Luther's eschatology may be the dominant one but it is not the only one. In light of shifts in the broader context of eschatological interpretation in the twenty-first century, the question of the apocalyptic in Luther's eschatology *co-existing* alongside other, more 'present' interpretations (and after all, here was a man who could accommodate paradoxes), has received scholarly attention. Influenced by the mid-twentieth-century Protestant and Catholic theologians who began to reconceptualise the eschatological vision of the New Testament in insightful new ways, Luther scholars have similarly suggested additional, alternative, and even competing models to the apocalyptic-eschatological framework. The work of Bultmann, Moltmann, C.H. Dodd and Karl Rahner – all with a clear line of sight back to the overarching influence of Schweitzer – is a clear influence on this strand of Luther scholarship.

From the 1950s onwards, Rudolph Bultmann began the bid to re-appropriate the New Testament message for modern minds. Bultmann rejected the concept of an eschatological future altogether. Instead, he argued that Jesus' acts on earth were intended to turn human attention to the present.⁹³ Rather than looking for the eschaton in the future, Bultmann argued the individual Christian should look for it in his or her own life, in the in-breaking of Christ in to the present. In this way, Bultmann 'demythologised' eschatology and reinterpreted it to mean existential: it does not tell us about the future; it tells us something critical about existence itself. In an article entitled 'New Testament and Mythology' Bultmann argued: "The mythical eschatology is untenable for the simple reason that the Parousia of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected. History did not come to an end and as

⁹³R. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 155.

every schoolboy knows, it will continue to run its course.”⁹⁴ “In every moment,” Bultmann therefore argued, “slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.”⁹⁵

Underlying Bultmann’s approach was C. H. Dodd’s terminology of realised eschatology, which he had coined in 1935 in *The Parables of the Kingdom*.⁹⁶ His view was that Jesus marked a distinctive break with his Jewish apocalyptic background because of Christ’s conviction that the kingdom of God was no longer merely an object of expectation, but was actually present on earth at the time of his ministry. Chiming readily with Bultmann’s existential and personal understanding of the eschatological, Dodd maintained that the eschaton had moved from the sphere of expectation to the sphere of experience.⁹⁷ In a similar vein, Moltmann would later stress the extent to which Christ is both a fulfilment and a promise.⁹⁸

Drawing on this heritage, a backdrop of ‘realized eschatology’ in the eschatological literature thus provided fertile ground for Luther scholars to revisit the question of his eschatology. The compelling dynamic of the ‘now and not yet’, seen from this particular perspective, could be readily incorporated to account for the paradoxical quality of Luther’s teaching. Those who followed Oberman argued that what both anchored and drove Luther’s eschatology was his commitment to, and belief in, the imminence of the Apocalypse. But even Oberman poses the question: “If his [Luther’s] reformation was indeed so unrelated to the concerns or needs of

⁹⁴ R. Bultmann, ‘New Testament and Mythology’, in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, trans. R.H. Fuller, ed. Werner Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1953), 1:5.

⁹⁵ Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 155.

⁹⁶ C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, (London, United Kingdom: James Nisbet and Co., 1935). See also Mikel Burley, ‘Dislocating the Eschaton? Appraising Realized Eschatology’, *Sophia*, vol. 56 no. 3 (September 2017), 435-452.

⁹⁷ A.N. Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper, 1950), 74.

⁹⁸ J. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

this present world, how was it that his message could break out of the monastic cell, and his voice evoke such a politically powerful movement throughout and far beyond Germany?”⁹⁹ Making sense of Luther’s call to live and be a participant in this life has tended to redirect scholars back to an assessment of Luther’s eschatology. How have scholars answered, for example, the question posed by Fintan Lyons: “It can be asked, of course, if highlighting Luther’s apocalypticism can form part of a balanced assessment of a man who married, had children and a happy family life, sang and played the lute, wrote hymns, shared his large residence with needy students, cultivated a garden and made great efforts to ensure that his children received a good schooling”?¹⁰⁰ There is an obvious question as to what Luther’s eschatology of the kind outlined in the previous chapter could have meant to the business of living for the believer in the sixteenth century, not to mention the believer in the twenty-first. Attempting to balance Luther’s eschatology framework with (and within) the practical concerns of an ethical life lived in the ‘here and now’ has been the task of most recent scholarship on Luther’s eschatology – and this is a task that mirrors a significant shift in how Luther scholarship frames itself, its remit, and its purpose.

“Whereas the concern of Luther scholarship in the twentieth century,” writes H.-M. Barth, “was to liberate Luther from the encrustations acquired in the history of his influence to arrive at the genuine Luther of the sixteenth century, the task of today’s work on Luther must be to bring the Reformer into contact with the present confessional, religious, and cultural situation.”¹⁰¹ Seen in this light and with this goal in mind, Luther’s eschatology has indeed proved problematic. Notions of a Last Judgement, of hell and eternal damnation, seem, to

⁹⁹ Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 72.

¹⁰⁰ P. Fintan Lyons, *Martin Luther. His Challenge Then and Now* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2017), 197.

¹⁰¹ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 21.

many today, to represent examples of ‘medieval’ superstition. Taken for granted by Luther and his contemporaries, the particular interpretation of the ‘apocalyptic horizon’, towards which life was aimed and directed, represents a worldview by no means shared by the majority of today’s Christians. Indeed, for many Christians of all denominations, theological convictions rest in, and are directed towards, not the life to come but this present life in the here and now. In this way, H.-M. Barth has argued: “there are few themes in Luther’s theology in which the foreignness of his thought to today’s current ideas seems clearer than in the case of eschatology.”¹⁰²

Nevertheless, and given the explicitly stated purpose of finding meaning in Luther for today, scholars have turned to Luther’s eschatology once more, this time not with the question ‘what was his eschatological position?’ but rather – and in the spirit of Bultmann – ‘what can we *learn* from this position?’ It is a matter of some dispute as to what extent the latter question then determines or colours the former – and undoubtedly, in terms of a methodological approach, the quest for the modern-day ‘applicable’ Luther is not without its problems – but scholars of this camp can demonstrably point to material from Luther that would seem to challenge Oberman’s steadfast conviction that a future-orientated apocalyptic eschatology was the primary, dominant, or even *only* theme of Luther’s eschatological insights.

One such challenge comes from the work of the Finnish School of Luther scholarship, pioneered by Tuomo Mannermaa in the mid-1970s. Mannermaa and his team contested many long-standing convictions concerning Luther’s work and chief among these is their research that prioritises in Luther ‘Christ present in faith’. This is the idea of *theosis*, Mannermaa’s conviction that for Luther, as a result of the presence of Christ in the believer, this opens up

¹⁰² Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 377.

the possibility of the Christian becoming a work *for* Christ herself, and in the process (and necessarily) a ‘Christ’ to her neighbour. Mannermaa and the Finnish School see the telos of theosis not as the ascent to God above in the eschaton, but rather a Christ-like transformation of the believer *in the here and now*, causing her to consider and act on behalf of her neighbour in the present world. Mannermaa and his students place the emphasis, therefore, not on Christ’s work *for* us but rather his presence *in* us.¹⁰³ The recognition of the importance of the real presence of Christ in the believer for Luther has opened up unprecedented perspectives on Luther’s understanding of the Christian ethical life and love for the neighbour. In consequence, there has been a noticeable spike in scholarship focusing on the ‘Pastoral Luther’ in the wake of Mannermaa’s findings.¹⁰⁴ If the ‘pastoral Luther’ and the ethical life he advocated for Christians living in the world has previously been marginalized, it would be reasonable to suggest a dominant apocalyptic-eschatological framework could have been the cause. If this life is focused above all else on the next, then what we do on this temporal plane inevitably receives less attention, particularly so when taken in conjunction with Luther’s well-known scathing views on earning merit to secure salvation. The Finnish School’s work is therefore an important check against adopting uncritically an overriding apocalyptic narrative in Luther’s eschatology, and more work is arguably needed to explore the implications of Mannermaa’s findings in the context of eschatology.

In addition, scholars who take the ‘pastoral Luther’ to be of central importance argue that his entire theology – humankind’s bid to fix its broken relationship with God – can and should be

¹⁰³ See ‘Finnish Luther Research since 1979’ in T. Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther’s Religious World*, trans. and ed. and introduced by K.I. Stjerna, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005). Luther comments in his 1525 sermon on Eph 3:14-21: “everything [Christ] is and does is present in us and there works with power, so that we are utterly deified, so that we do not have some part or act of God, but his entire fullness.” WA 17/1, 438; M. Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 8, ed. and trans. J.N. Lenker, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 236.

¹⁰⁴ See R.K. Rittgers, ‘How Luther’s Engagement in Pastoral Care Shaped Luther’s Theology’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, as one example.

anchored in the real world, for it is here that we uncover telling insights about our true nature and standing in relation to God. Luther is talking specifically of a theology that is learned in the very practice of living: Luther's theology is experiential; it is a life-long process. Here may be seen one of the central motivations for his attack on monasticism. Luther's criticism of this institution, becoming sharp and didactic even as early as 1510, was not only based on his convictions against works-righteousness, but also against a lifestyle that attempted to separate faith from mundane experience, and to elevate and prioritise the former over the latter. Marriage, sex and family life, along with work and play – in short, the very business of living – were not to be avoided but were, rather, the very locus and channel through which the Gospel directed mankind towards God's blessing. In this way, Luther broke with medieval views of the superiority of the 'sacred' over the 'profane', and pioneered new ways of viewing life on this earth as well as what counted towards 'God-pleasing' activities.

Drawing on work from the Finnish School, scholars have pointed out the connection between such an attitude in Luther and a corresponding (and life-affirming) duty and responsibility towards the neighbour in an everyday bid to become more 'Christ-like'. In his Christmas sermon of 1532, and taking as his theme the jarring refrain: 'no room at the inn', Luther commented thus: "There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: 'if only I had been there! How happy I would have been to help the baby! I would have washed his linen! How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger! Yes you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbour. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbour in need you do to the Lord Christ

himself.”¹⁰⁵ ‘Why don’t you do it now?’ could be taken as a call in Luther’s pastoral theology and this, of course, has significant implications for Luther’s eschatology.

In numerous ways, therefore, scholars have shown that Luther (uncharacteristically for a classic ‘apocalyptic prophet’) was more optimistic about the world he lived in than is traditionally assumed. Luther is credited with saying that if he knew the world was ending tomorrow, he would still go out and plant an apple tree today.¹⁰⁶ Luther would have planted the tree to enjoy its beauty as a reflection of God’s goodness and to produce fruit for the neighbour. Mary Gaebler has further extended this perspective on Luther to comment on his growing appreciation of the self as his attention was drawn more and more to the temporal goods found in this world.¹⁰⁷ In a similar way, H.-M. Barth sees in this a connecting thread with the Church Fathers and the ancient tradition as expressed by Irenaeus of Lyons in his phrase ‘*gloria Dei vivens homo*’ (the glory of God is the human being fully alive). “It is in service of liberation from sin, death, and the devil and is meant to encourage toward life, action, and the joy of living: ‘*ubi Christus, ibi gaudium est*’ (WA 20, 365, 13-14): ‘where Christ is, there is joy’”.¹⁰⁸ In no way, therefore, was Luther dismissive of life in this world. This fact has been incorporated by scholars into Luther’s eschatological schema in ways that redress and re-examine the overtly apocalyptic understanding that had previously dominated.

H.-M. Barth is one such scholar whose work epitomises this recent trend. “What is important is not the apocalyptic scenario but the eschatological expectation that may be expressed there.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in R.H. Bainton, *Here I Stand A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1950), 365.

¹⁰⁶ J.E. Strohl, ‘Luther’s Eschatology’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, 28.

¹⁰⁷ “This shift constitutes an important development, often overlooked, in Luther’s theology” M. Gaebler, *The Courage of Faith. Martin Luther and the Theonomous Self* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2013), 117.

¹⁰⁸ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 15.

I therefore do not consider it appropriate to speak of an ‘evangelical apocalyptic’ or ‘Lutheran apocalyptic’. Picking up on a theme from Karl Rahner,¹⁰⁹ Barth argues that the future be seen entirely in the perspective of the present, and the present, in turn, from the perspective of the future. “The accent lies on justification here and not on blessedness beyond death, on the slaying and renewal of the human being today and not on his or her physical death, on new life in the present and not on any kind of speculations about the future.”¹¹⁰ Barth favours an eschatological interpretation of Luther that points not to knowledge of the post-mortal world, but rather, to knowledge that unlocks the present and thus develops anticipatory power. He points to Luther’s use of the example of a farmer toiling the land. What is the farmer thinking whilst sowing seeds, asks Luther? He or she does not “dwell on the kernels which fall into the ground to rot”, but “looks forward to and awaits the coming summer.”¹¹¹ Barth concludes that “from many points of view Luther is, in modern terms, an advocate of ‘present eschatology’. Luther is thus ‘eschatologically re-grounded’ for Barth in the very soil of the earth. By this interpretation, soteriology is a process that begins in this world and is fully realised in the next, but at the same time this world deserves, and receives in Luther, ample respect. The debt owed to Bultmann, Dodd and Moltmann is clear, as is the appeal of this perspective to modern minds. When Barth asks the questions “Does the message of justification ultimately rest solely on the expectation of the last judgement? Does it collapse without the biblical view of the future? What can it say to people who do not live within an eschatological horizon shaped by traditional Christianity?”¹¹², it is a clear and

¹⁰⁹ Karl Rahner distinguished eschatological from apocalyptic in an interesting way. Eschatology, he argues, is a future projection from the present. It is a forward-looking gesture rooted in the present moment. Apocalyptic is when we inject the future into the present. We attempt to look at the present from the point of view of the future. Rahner called this a ‘false apocalyptic’ because the future is genuinely open. Apocalyptic can really only unveil a deeper reality of the present, it cannot tell us about the future. See P.C. Phan, ‘Eschatology’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, eds. D. Marmian, and M.E. Hines, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 178.

¹¹⁰ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 390.

¹¹¹ Luther, “Sermons on 1 Corinthians 15, 1533,” LW 28, 177.

¹¹² Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 392.

pointed attempt to demonstrate the limitations of a next-life-only understanding of soteriology.

A concern for how best to appropriate Luther's message for today has similarly led other scholars towards underscoring the present rather than an otherworldly future in their interpretation of Luther's eschatology. Frykholm, for example, points to Luther's 1521 pamphlet, published with Cranach, entitled *Passional of Christ and Antichrist*, in which they depicted a cartoonish pope. In one scene Christ enters Jerusalem on a donkey while the pope enters with a pompous procession. In another, Christ throws the moneychangers out of the temple while the pope invites them back in. This use of Christ and antichrist imagery was directed, argued Frykholm, at a church that seemed to belong not to the end of the world but to a future world in this temporal plane, where a more moral and Christ-like community could be formed. "This aspect of Luther's eschatology might be described as prophetic rather than apocalyptic, aimed at the transformation of this world rather than the brink of the next."¹¹³ Similarly, Hinlicky is overtly dismissive of the use and value of apocalypticism in Luther's eschatology for today's Christian outlook. He argues instead for a Christologically 'modified' interpretation: "One cannot properly extricate what is valuable in Luther – his Christologically modified apocalyptic – without more consistently than he abandoning that remnant of unmodified apocalyptic that despairs of the world God created."¹¹⁴ Even Oberman can see the merit of a modified or 'softened' apocalyptic reading of Luther and makes some allowance for the Christian life to be actively lived in the here and now: "It is of lasting significance that Luther's rejection of all historical utopias did not entail abandoning the

¹¹³ Frykholm. *Christian Understandings of the Future*, 216.

¹¹⁴ P.R.Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 385.

Church and the world to chaos: Christians are threatened but not helpless; under attack but not defenceless”¹¹⁵

In light of the quest for the ‘pastoral’ Luther – and when this particular methodological prism is applied to Luther’s eschatology – what is being emphasised here is that his eschatology need not lead to ethical and social passivity in the here and now. Scholars have stressed that this more optimistic call to live life as an active participant was meant both for Luther’s contemporaries, as well as carrying a message still applicable for those Christians in the twenty-first century. A focus on what today’s Christians have to learn from Luther may be a fruitful approach in some respects, but in other important respects – particularly when it comes to his eschatology – it is clear that Luther is not always an obvious contemporary conversational partner. His radically different worldview – undeniably apocalyptic in emphasis and tone – should give pause for thought when attempting to make him a spokesman for the modern age. Anticipating an appropriation of Luther’s message for today in this way, Oberman makes his point forcibly clear when he speaks of Luther’s ethics only as “survival ethics in dangerous times”, and reinforces his belief in the primacy of an apocalyptic framework: “Luther was proclaiming the Last Days, not the modern age.”¹¹⁶

Despite Oberman’s cautionary note of misappropriation (which underscores an important point), his insistence on the dominance of the apocalyptic in Luther’s eschatology can, as has been shown, be challenged. An apocalyptic-dominated reading of Luther’s eschatology may have obscured or marginalized access to other areas of his thinking; conversely, extending Luther’s eschatology to include other interpretative models may illuminate in intriguing new

¹¹⁵ Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 74.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 79.

ways many different aspects of his work. In other words, the *implications* for Luther's 'present' eschatology have yet to be fully explored, especially with regards to the relationship between eschatology and theodicy in Luther. Placing a driving emphasis on apocalyptic eschatology has led to a scholarly conviction that, for Luther, the ultimate evils confronting man in this world can be solved *only* with the Parousia and when the coming Kingdom of God ends all human history. Yet the 'pastoral' Luther calls for a different approach that meets suffering and evil head on in this life and in this world. The nexus at which eschatology and theodicy meet in Luther, and the implications of one for the other, is an underexplored area.

What implications could Luther's 'Present Eschatology' have for his Theodicy?

The eschatological influence of Luther's thought is clear and has, for the most part, scholarly consensus. Through the work of many scholars (some of whom are cited in this reception history), Luther's entire theological framework, including his 'breakthrough' insight of justification by faith alone, has been convincingly demonstrated to be shot through with eschatological struggle as a central and compelling force. Moreover, this study has demonstrated that an 'apocalyptic' reading of Luther's eschatology is by no means the only interpretive model (although it has been argued that it is certainly the dominant lens). The implications of these extended interpretive models for Luther's eschatology are yet to be fully realized, particularly with regards to the relationship between Luther's eschatology and theodicy, although the link between these areas is striking. Peterson has argued that, "the problem of theodicy was historically a strong impetus, if not the exclusive impetus, for the development of eschatology ... eschatology without theodicy is implausible; theodicy without eschatology is incomplete."¹¹⁷ An eschatologically driven worldview is, undeniably,

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 519.

one form of ‘solution’ to the problem of evil: it is, itself, a form of theodicy. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the presence of inexplicable suffering and evil in the world necessitates an eschatological worldview as one way of making sense of the senseless.¹¹⁸

If scholars have addressed Luther’s theodicy at all they have done so through a ‘traditional’ reading of his eschatology. It is argued that for Luther, only the eschatological consummation of the world can fully explain the presence of evil and definitively demonstrate the righteousness and goodness of God. J.A. Bussie, for example, cites Luther’s statement that “this whole insoluble problem [of God’s injustice] finds a quick solution in one short sentence, namely, that there is a life after this life, and whatever has not been punished and rewarded here will be punished and rewarded there, since this life is nothing but an anticipation, or rather, the beginning of the life to come.”¹¹⁹ But because of this arguably one-dimensional understanding of Luther’s theodicy, J.A. Bussie goes on to criticise Luther’s ‘quick solution’ as a slide, much too quickly, into a facile resolution to the very real challenge posed by radical evil:

Luther’s quick solution of eschatological postponement fails to address neither ours nor the psalmist’s lament: ‘How long, O Lord, will you look on?’ (Ps 35:17). The question of human suffering is not only about ‘when?’ But about ‘why?’ and ‘how could you?’ Luther’s words acknowledge the truth of redemption but do not sufficiently confess the irascible world-rupturing truth of human suffering... Luther’s theodicy shuns the fact that Christians,

¹¹⁸ John Hick provides a classic theodicy with an explicit eschatological trajectory; he interprets suffering as the means by which a more appropriate environment is provided for ‘soul-making’ purposes and this process of becoming continues into the divine kingdom. See J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, revised edition (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978).

¹¹⁹ Luther, “The Bondage of the Will, 1526,” LW 33, 293, quoted from J.A. Bussie, ‘Luther’s Hope for the World’ in Helmer (ed.), *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, 116.

following Jesus, understand redemption to be proleptic, not only ‘not yet’ but somehow also ‘already’... Luther fails to express any desire to combat social injustice and to heed the persistent biblical injunction to care for the poor, the widow and the oppressed... his theological sleight-of-hand legitimises suffering. It allows us to exonerate ourselves of the guilt or shame caused by our complicity with present injustice.¹²⁰

Bussie’s critique of Luther’s theodicy is based solely on an understanding of Luther’s *apocalyptic* eschatology, and, as he demonstrates, there are certainly statements from Luther to support this. But Luther was a man who could accommodate paradoxes; indeed, he chose to work with them all his life as his preferred didactic device (‘Law’ versus ‘Gospel’, *Deus Absconditus* versus *Deus Revelatus*, Theology of the Cross versus Theology of Glory, *simul justus et peccator*). In addition to the apocalyptic element, alternative interpretive frameworks of Luther’s eschatology suggest that it is not the case, as Bussie would argue, that Luther was unaware of the ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ aspect of salvation and eschatology. How is Luther to be most accurately understood in one of his early responses to the papal bull, *exsurge domine*, when he says:

 this life, therefore, is not guidelines but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.¹²¹

¹²⁰ J.A. Bussie, ‘Luther’s Hope for the World’ in Helmer (ed.), *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, 117.

¹²¹ Luther, “Defense and Explanation of all Articles, 1521,” LW 32, 24.

What can be said of Luther's 'right road' in this life in the context of theodicy, and to what extent did (and does) this direct Christians towards response-driven action as a means of responding to the problem of evil?

Accommodating paradoxes may be the key to understanding Luther's eschatology, as well as an appropriate starting place when outlining the contours of his theodicy. But broadening the scope of his eschatological insights to include models discussed in the previous sections above, rather than restricting Luther's eschatology to the apocalyptic *alone*, is crucial.

Scholars have spilled gallons of ink to prove that "it seems reasonable to speak of Luther's 'apocalyptic eschatology'."¹²² But if the starting point is not *was or how* apocalyptic was Luther's eschatology but also, *what else was it too?*, this affords a more holistic approach on the quest for his theodicy. In short, to what extent has a dominant apocalyptic-eschatological reading of Luther obscured a true rendering of Luther's answers to the problem of evil? Has an 'apocalyptic eschatological bias' been adopted uncritically as a guiding (if not exclusive) prism with which to view Luther's response to evil and suffering? Indeed, is Luther's eschatological position the *only* backdrop scholars should look to or reference when in search of Luther's theodicy? What implications does an emphasis on the 'pastoral' Luther have for both Luther's 'solution' to the problem of evil as well as his *response* to evil in the here and now?

It is certainly the case, as Peterson has suggested, that a comprehensive overview of Luther's theodicy would be expected to include, in important respects, an apocalyptic eschatological outlook, particularly given the medieval assumptions of the day. Indeed, Ulrich Asendorf made it clear in 1967 that theologians who would dwell on the 'now' of the kingdom's in-

¹²² T. George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 101.

breaking and thus neglect what is yet to be at the Last Day are not doing Luther's eschatology justice.¹²³ Such a view has exerted a powerful longevity. Over thirty years later, Lohse argued, "a theology that does not reflect on this horizon of the end time misses both the truth of the gospel and the reality of human experience."¹²⁴ But the same could be said of missing the truth that comes from reflecting on the Christian life lived in the moment: this too, as can be shown in Luther, testifies to the truth of the gospel and of human experience. Luther's treatise in *Against the Antinomians* in 1539, for example, reaffirmed that the Ten Commandments needed to be taught because they model Christ's life as exemplar and teach the Christian how to live theirs. Such a position (characteristically for Luther), does not encourage world-flight but directs the Christian to service to the neighbour and to everyday, 'this-worldly' vocations.¹²⁵

Kolb has argued that, "as important as they were for him, Luther's faith focused neither on the afterlife not on the individual's relationship with God alone. Trusting God – listening to him – enables faithful people to focus their lives on service to others."¹²⁶ As an approach to meeting the challenge of evil and suffering head on, empowering our actions in the here and now has been a guiding motif in both Feminist and Liberation Theology.¹²⁷ Drawing upon,

¹²³ J.E. Strohl, 'Luther's Eschatology' in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, 32.

¹²⁴ B. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 325.

¹²⁵ In his *Large Catechism*, Luther's comments on the fourth commandment, to 'honour thy mother and father', are taken as having to do with service to the neighbour. The practice of love of God really belongs to mundane, ordinary details of life in conjunction with loving the neighbour we see every day. "Are we to look for our neighbour in Rome? Don't we have enough neighbours right around us, our wife, children, and other poor people?" LW 79, 61-62.

¹²⁶ R. Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith. Christian Theology in Context* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2009), 135.

¹²⁷ For Liberation Theology see G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973) and D.P. Gushee and C.D. Norred, 'The Kingdom of God, Hope and Christian Ethics' in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol 31, no. 1 (February, 2018), 3-16. For Feminist Theology see E. Pennington, 'Does Feminism need the future? Rethinking Eschatology in Feminist Theology' *Feminist Theology*, vol 21, no. 3 (May, 2013).

and in light of, these models, a re-examination of Luther's eschatology could reveal a more community-minded Luther and these insights have significance for theodicy. Similarly, such a vantage point could also have fresh implications for the point, power and purpose of Luther's devil; for his understanding of the human (and divine) condition, and for how Luther advised Christians to come to terms with evil and suffering. Such a re-examination is further justified given the more recent emphasis on the 'pastoral' Luther and the arguments for a form of 'present eschatology' in his thought; questions now arise as to how, and in what ways, such a subtle shift affects questions of theodicy. The quest for a more accurate portrayal of Luther's theodicy – via a reconsideration of Luther's own position on eschatology, as well as a review of key tenets of his belief including Christology, soteriology, anthropology, demonology, the nature of evil, and the nature of God – could well reveal a more subtle, nuanced and unique theodicy in Luther that goes a long way in addressing the criticisms and shortcomings Bussie highlights.

This chapter has argued for an alternative reading of Luther's eschatology, or, at least, for an *additional* reading alongside the 'apocalyptic' in Luther. If it is true that key eschatological contributions and shifts do have significant import for questions of theodicy, then what Luther did, in fact, have to say about the problem of evil could prove far more nuanced than previously believed. That being the case – and in order to begin a project of theodicean construction – in light of these insights on Luther's 'Present Eschatology', the next chapter will re-examine Luther's conceptualisations of '*Evil*', '*Sin*', '*The Devil*' and '*Suffering*' in order to uncover Luther's response to the problem of evil.

Chapter Three: **Re-examining Luther's conceptualisation of the Problem of Evil**

A theodicy that addresses the problem of evil must have a view on two essential concepts: what evil is and why it is a problem. When a 'Present Eschatology' interpretive framework is adopted, what are Luther's answers?

The 'problem of evil' is traditionally a 'problem' for those who maintain their belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God in the face of the evil and suffering human beings experience in the world. As one such believer, Luther was, indeed, discombobulated by evil. His intellectual candour and empathy for those who suffered led to his frank and honest acknowledgment about the very real hurdle evil represented to faith: "And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been a man."¹²⁸ Indeed, Luther was strikingly honest about his struggle with divine opacity and unafraid to acknowledge that faith and trust in God given the world we encounter around us amounts to something of an existential crisis. He says, "Our Lord God treats people too horribly ... Who can serve him as long as he strikes people down right and left?"¹²⁹ The problem of evil is such that, "it is a great power of the Holy Spirit to trust the grace of God and to hope that God is gracious and favourably disposed. Nor can this confidence be preserved without the most bitter struggles, aroused in our flesh by our daily occasions for trouble and sadness."¹³⁰ Luther's attempts to deal with

¹²⁸ Luther, "The Bondage of the Will, 1526," LW 33, 217.

¹²⁹ Luther, "Table Talk, 1531-1533," LW 54, 11.

¹³⁰ Luther, Lectures on Psalm 51, 1515, WA 3, 494.

the apparent contradiction between Christian claims of divine love and the realities of suffering are rich and honest. When the psalmist cries out, “God – how long?” Luther recognizes this as the voice of the many souls deeply hurt by “the feeling of being forsaken and rejected by God.”¹³¹ For Luther, then, just like millions of theists today, God’s apparent injustice causes incomparable spiritual anguish. This is an important admission and typical of the ‘pastoral’ Luther, whose concern was one of empathy and solidarity with the everyday person’s plight and experience of the world; Luther, too, felt the problem of evil keenly. His was an experiential theology as his lifelong battles with *Anfechtung* attest. Indeed, on a personal, existential note, he took Paul’s remark seriously when the apostle lamented, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15). Given such an admission, it would seem highly improbable that Luther would not then take steps to address or respond to such a pronounced disconnect between a loving God and ‘depraved’ humankind.

Given his sixteenth-century context, however, Luther was simply theologically unequipped to put God ‘in the dock’ in the style acceptable post-Enlightenment and post-Leibniz.

Significantly – and like Augustine before him – Luther refused to wrestle with the *origins* of evil, stating, instead, that the ‘why’ of evil was indeed a mystery: “If I could by any means understand how this same God, who makes such a show of wrath and unrighteousness, can yet be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith.”¹³² He goes on to say, “Why then does He not alter those evil wills which He moves? This question touches on the secrets of His majesty, where ‘His judgments are past finding out’ (cf. Rom. 11.33). It is not for us to

¹³¹ J. Pelikan (ed.), *Luther’s Works* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 14:141.

¹³² Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” LW 33, 101. He adds: “Why did God let Adam fall, and why did He create us all tainted with the same sin, when He might have kept Adam safe, and might have created us of other material, or of seed that had first been cleansed? God is He for whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule or standard... if any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God.” Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” 209.

inquire into these mysteries, but to adore them. If flesh and blood take offence here, and grumble, well, let them grumble.”¹³³ Any attempt to question God’s mysteries would have been anathema to Luther, as well as akin to the worst type of blasphemy for lack of trust in God. Indeed, mistrusting God *is* the face of evil: it is the evil of unbelief. Demanding that God gives an answer to the accusatory question ‘why?’, therefore, would have counted, for Luther, as *evidence* of evil. Indeed, such was Luther’s framework of beliefs that it was almost impossible (i.e. unthinkable) to put these questions to God in the first place. But if it is the case that Luther’s position on questions of the *origins* of evil was traditional (“It should be enough to simply say that God has willed ... and the reason of the Divine will is not to be sought, but simply to be adored”¹³⁴), it does not follow that he did not outline a *response* to evil. Part of the problem in uncovering that response has been tied to the scholarly consensus that Luther’s position on the origins of evil was ‘traditional’ in that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ found an ultimate answer only in the afterlife; such a position makes it easier to overlook what Luther did have to say about responding to evil *in this life*. Indeed, as a first step, *understanding* evil in order to know how to meet it, how to proactively respond to it, was important and significant to Luther, as this quote demonstrates: “You should not argue about why God has permitted what people with an inquisitive bent are accustomed to inquire into. No, you should rather ask how we are rescued and freed from this evil and know that God speaks with us to arouse us to acknowledge it.”¹³⁵

Luther certainly *believed* in evil and its associated concepts of sin, suffering and the devil. Indeed, evil’s presence on earth, and indwelling in mankind, amounted to an aporia of the

¹³³ Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” 208: “I follow this general rule: to avoid as much as possible any questions that carry us to the theme of the Supreme Majesty. It is better and safer to stay at the manger of Christ the man. For there is very great danger in involving oneself in the mazes of the divine Being.” 244.

¹³⁴ Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” 100.

¹³⁵ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis 38-44, 1544,” LW 7, 281.

most serious nature for him. A body of research that adopts a ‘Present Eschatology’ lens – which seeks to build on Luther’s position that this life was for living and attempts, therefore, to unearth the novel ways in which Luther urged mankind to *respond* to evil – must, inevitably, begin with an examination of what, precisely, evil was for the reformer, and why a response was necessary; indeed, why it was imperative. How, then, did Luther envisage evil and frame the ‘problem’? To answer this, the relationship – as well as the distinctions – between Luther’s understanding of *Evil*, *Sin*, *Suffering* and *The Devil* must be explored.

What did Luther think ‘Evil’ was?

What needed an answer according to Luther was not so much ‘*the problem of evil*’ but ‘*the problem between God and humankind*’. The aim of ‘doing’ theology for Luther was to understand God and humankind in a relational context, and to acknowledge the broken relationship between them: “The proper subject of theology is the sinful and lost human being and justifying God, the saviour of the sinful human being.”¹³⁶ For some scholars, this insight alone sets Luther apart and represents his unique contribution to theology: “What was new was the particular widening of the object of theology to God and humanity, and that both particular predicates related to each other. The simultaneous importance of both parts for a brief and profound definition of theology as such: that was an original contribution of Luther.”¹³⁷ This relational aspect between God and mankind also sheds much light in the context of understanding evil. For Luther, ‘evil’ explains the condition of disconnect, dissonance, and distance between God and man. Moreover, this primary dislocation (or Original Sin) insidiously and inescapably infiltrates *every* relationship a person has: with oneself; with one’s neighbour, and with the natural world.

¹³⁶ Luther, “Lectures on Psalm 51, 1532,” WA40/2, 328.

¹³⁷ Batka, L. ‘Luther’s Teaching on Sin and Evil’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, 2.

Thus, from the outset, 'evil', for Luther, is to be understood as anything that has frustrated or marred the relationship between God and mankind, with significant and additional implications for human-to-human interactions and even our relationship with ourselves. The 'solution' lies in how this broken relationship with God is fixed. In some sense, then, the 'proper' subject of theology for Luther, is precisely the problem of evil. But alongside this insight, and also from the outset, Luther stresses that in the face of evil in the world, the onus is on *humankind* to meet this challenge head on. After all, the grasping of this 'proper' subject of theology is aimed in one direction only: towards humankind; Luther is not suggesting that God needs to get a hold of it. Indeed, Luther's goals in articulating what evil was, were pastoral; he was looking to communicate the ways in which people could mitigate evil's effects. Such a position is not to be confused with Luther's commitment to, and unbending stance on, soteriology: salvation is determined by God's grace alone. But what Luther is outlining here is an active response to living, *given* God's grace; human beings' salvation may have already been decided by God but that does not render them passive in the business of living, which includes living through a significant amount of evil. Indeed, for Luther, equipping mankind with the correct understanding and insight as to what evil *was*, was an important first step. Significantly – and this is a theme that is also echoed in Luther's understanding of *Sin, Suffering* and *The Devil* – there is no fatalistic mindset here that gives way to passivity or inaction, but rather an injunction to 'know thyself' and then, crucially, to *act*. In the face of evil Luther says: "Don't just sit there by yourself or lie on your belly with your head hanging down and let these thoughts bite into you, and don't get eaten up worrying over them. Get up, you lazy fellow, and then get down on your knees and hold up your hands

to heaven and pray a Psalm or the Lord's Prayer and bring your complaints to God."¹³⁸ But in order to 'get up' and meet evil's challenge head on, one must first grasp the true nature of evil and sin. According to Luther, that quest begins with the proactive search to understand oneself.

What did Luther think 'Sin' was?

Knowing oneself, for Luther, "is to learn that all he [one] is capable of is sinning and doing evil."¹³⁹ Sin is the consequence of this broken relationship between God and mankind; it is what humans 'do', through their thoughts, words, and deeds – and what they cannot fail *but* do – because of this disconnect. Like evil, 'sin', then, describes a condition: it is the defining condition of mankind. Specifically, *sinning* springs from one sin in particular: hubris. Indeed, mistrust in God, for Luther, is the face of evil because instead of placing their trust in God, humans place it in him- or herself, thus making gods of themselves and breaking the First Commandment. In this, Luther accepted Augustine's understanding of concupiscence as every impulse of the spirit to love oneself. He affirmed Augustine's teachings on original sin in The Smalcald Articles (1537) and wrote: "Sin originated from one man, Adam, by whose disobedience all men were made sinners, subject to death and the devil. This is called original or capital sin."¹⁴⁰ Luther added to this concept the term *incurvatio in se ipsum*¹⁴¹ – to be narcissistically curved back in on oneself – which he saw as both the source and motivation behind all sins. Sin is, in this respect, characterized by mankind's conceited rejection of any attempt to heal the broken relationship with God, and instead, perpetuating the estrangement

¹³⁸ C.W. Hovland, 'Anfechtung in Luther's Biblical Exegesis' in *Reformation Studies: Essays in Honour of Roland H. Bainton* (ed.) F.H. Littell (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press), 53.

¹³⁹ Luther, "Table Talk Recorded by Veit Dietrich, 1531-1533," LW 54, 74.

¹⁴⁰ E.L. Granten, "'Born Sinners' Striving for Perfection: Criteria for the Construction of a Contemporary Lutheran Theology of Original Sin", *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, vol 48, no 1, (March 2009), 98.

¹⁴¹ For example, see Luther, "Lectures on Romans, 1516," LW 25, 345.

by continuing to place their faith in only themselves (Christoph Schwöbel describes this impulse as “striving for self-perfection instead of hoping to be perfected by God”¹⁴²). This inherently sinful nature results in a complete alienation from God, and the total inability of humans to achieve reconciliation with God based on their own abilities.¹⁴³

Much has been written about Luther’s perceived pessimism in diagnosing the human condition. *On The Bondage Of The Will*, 1525, for example, is Luther’s stinging and acerbic reply to Erasmus’ much more ‘optimistic’ depiction of the human condition in his *Diatribes*, 1524. Erasmus’ discourse on Free Will was an attempt to preserve the meaning and merit of human effort, or ‘works’, as a vehicle for gaining eternal salvation. Luther, however, reaffirmed his position that nothing but God’s grace could determine salvation; mankind was wholly impotent to affect the outcome. Unquestionably, these two competing visions of both the human condition and soteriology did much to ignite the fiery fury that would lead to the Reformation. And indeed, much ink has been spilled over that monumental tale. The story to uncover in this research, however, follows a course of study much less scripted.

The significance of grasping Luther’s understanding of ‘sin’ is, however, crucial, not least for historians and theologians who want to engage with the Reformation debate. As can be overwhelmingly demonstrated, much depended on how ‘sin’ and the ‘human condition’ were interpreted; indeed, the ramifications of these contrasting interpretations are still being felt

¹⁴² C. Schwöbel, (2017) ‘The Many Faces of Evil: Philosophical and Theological Conversations on the Experience of Evil’, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, vol 78, no 4-5, (October, 2017), 341.

¹⁴³ The parable of a tree bearing good or bad fruits enabled Luther to reverse the association of righteousness with righteous deeds, countering the influence of Aristotle’s ethics, as Luther clearly explained in a letter from October 1516: “For we are not, as Aristotle believes, made righteous by the doing of righteous deeds, unless we deceive ourselves; but rather – if I may say so – in becoming and being righteous people we do righteous deeds. First, it is necessary that the person be changed, then the deeds [will follow]. Luther, “Letter to George Spalatin: Wittenberg, October 19, 1516,” LW 48, 25.

today. But of course, neither Luther nor Erasmus was writing predominantly for posterity. Luther, in particular (and alongside his more abstract tracts with intellectuals), was concerned, first and foremost, with making meaningful connections with real people. He wanted to convey a Reformation message that proliferated and resonated; that would lift off the page and into people's hearts, that was both inspiring and inspired *action*. This motivation lies behind the additional, but *overlooked*, message in Luther's understanding of sin. It is undoubtedly the case that Luther articulated the nature of sin as he saw it with the intention of 'correcting' the soteriological misconception that works could affect salvation. But his concept of 'incurvatio in se ipsum' also carried with it another message and another purpose. Luther is diagnosing an aspect of the human condition that precipitates a life lived 'inward' for the self, rather than 'outward' for God and others. The 'sin' Luther is outlining has a relational consequence and fragmentary effect, for egocentrically selfish love leads to contempt for *both* God *and* one's neighbour. Thus, the relational aspect of sin is once again emphasised, but in two important respects. First, Luther connects sin with anything that attempts to achieve by one's own efforts (i.e. works) what can only be given as a gift (i.e. salvation). But second – and because of this prioritisation of the self – Luther highlights how this same sin goes on to make us blind to one another; we sin because we live atomistically and in isolation from other human beings,¹⁴⁴ as well as God. Luther's comments on the Apostle Paul's charge to "Let each of us please his neighbour" (Rom. 15:2) are telling: "Therefore to please our neighbour means not to please oneself ... true love for yourself is hatred of yourself."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Pannenberg articulates this point for contemporary believers: "We may say now that by making themselves independent, creatures fall victim to entropy... The more continued existence is internalised in the series of creaturely norms, the more painful corruptibility and the experience of perishing becomes, not merely in the sense of a feeling of momentary pain, but as something that colours our feeling for life as a whole". W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 173.

¹⁴⁵ Luther, "Lectures on Romans, 1516," LW 25, 512.

There are two important implications that follow this insight. The first is that by this reading, it is difficult to see how ‘individualism’ could have been an ideal Luther would have championed (despite the subsequent historiographical appropriation of Luther’s message in this vein, which this research has sought to challenge). After all, even sin is a socially shared problem, common to all humans, rather than problems with God experienced by isolated individuals. The second is that, when it comes to affecting one’s salvation, because of one’s human nature and total ‘depravity’ of the will, it is necessarily the case that a sense of fatalism pervades: mankind can do nothing. But it is by no means the case that Luther is suggesting mankind is condemned to the same passivity and inaction when it comes to re-engaging with one’s neighbour *in this life* as a means of combatting evil and sin. Luther does indeed set out active responses to the challenge evil poses. It is on this last point, and via a close examination of Luther’s hymns in the penultimate chapter, that this research hopes to build a case.

If ‘*Evil*’ and ‘*Sin*’ describe the human condition and its consequence (that is the ‘problem’ in ‘the problem of evil’), then ‘*The Devil*’ and ‘*Suffering*’ represent for Luther a step closer to the ‘solution’. That may strike a somewhat counter-intuitive note, but as will be demonstrated, Luther’s understanding of these concepts sheds much light on how one is to respond in the world given the fact of evil.

Who did Luther think ‘The Devil’ was?

Luther was demonstrably devil-obsessed. References to the Devil littered his writings, as they did the speech and thought of most God-fearing folk of the time.¹⁴⁶ Like his attitude towards the origins of evil, questions of *why* God chose to authorise the Devil’s presence and activities did not concern Luther as much as discerning the significance of diabolism in everyday lives; how it served to glorify God; what its implications were for salvation, and how mankind should meet this challenge. Instead of searching for the reasons God chose to include the Devil in his schema – and as MacCulloch delightfully puts it – Luther appears to have accepted that, “for reasons best known to himself, he (the Devil) went freelance in the messenger business.”¹⁴⁷ Whilst Luther did nothing to dilute this demonic presence in the populace’s imagination, however, he also undoubtedly revolutionised the point, power and purpose of the Devil, with significant implications for the problem-of-evil aporia. Indeed, as Oberman has argued, ‘Luther Discovers Satan’ is a worthwhile and illuminating interpretive lens with which to view his entire theology.¹⁴⁸ But adopting such a prism is a giant undertaking and one in which this body of work is unable to do justice, given its remit. Inevitably, therefore, this section will focus exclusively on the ways in which Luther’s unique understanding of the Devil point towards an underexplored theodicean framework of proactively responding to evil.

¹⁴⁶ Luther’s frequent references to the Devil underscore an important point: the Devil’s intimate involvement with humankind since Creation accounted for much and was not to be ignored. So personal and significant was the Devil’s involvement, in fact, that Luther was at pains to stress his insights on the Evil One stemmed from his own direct experience. See Luther, “Lectures on Galatians, 1-4, 1535,” LW 26, 164, 192-3, 196, as examples.

¹⁴⁷ MacCulloch, D. *All Things Made New: Writings on the Reformation* (New York: Penguin, Random House, 2016), 24.

¹⁴⁸ Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 231.

It is true for Luther that in the arena of soteriology, the battle for individual souls rendered humans as powerless as mere pawns. The soul, he argued, is like a horse: when God rides it, it goes where God chooses; when the Devil rides it, it goes where the Devil chooses. The two riders dispute the mount between themselves, but the horse has no choice; it obeys whomever is in the saddle.¹⁴⁹ This is the case for the ‘end game’ of winning/losing *souls* and *in the next life*. In this regard, and on this plane, God has already decided the outcome (indeed, it is no ‘battle’ at all). But what did Luther believe were God’s intentions for the devil *in this world* and how were humans to respond?

Luther’s conception of the devil’s role was original in this regard. Whilst an understanding of the Devil as God’s instrument (and sin’s facilitator) was not new, Luther framed God’s *motive* for this in a novel, creative, and typically startling, way. Luther called the Devil *Doctor Consolatorius*, giving him the honorary title that the Christian tradition otherwise had accorded only to the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁰ That the devil haunted this world – indeed, was ‘king’ of it¹⁵¹ – brought Luther not despair, but comfort. In a letter to Jerome Weller, Luther wrote: “It is necessary for all of us who are Christians to have the Devil as an adversary and as an enemy ... you ought to rejoice in this temptation by the Devil, because it is a certain sign that God is favourable and merciful to you.”¹⁵² The demonic presence is precisely, at that point, proof of the presence of Christ and of his righteousness; for the Devil is not interested in the godless – he already has them – but attacks where he senses Christ.¹⁵³ As Oberman highlights: “The ‘comfort’ is as follows: if the Devil attacks you, you can be certain that you

¹⁴⁹ Luther, “The Bondage of the Will, 1526,” LW 33, 213.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁵¹ In his “Lectures on Galatians, 1-4, 1535,” LW 26, 312, Luther noted “We are guests in the world, of which he is the ruler and the God. Therefore, the bread we eat, the drinks we drink, the clothes we wear – in fact, the air and everything we live on in the flesh – are under his reign” (Devil).

¹⁵² M. Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. and trans. T.G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 85.

¹⁵³ H.A. Oberman, *The Reformation. Roots and Ramifications*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 64.

are implanted in Christ and are his property.”¹⁵⁴ Luther himself states: “Though Satan ceases not to plague the Christians, and to shoot at us his fiery darts, ’tis very good and profitable for us, for thereby he makes us the more sure of the word and doctrine, so that faith increases, and is stronger in us.”¹⁵⁵

Such a view represents a radical deviation from the medieval concept of the Devil and hints at the contours of a uniquely Lutheran theodicy. In traditional depictions of the Last Judgement, evident, for example, in the Romanesque church at Autun in Burgundy (see Appendix), a fundamental view of the moral order of the universe is established: to God’s left sit those souls in eternal bliss; to His right, a scene of torture and pain, as condemned souls are dragged down to hell. Goodness seeks out only the good, and evil consorts only with evil. That the Devil by his very nature corrals only the godless determined the shape of not only medieval piety but also post-Reformation theology and religious morality across confessional lines.¹⁵⁶ Yet in Luther’s view, and on the contrary, where Christ is present the adversary is never far away: ‘When the Devil harasses us, then we know ourselves to be in good shape.’¹⁵⁷ It is not a life of debauchery and licentiousness that draws the Devil, but a life dedicated to Christ and spreading the true Word, for it is here that the Devil feels most threatened. Luther wrote: “The devil smells Christ many hundred miles off; he hears at Constantinople and at Rome what we at Wittenberg teach and preach against his kingdom; he feels also what hurt and damage he sustains thereby; therefore rages and swells he so horribly.”¹⁵⁸ According to the medieval tradition the Devil’s assaults had been seen as the inevitable consequence of sin, but for Luther they became certain proof that one was

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 64.

¹⁵⁵ Luther, *Table Talk*, 176.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 65.

¹⁵⁷ Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 106.

¹⁵⁸ Luther, *Table Talk*, 103.

struggling for God's truth. Oberman suggests that this, "hitherto unheard-of-view of the Devil is a revolution in the history of thought; a thousand years of Christian piety and Western morality are abruptly overturned by this discovery."¹⁵⁹

With this insight, Luther offered new direction in meeting the Devil's terrifying assault: a call to action. Luther, in fact, saw his entire mission as such: to enjoin ordinary people to act. His whole theology was centred upon personal, individual engagement, and, contrary to scholasticism, it was rooted in the real world. Ironically (since it was also our weakest defence and the very point of entry for the Devil) the best way to combat the Devil was, for Luther, also in the act of being a human being. For in so being, we celebrate the gifts God gave us – sociability, engagement, community-mindedness, love, friendship, family, joyfulness – and nothing angers the Devil more. There was no point in arguing with the Devil; as Luther points out, "he has had five thousand years of experience; he has tried out all his tricks on Adam, Abraham and David, and he knows exactly the weak spots."¹⁶⁰ What is needed when the Devil strikes is fellowship with man, for it was always God's intent that it should be so. In *Table Talk*, Luther commented: "For God makes us not melancholy, nor affrights nor kills us, for He is a God of the living. Hence the Scripture, 'Rejoice, and be of good comfort.'"¹⁶¹ Luther was, in a way, prescribing faith as a cure for the lack of faith: to give up the argument against the Devil and engage in extraneous activities is, of itself, an act of faith; an expression of confidence in the restorative power of God.¹⁶² Human beings should make music, play cards, sing, dance and drink, all to spite the Devil, for the Devil is a morose spirit, but the believer is not: he enjoys the pleasures of creation.¹⁶³ Luther observed:

¹⁵⁹ Oberman, *The Reformation. Roots and Ramifications*, 64.

¹⁶⁰ Bainton, *Here I stand*, 284.

¹⁶¹ Luther, *Table Talk*, 175.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 285.

¹⁶³ Oberman, *The Reformation. Roots and Ramifications*, 69.

“When King David was idle and alone, then he fell into adultery and murder. I myself have found that I never fell into more sin than when I was alone. God has created mankind for fellowship, and not for solitariness.”¹⁶⁴

Oberman terms this discovery, “breaking through the isolation of the ego”.¹⁶⁵ As Stanford reminds us, “Eve got into trouble when she walked in the Garden alone.”¹⁶⁶ Luther’s response is, therefore, to be a participant and seek out the joys of a life lived amongst others. He asserted: “All sadness is of the Devil, for he is lord of death. Therefore, sadness in our relation to God is most certainly the work of the Devil.”¹⁶⁷ The Devil seeks out the lonely, isolated soul not the man amongst friends. As Luther put it, “the further one sinks into sorrow and despair, the more suitable he becomes as a tool of the devil. For it is through doubt and despair that the devil finds an entrance to our soul and acts upon us.”¹⁶⁸ This view represents a significant departure from a more traditional understanding of Luther’s work, namely, that a readily discernible and nascent theme of ‘Protestant individualism’ runs throughout his entire theology.

Far from advocating the life of the lone ascetic, then, what is remarkable in Luther’s spirituality is the extent to which he embraced what was subsequently understood as ‘sinfulness’, especially under the Calvinists (to make music, play cards, sing, dance and drink), as the very means of resisting the Devil. The significance here is that Luther connects the Devil and sin in ways that ultimately serve to direct the individual towards responses to

¹⁶⁴ Luther, *Table Talk*, 187.

¹⁶⁵ Oberman, *The Reformation. Roots and Ramifications*, 69.

¹⁶⁶ P. Stanford, *The Devil. A Biography* (London, England: The Random House Group Limited, 1996), 155.

¹⁶⁷ E.M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*. (St Louis, Missouri, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 398.

¹⁶⁸ Luther, *Table Talk*, 284.

evil that are positive, proactive and life-affirming. Indeed, if faith was to be discerned as the correct response to temptation, then temptation – dangled before mankind by the Devil – had to be discerned in full.¹⁶⁹ Thus a great deal of our spiritual task, according to Luther, was to *believe* in sin as a tool for ultimately glorifying God. It was from the Wartburg Castle that Luther wrote to his younger colleague, Philip Melancton, the provocative words, ‘sin boldly’.¹⁷⁰ As Luther put it: “Sometimes one must drink more, play, or make nonsense, and even commit some sin in defiance and contempt of the Devil, in order not to give him an opportunity to make us too scrupulous about trifles. We shall be conquered if we worry too much about falling into some sin.”¹⁷¹ Whilst it may be easy to imagine Luther responding to the temptation to drink by drinking the whole bottle, Luther’s point here is that the greater temptation is to ignore the true nature of being human and believe, instead, in our inflated virtue (a form of hubris).

What is clear is that the Devil worked, as Luther saw it, through human experience. This experience was intended to stimulate a hunger for God. How people ought to behave, therefore – Luther’s view of the correct human *response* to the Devil and the problem of evil, rather than a solution – does hint at a unique theodicy. Of course, it is important to remember that according to Luther’s schema – particularly his commitment to predestination – many human beings will not have been chosen by God for heaven; as an appetite-stimulator for God, the Devil worked only for the elect. In this regard, that Luther outlines how human beings can best respond to evil and the Devil, would have been intended, in Luther’s mind, for those already ‘saved’. And yet, setting aside the soteriological implications of Luther’s

¹⁶⁹ Marx, *The Devil’s Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England*, 61.

¹⁷⁰ M. Luther, *Saemmtliche Schriften*, ed. Johannes Georg Walch, vol. 15, 2585-2590 (St Louis, Missouri, MO: Concordia Publishing House), quoted in Fernie, *The Demonic Literature*, 40.

¹⁷¹ Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 85.

insights on the devil and evil for the many Christians of the twenty-first century who do not ascribe to this view of predestination, there may still be a useful and positive message to draw. Indeed, Luther's insistence that the most effective response to evil is in having the right mindset resonates with many people today, of all denominations. By fostering passions that split the human psyche, Luther's Devil sought to make human beings isolated from ourselves, our fellow man, and from God. Luther's call is, therefore, to meet the Devil head on by celebrating a life lived amongst others, and this approach heralded the beginnings of a communitarian and – perversely, given other tenets of his theology – much more optimistic take on the human condition, even if it was framed exclusively for the elect. However (and whatever) 'the Devil' and evil are defined as today, this is a message all human beings may relate to and can profitably draw from. As Oberman concludes, "Luther looked into the Devil's mirror and recaptured a Christian zest for life. This is a portion of his legacy that is still waiting for us, not between the epochs, but beyond medieval and modern times."¹⁷²

A final section in this chapter links the Devil and Luther's understanding of '*Suffering*'. Luther believed that mankind experiences the Devil's attacks in the form of suffering but for "no longer or further than He [God] wills, for God has set him a mark, beyond which he neither can nor dare step."¹⁷³ This next section explores the purpose of suffering as discerned by Luther with a reinterpretation of its place in his theodicean scheme, and its positive role in responding to evil.

¹⁷² Oberman, *The Reformation. Roots and Ramifications*, 73.

¹⁷³ Luther "Table Talk Recorded by Anthony Lauterbach, 1538-1539," LW 54, 265.

What did Luther think 'Suffering' was?

Luther's 'Reformation breakthrough' of salvation by faith alone resulted in yet another revolutionary breakthrough: his rejection of suffering as a *penance* for the penalty of sin. This rejection signalled a crucial break with late medieval penitential theology and much of the Latin Christian tradition. Indeed, his famous assertion that a theologian is not made from "understanding, reading or speculating", but rather from "living, no rather by dying and being damned,"¹⁷⁴ has been interpreted as an "existential Copernican revolution in theology".¹⁷⁵ Far from being a penance,¹⁷⁶ with its associations of guilt and something to be avoided, suffering, for Luther, is how human beings *access* God. In this regard, Luther was closer to Dante¹⁷⁷ than the penitential or 'making satisfaction' model for understanding suffering's purpose. Indeed, Luther's soteriology demanded a different explanation for suffering: he was adamant and consistent in his views that in Christ's crucifixion, God had already made satisfaction for human sin. For Luther, then, suffering is seen as a positive process of enforced 'kenosis' (self-emptying), which serves to dilute mankind's natural hubris, leading them to trust and hope in God entirely. If the 'problem' is mankind's arrogance and conceit, which forces an epistemic distance from God, suffering is part of the solution: it is the necessary means by which the broken relationship can begin to mend and heal, leading mankind back towards

¹⁷⁴ "*Vivendo immo moriendo et damnando fir theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando*" WA 5, 163.

¹⁷⁵ S.D. Podmore, *Struggling With God* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co Ltd, 2013), 102.

¹⁷⁶ In the poignant devotional piece, 'Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage' (1542), Luther departs from the classic retributive theodicy and reassures mothers that the loss was neither her fault nor a punishment from God for sin... According to Luther, "hope is not found in eschatological postponement of justice but instead in our very own heartache, tears, and groans, signifying an implicit hope that God is imminent and present with eyes and ears wide open to see and hear them". C, Helmer. (ed.) *The Global Luther*, 120.

¹⁷⁷ For Dante, suffering was also a means to access God. Indeed, in Dante's Purgatory, souls rejoice in their suffering because they perceive it will bring them closer to God (see A. Dante, *The Divine Comedy Volume II: Purgatory*. (Middlesex: Penguin Classics Ltd, 1985)). The difference with Luther could lie in the reformer's much more 'this-worldly' understanding of suffering's purpose i.e. the same process occurred through suffering – a reconnection with God – but souls did not need to wait until the afterlife; this process began in this life.

dependence on God's promises alone. Thus, for Luther, one response to evil *is* to actively suffer; it is, in fact, essential in his theodicean scheme.

Luther did not draw this conclusion via the academic and abstract routes of 'understanding, reading or speculating'; he knew it by *living* and *feeling* it himself. Indeed, he was brought to this insight on his knees.¹⁷⁸ Much has been said about Luther's battles with *Anfechtung*; too much, in fact, to do justice here, save for underscoring the connections between suffering and Luther's theodicy. *Anfechtung* is a difficult concept to define, with no direct translation in English, yet Roland Bainton captures something of the sheer discombobulating horror of the phenomenon: it is "all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation and desperation, which invade the spirit of man."¹⁷⁹ Luther certainly experienced this as a lifelong existential assault reducing him to a state of terrifying doubt. But the fact that it happened at all began to give him hope that he was destined for salvation. Much like his understanding of the Devil, he increasingly framed suffering in the context of its purpose: as a necessary process one must endure to 'empty' oneself of hubris so that one could see God more clearly.¹⁸⁰

One example from early on in his ministry serves to highlight the point of suffering for Luther. Between the summer of 1513 and the Autumn of 1515, Luther gave a series of

¹⁷⁸ Luther battled with suffering and attacks from the devil his whole life. On December 31, 1527, Luther wrote about himself in the third person to Jacob Propst: "We are all in good health except for Luther himself, who is physically well, but outwardly the whole world and inwardly the devil and all his angels are making him suffer." Grindal, G. *The Rhetoric of Martin Luther's Hymns: Hymnody Then and Now* *Word and World*, vol 26, no 2, (Spring 2006), 13.

¹⁷⁹ C.W. Hovland, 'Anfechtung in Luther's Biblical Exegesis' in *Reformation Studies: Essays in Honour of Roland H. Bainton* (ed.) F.H. Littell, (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press), 46.

¹⁸⁰ In this respect, there is a strong parallel with recent scholarship on the Puritan mindset. In Section V of Tom Webster's 'Writing to Redundancy: Approaches to Spiritual Journals and Early Modern Spirituality' (*Historical Journal*, vol 39, no 1 (March 1996), the denial of the self and being emptied of the self in order to be filled with God, are discussed, 42.

lectures on the Psalms in which he spoke frequently of suffering in the Christian life. In the discourse on Psalm 59, Luther identifies the world and all of its temptations, afflictions and persecutions as the ‘pot of Moab’,¹⁸¹ a place of great testing and hardship into which God allowed Christians to be thrown and ‘cooked’ for their benefit and that of the saints, the angels, and Christ. Luther argues that just as wild game must be hunted, killed, and slaughtered, and cooked before it can be fed to distinguished guests, so, too, must God’s saints endure a painful process of preparation before they are suitable for heavenly consumption.¹⁸² Luther is at pains to emphasise that God is the agent behind this suffering: there is no trace of dualism in his thinking; God is the ‘mistress of the kitchen’ (*artificinam coquinae*), and Christ is his cook.¹⁸³

In this story, Luther identifies Moab with human pride. Being rendered humble is the true goal of the process and tale. He sees this purification or ‘cooking’ process as the means by which this is achieved and essential to the salvific process (“the heavenly banquet guests do not eat raw and uncooked food”¹⁸⁴). Understood in this light, Luther could be advocating, and even promoting, suffering as a form of ‘purgatory with purpose’ *in this lifetime*. He concludes by saying to his students: “Why, then, do you try to run away from temptations and trials? For they are a sign that you are being prepared for glory and are being called to be a dish for all the saints, who will be refreshed by you in heaven.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, the ‘problem’ and ‘solution’ of the problem-of-evil aporia comes full circle. Having diagnosed the problem (hubris leading to alienation from God), Luther presents the cure (‘self-emptying’ via suffering that leads man back to God). Moreover, it is *precisely* suffering and despair that

¹⁸¹ Luther, “Lectures on Psalms, 1-75, 1515,” LW10, 35.

¹⁸² R.K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁸³ Luther, “Lectures on Psalms, 1-75, 1515,” LW 10, 288.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* LW 10,287.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

leads to hope, for it is the means by which mankind is stripped of all self-confidence and self-reliance and instead, causes him or her to look to God alone for comfort and salvation. Luther says: “It is the explicit statement of Sacred Scripture that one who is outside of tribulation is outside the condition and hope of salvation.”¹⁸⁶ It is for this reason that Luther is able to refer to *Anfechtung* as a “delicious despair”.¹⁸⁷

Christians must, therefore, embrace suffering, not shun it. They must resist the human desire to avoid suffering, which only denies humans of the benefits of suffering. Safe in the knowledge that suffering is no longer the means of rendering satisfaction for sin, and that salvation is not at stake, Luther urges his listeners not to avoid tribulation but to “long for suffering” and to “seek it like a treasure”¹⁸⁸. But there is another point to this delicious despair for Luther. The danger of *Anfechtung* is that it can easily become fetishized so that human beings revel and wallow in it. Such counter-productive and indulgent suffering then *becomes* a form of hubris, rather than ridding one of it. For Luther, suffering is needed and necessary but the point is to recognise and use it for the force for good that it is – and the role *other people* play here is vital in two respects. Firstly, suffering may be a powerful tool but Luther warns we must not give in to the temptation of ‘suffering in silence’; we must avoid the interiority of solitude. Luther, in fact, prescribes a pragmatic response to suffering that centres around being with other people. He says: “When you are assailed by gloom, despair or a troubled conscience you should eat, drink and talk with others. If you can help yourself by thinking of a girl, do so...”¹⁸⁹. Secondly, experiencing *Anfechtung* and suffering allows us

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. LW 10, 289.

¹⁸⁷ Podmore, *Struggling With God*, 171. Luther goes on to say all our trials are ordained by God and “where all is as it should be, trials will not pass us by, and we do not seek to avoid them, but to overcome them like a true knight. Of such, Job says, ‘Man’s life is a struggle or a trial’ [Job 7:1]” Luther, “Table Talk Recorded by Veit Dietrich, 1531-1533,” LW 54, 72.

¹⁸⁸ Luther, “Lectures on Romans, 1516,” LW 25, 291.

¹⁸⁹ Luther, “Table Talk Recorded by Veit Dietrich, 1531-1533,” LW 54.

to subsequently reach out to others. The pain of suffering is necessarily self-referential – but only initially. The process Luther outlines may begin with the individual – a clarion call to ‘know thyself’ and see oneself as “vile and nothing, abominable and damnable”¹⁹⁰ – but that self-realisation and mark of true humility then facilitates action. Humans can only respond to God in *humilitas fidei* – the humility of faith. The true point of suffering for Luther is that it produces humility – the exact opposite of the diagnosed problem, hubris – which then enables Christians to *act*, to *realise* their duty of humility towards God and neighbour. In this respect, Luther prescribes a mode of being for human beings that is rooted in this-worldly action and pro-action; it is his response to the challenge of mankind’s natural inclination to pride, conceit and hubris. Even if the starting point is the self, the end goal of suffering for Luther is to reach out and connect with others or with God.

This connection with others is a central concern in Luther’s pastoral theology of suffering. Indeed, as has been shown in the preceding chapter, Luther’s pastoral writings seek to reassure those who suffer that they are not alone. He embodied the belief that one must first have searched and attended to one’s own soul (“Physician, heal thyself!” Luke 4:23), and having done so, one would *then* have cultivated the requisite pathos for the care of *other* souls.¹⁹¹ Thus, as with Luther’s conceptualisation of the Devil, his understanding of suffering is that it leads us, eventually, to others. In fact, if ‘Evil’ and ‘Sin’ diagnose ‘the problem’ for Luther, both ‘the Devil’ and ‘Suffering’ have a positive and affirming role in Luther’s theodicean scheme, precisely *because* they represent a step towards other people, they represent steps towards his ‘solution’.

¹⁹⁰ Luther, “Lectures on Psalms, 1-75, 1515” LW 10, 404.

¹⁹¹ Podmore, *Struggling With God*, 111.

Conclusion

Misinterpretations of Luther's response to the problem of evil arise not out of any disagreements over his ultimate *solution* to the problem of evil (indeed, there is scholarly consensus over the *goal*: to bridge the gap between man and God), but in right readings of his *method* and *timeframe*: *how* this is achieved for Luther and *when*. This research has suggested a 'traditional' answer, according to Luther scholarship, has been that the solution came only in the afterlife and because of Luther's views on God's grace. It is true for Luther that human sin meant a soteriological framework in which they could do nothing to affect salvation. But that does not mean Luther was advocating passivity and inaction in the face of evil in this life. This thesis has thus far attempted to redress that misconception by emphasising the importance of 'Present Eschatology' in Luther's schema, which challenges the 'when' of the solution to the problem of evil, and hints at the contours of what a this-worldly response to evil entails. This chapter has then shown that having first confronted 'Evil' and man's true nature honestly, Luther then moved to put praxis first and outlined a response to evil that was anchored in human action and directed towards our fellow man. The final chapter explores in more depth what, according to Luther, such a response to evil would look like.

Chapter Four:
‘Fruit of faith therein be showing’

Constructing Luther’s response to the problem of evil using his Hymns

It is the purpose of this chapter to explore the ways in which Luther used his hymns to answer the question ‘*given that evil exists in the world, how should I live and ‘be’?*’ Thus far, this research has shown the extent to which dominant interpretive prisms and driving ‘Luther motifs’ have held sway in the scholarship to the extent that any answer to the question above becomes all but moot. Indeed, given such primacy placed on Luther’s ‘apocalyptic eschatology’ very few scholars have even raised this question, and certainly none has seen fit to ask it of Luther’s hymns. But it has also been suggested here that, in line with certain historical and theological shifts in preoccupations and emphasis, new interpretive lenses have emerged that challenge the pre-eminence of those dominant motifs in ways that make room for alternative (and sometimes even competing) ideas in Luther. When seen through these new perspectives, however, asking Luther this problem-of-evil question becomes, at the very least, *possible*. This chapter seeks, therefore, to take the next step forward. With this question at the forefront – and taking the thirty-five hymns Luther wrote (alongside his numerous hymnal prefaces) – it will be demonstrated here that Luther does indeed give theologically rich answers to this age-old aporia.

As outlined, recent research has begun to prioritise the ‘pastoral’ Luther (Volume Four of *The Annotated Luther* describes these writings as ‘Pastoral Care and Consolation’), and to identify Luther’s efforts to concentrate his theology in an easily understandable (and

learnable) way¹⁹². Here, the corpus of Luther's sermons is vast¹⁹³ and it could, of course, be argued that *all* of Luther's works are 'pastoral'; as an author he was driven not by a deep concern for 'correct' theology but in offering practical consolation and hope to suffering people. But providing readers with manageable selections is an important goal of this thesis. As such, the *problem of evil prism* will be limited to Luther's 'pastoral' writings that focus particularly on his hymns. Although the quest for the 'pastoral Luther' has proved a popular and fruitful avenue for scholars to explore, it is somewhat surprising that very few historians or theologians have mined his hymns for material or messages in a thematic way. Ulrich Leupold, for example, the editor of volume 53 of *Luther's Works* (on "Liturgy and Hymns"), examined the sources of Luther's texts and melodies, together with his choice of Germanic poetic and musical forms, but, according to G. Grindal, "does not consider, explicitly, the rhetoric of Luther's hymns."¹⁹⁴ Similarly, Dorothea Wendebourg's 'Hymns' chapter in *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 4, *Pastoral Writings* tells the story of the new poetic genre that Luther initiated and selects certain hymns to unpack, but the emphasis is on style and individual hymns in isolation. Indeed, hymns quoted by Wendebourg are based on the translation in LW 53 by G. McDonald, revised by U.S. Leupold. According to the introduction of that volume the intention was to "...represent Luther's hymns in an English form that is as close as possible to the original German text *and at the same time* singable to the original melodies." (italics not in the original). Similarly, Markus Jenny's English edition of Luther's lyrics and melodies,¹⁹⁵ updates the older translations,¹⁹⁶ but, like its predecessor, gives a chronological

¹⁹² M.J. Haemig et al. (eds.), *The Annotated Luther Vol 4: Pastoral Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2016), 4.

¹⁹³ Luther preached approximately 4,000 sermons in his lifetime. See Meuser, 'Luther as Preacher of the Word of God', in D.K. McKim, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136-48.

¹⁹⁴ G. Grindal, 'The Rhetoric of Martin Luther's Hymns: Hymnody Then and Now', *Word & World* vol 26, no 2 (April 2006), 181.

¹⁹⁵ M. Jenny, *Luthers Geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesänge* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1985).

¹⁹⁶ Luther, "Liturgical Collect, 1523-1539," LW 53, 131-146.

synopsis and a separate introduction for each hymn written by Luther with notes only on melodies. Inevitably, this has led to English translations that prioritise poetic metric, rather than literal translations, and thus they become problematic when the goal is getting as close as possible to Luther's theological meaning.¹⁹⁷ There appear to be no published translations of Luther's hymns into English prose. In what follows, therefore, Luther's hymns are subjected to a methodological approach that, following Grindal, "takes particular note of their rhetorical purposes, that is to say, how they preach the particular passage of Scripture, to whom they are addressed ... and to what end they are aimed."¹⁹⁸ If, in the English translations of Luther's hymns, what is missing is any obvious attempt to discern themes or patterns that uncover Luther's theology (a theodicean hermeneutic, for example), then it is necessary to abandon any translation that is concerned with 'fitting' Luther's German to the melodies, and instead, focus exclusively on literal translations of the hymns as though they were prose. In other words, the case needs to be made on the basis of Luther's own words and not on possible interpretations or interpolations by the hymns' translators. To this end, this research has taken the somewhat novel – but absolutely necessary – approach of having Luther's hymns translated literally into English. In this chapter, the literal English translation of relevant hymns will be quoted in the body of the text with the German original accompanied in a footnote.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ In her overview of the study of song/music translation, which only began receiving scholarly attention in the 1990s, Charlotte Bosseaux has suggested that translating songs has not primarily been concerned with translating only lyrics because of the emphasis on translating lyrics that fit the music, and this, inevitably, adds a set of constraints; translators must also take into considerations factors such as rhythm and rhyme. See Charlotte Bosseaux, 'The Translation of Song,' in Kirsten Malmkjær and Kevin Windle, *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* (Oxford, United Kingdom, 2011), online at:

<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199239306.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199239306-e-014>.

¹⁹⁸ Grindal, 'The Rhetoric of Martin Luther's Hymns', 181.

¹⁹⁹ All of Luther's 35 hymns were read by the author and the 17 cited here are a representative sample. The hymns cited have been translated into English from Johannes Heimrath and Michael Korth (eds.), *Ein feste Burg: Luthers Kirchenlieder nach der Ausgabe letzter Hand von 1545* (Munich: Artemis

When combined, reading Luther's hymns using a literal translation, plus a thematic methodological approach, proves illuminating. This is the case both for message and medium; the *content* of Luther's hymns sheds much light when viewed through the problem of evil prism, but also, the *vehicle itself* – how Luther intended his hymns to be *used* – goes a long way to addressing the question: “*Given that evil exists in the world, how should I live and ‘be’?*” If ‘Luther and Music’ is a topic often written about, it is arguably the case that “the theological profundity of Luther’s view of music has largely been dismissed.”²⁰⁰ In this respect, this research hopes to add to the literature.

It should be noted, of course, that Luther's hymns do indeed reiterate and reinforce the more ‘traditional’ motifs such as the grace/law distinction and the central soteriological message of the Reformation. In his 1525 hymn, *From Trouble Deep I Cry To Thee*²⁰¹, for example, Luther perfectly captures his position on works in one of the neatest summaries to be found in his entire writings: “With you nothing counts but [your] grace and favour / to forgive all sin; what we do is in vain.”²⁰² Whether paraphrasing the psalms, narrating Christ's birth and resurrection, or melodising the catechetical texts of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, or the baptism of Christ, Luther used hymns as vehicles for promulgating these familiar Reformation messages.

But what else did his hymns show and do? ‘*But what else?*’ could be taken as the underlying question of this entire research; what has been overlooked in Luther? It will be argued here

Verlag 1983), referenced henceforth in the footnotes with the German text followed by the citation ‘Heimrath and Korth (eds.)’. I am using an unpublished literal translation of this text into English by Lydia Ludlow and I am deeply grateful to her for making this available to me.

²⁰⁰ M.E. Anttila, ‘Music’, in O.P. Vainio (ed.), *Engaging Luther. A (New) Theological Assessment* (Cascade Books: Eugene, OR, 2010), 211.

²⁰¹ Henceforth, Luther's hymns will appear in bold type to assist the reader in identifying references to each hymn, and in italics in the footnotes to distinguish what is being cited from Luther's other works.

²⁰² *Bey dir gilt nichts den gnad und gunst / die sunde zuvergeben / Es ist doch under thun umb sunst:* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 104.

that Luther's hymns provide ample evidence that he did indeed articulate a particular response to suffering and evil that has, hitherto, been underexplored in connection with his theodicy. In fact, most of his hymns follow a template that could be described as 'theodicean-centric': they begin by outlining humankind's fallen nature and the disconnect, or alienation, humans feel both between one another and God (often with overtones of *Anfechtung*),²⁰³ and then move towards a 'solution'.²⁰⁴ This solution is, first and foremost, rooted in Christ on the Cross, but then, significantly, Luther typically concludes his hymns by stressing the importance of the '*fruit of faith*',²⁰⁵ which points mankind towards engaged, participatory and community-led lives, lived dialogically and in relation to others. Indeed, there is a direct correlation in Luther's hymns between, on the one hand, the evil and suffering the individual human experiences, and on the other, its corrective or 'solution': an embodied life that prioritises 'the other' and the community.²⁰⁶ This perspective in Luther is certainly marginalised given the more mainstream and accepted view that Luther was concerned primarily with the *individual's* relationship with God.²⁰⁷ In the context of theodicy, one of the

²⁰³ Luther's hymn *In the Midst of Life Are We*, 1524, for example, gives expression to the task, challenge, and despair of living in the world today: 'In the midst of death behold hell's jaws gaping at us! Who will from such dire distress free and scathless set us?' LW 53, 275.

²⁰⁴ Such a model – the mixture and movement between sadness and joy, lamentation and praise – is also found in the Psalms, as highlighted by Walter Brueggemann's work, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2001). Brueggemann identifies in many psalms a cry of agony to God, followed by a turning-point and then, expressions of faith in God's saving power. The psalm's lament provides a structure and outlet for pain or grief, which then facilitates and gives rise to an expression of joy. Given Luther's commitment to the Psalms – K.D. Billman and D.L. Migliore argue in *Rachel's Cry* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), 51, that "there was no book in the Bible in which he [Luther] had devoted as much labour as the Psalter" – it is reasonable to surmise that Luther was influenced by this template for his hymns.

²⁰⁵ The hymn *Jesus Christ Our God and Saviour*, 1524 ends with: 'The fruit should also not fail to appear: / you should love your neighbour / that he enjoys [the same treatment] from you / that God has granted you.' *Der frucht sol auch nicht aus bleiben | deinen nechsten soltu lieben | Das er dein geniessen kan | Wie dein Gott an dir hat gethan*. Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 87.

²⁰⁶ For example, in Luther, *Dear Christians, Let Us Now Rejoice*, 1523, LW 53. 217-220.

²⁰⁷ The Proclamation Model of interpreting Luther's Theology of the Cross refutes any implication of a theology of the cross beyond its work on the individual; see G. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), i. By this reading, justification is about the individual human being. This research will add to those scholars (Moltmann, for example) who argue that restricting Luther's theology to the individual's

intentions of this chapter, therefore, is to highlight the ways in which Luther stressed the centrality of *community*. Throughout his hymns, he laid great emphasis on the individual *having* a certain disposition (generally happy or ‘gladsome’), which flowed inevitably outward to ‘the other’. This represents a distinct communitarian aspect in his thought that is in keeping with his intentions for how the hymns were to be used: as a blueprint for *living*. His hymns underscore the importance of being engaged in this world and urge that such engagement should find expression in unity and fellowship with others. It is certainly the case that ‘this-worldly’ pleasure or joy, and proactivity in the face of evil, are not commonly associated with Luther, but it is these themes that will be shown to dominate when his hymns are subjected to the question: “*Given that evil exists in the world, how should I live and ‘be’?*”

Hymns as an antidote to evil

Luther commented often about the central role of music in teaching the Gospel. Indeed, he spoke of the need for God’s Word to be advanced through precisely the medium of speaking and singing; the Gospel is “a good message, good news, a good report, a good shout, which one sings and tells with gladness.”²⁰⁸ Even in the hymns themselves, Luther reiterated this message. The good news of Christ’s birth, for example, is to be spoken and sung, as the first stanza of the hymn ***From Heaven on High I Come to You*** puts it: “I bring so much good news / I would sing and speak of it”²⁰⁹ He was, moreover, well aware of the pedagogical impact of singing, and alive to the power of a hymn to communicate the Christian message

encounter with divine grace ignores the communal aspect clearly intended in his thought, of which his hymns afford a prime example.

²⁰⁸ Luther, "Preface to the New Testament," LW 35, 358.

²⁰⁹ *Der guten mehr bring ich so viel / davon isch singen und sagen will* (Heimrath and Korth (eds.) 52).

(to memory, in particular) more readily than by reading the Bible or listening to a sermon.²¹⁰

In addition to this recognition of a hymn as a teaching tool based on its ability to transmit a message, Luther's appreciation for hymns as the very means of staving off the devil, ran deep. For in the very act of singing, there is an engaged, proactive and community-minded response to the problem of evil waiting to be discovered.

If Luther was attuned to the influence music could have in disseminating the Christian message, he was even more interested in the power music had over the human soul. "Music is the mistress and governess of human affects," he said in the *Encomion Musices*.²¹¹ His own lifelong experiential battles with *Anfechtung* heightened his perception for "the human *affectus*, the hidden inner will, the innermost directedness of human personhood,"²¹² and in music, he diagnosed the cure for a despairing soul. In a letter to the composer Ludwig Senfl Luther boldly asserts: "Indeed I plainly judge and do not hesitate to affirm, that except for theology there is no art that could be put on the same level with music, since except for theology, music alone produces what otherwise only theology can do, namely, a calm and joyful soul."²¹³ The power of music to bring about 'joyful hearts' and 'innocent delight' is of fundamental importance; music has a transformative effect on the individual and the very real power to drive away the enemy of joy, the spirit of sadness, or, in other words, the devil himself.²¹⁴ To illustrate this point, Luther often referenced 1 Sam 16:23: "And so it was, whenever the spirit from God was upon Saul, that David would take a harp and play it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the distressing spirit would depart

²¹⁰ "Grace and peace! I am planning, according to the examples of the prophets and the ancient Fathers, to create vernacular psalms, that is hymns, for the common folk, so that the Word of God remain with the people also through singing. Therefore we are looking everywhere for poets." Luther to George Spalatin, secretary and father confessor, 1523, WA Br 3, nr. 698.

²¹¹ Anttila, "Music", 212.

²¹² Ibid, 212.

²¹³ Luther, "Letter to Louis Senfl: Coburg, October 4, 1530," LW 49, 428.

²¹⁴ Luther, "Concerning Music, 1530," LW 61, 171.

from him.”²¹⁵ When, for Luther, music is used properly, it can drive / is capable of driving away sadness, insecurity, lack of faith, all of which were characteristics cherished by the devil.²¹⁶

Nothing illuminates this fact for Luther more than his *A Preface for All Good Hymnals*, 1528. Following classical precedents, a common device of artists of the sixteenth century was to personify the Arts and Luther followed this trend when he put his preface on the lips of ‘Dame Music’ and had her extol her own gifts:²¹⁷

D. M. L. [Doctor Martin Luther]
Lady Music.
Amongst all joys on earth
There can be none finer
than the joy I give with my singing
and sweet ringing.

²¹⁵ Anttila, “Music”, 213.

²¹⁶ “[Music] serves to cast out Satan, the instigator of all sins, as is shown in Saul, the king of Israel [I Sam. 16:23].” Preface to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae iucundae* 1538, *The Works of Martin Luther*, Vol 53: *Liturgy and Hymns*, 323. Interestingly, there is also a ‘science’, of sorts, that illustrates how music resonates with the ‘music’ of the body. For more, see J. Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism* (London: Routledge, 2010), especially Ch 1.

²¹⁷ *The Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 53: *Liturgy and Hymns*. German: J. Walther, *Lob und preis der löblichen Kunst Musica*. Wittenberg: Georg Rhau, 1538:
Frau Musica.

Fur allen freuden auff erden / Kan niemand keine feiner werden, / Denn die ich geb mit meim singen / Und mit manchem süssen klingen.
Sie kan nicht sein ein böser mut / Wo da singen gesellen gut, / Sie bleibt kein zorn, zanck, haß, noch neid / Weichen mus alles herzeleid,
Geiz, sorg und was sonst hart an leit / Fert hin mit aller traurigkeit, / Auch ist ein jeder des wol frei, / Das solche freud kein sünde sei,
Sondern auch Gott viel bas gefelt / Denn alle freud der ganzen welt. / Dem Teuffel sie sein werd zerstört / Und verhindert viel böser mörd.
Das zeugt David des Königs that, / Der dem Saul oft gewehret hat / Mit gutem süssem harffenspiel, / Das er nicht inn grossen mord fiel.
Zum Göttlichen Wort und warheit / Macht sie das herz still und bereit. / Solchs hat Eliseus bekant / Da er den geist durchs harffen fand.
Die beste zeit im jar ist mein, / Da singen alle Vögelein, / Himel und erden ist der vol, / Viel gut gesang da lautet wol.
Woran die liebe Nachtigal / Macht alles frölich umberal / Mit jrem lieblichen gesang, / Des mus sie haben immer danck
Vielmehr der liebe HERRE Gott, / Der sie also geschaffen hat, / Zu sein die rechte Sengerin, / Der Musicen ein Meisterin.
Dem singt und springt sie tag und nacht / Seines lobs sie nichts müde macht, / Den ehrt und lobt auch mein gesang / Und sagt im ein ewigen danck.

There can be no evil courage here
Where men sing well,
No anger, quarrel, hatred, nor envy resides here
All sorrows of the heart are softened,

Meanness, worry and all other types of suffering
Are cast away with all sadness,
Every one of them is free,
Such joy is no sin,

But rather pleases God a great deal
Among all the joy in the whole world.
It destroys the work of the devil
And prevents much evil murder.

So says the testimony of King David,
Who often defended Saul
With good sweet harp-playing,
So that he would not fall into great murderousness.

The divine word and truth
Make the heart calm and ready.
Elisha knew this
When he found the spirit through the harp.

‘The best time in the year is mine’:
so all the little birds sing,
Heaven and earth are full of them
There is much good singing there.

First the dear nightingale
Makes everything happy everywhere
With her lovely song,
She must always be thanked,

And even more so, the dear LORD God,
Who created her thus,
To be the right singer,
the master of music.

The one to whom she sings and jumps day and night:
She does not tire of praising him.
Likewise, it is He whom my song honours and praises
And to Him I give eternal thanks.

Thus, for Luther, not only is music a tool for the Christian message, but also – and more importantly – it is a tool against the devil. When one feels the spirit of sadness taking grip,

there is also here an implicit exhortation to act, and to be proactive. Moreover, Luther enjoins a *community* to action when he says: “For whether you wish to comfort the sad ... to encourage the despairing ... or to appease those full of hate – and who could number all these masters of the human heart, namely, the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel men to evil or good? – what more effective means than music could you find?”²¹⁸ ‘The sad’, ‘the despairing’, and ‘those full of hate’ certainly speaks of whole collections of people. If it can be shown that, for Luther, communities singing together carried a real restorative power – a ‘solution’ of sorts, to evil and suffering in the world – then what of hymns in particular, as a special type of singing? What were Luther’s intentions for his hymns and how did he envisage them being used by the laity?

There is evidence here that Luther wanted his hymns to be used as a powerful communitarian device that would meet sadness, suffering and evil head on. In a letter to his friend, Spalatin, asking him to help with the task of writing new hymns, Luther wrote, “I would like you to avoid new-fangled, fancied words and to use expressions simple and common enough for the people to understand, yet pure and fitting.”²¹⁹ Luther’s language was – and was intended to be – simple and direct. He used few adjectives in his hymns and constructed brief lines consisting almost exclusively of verbs and nouns. Enjambment – the carrying over of one or more words from one line to the next so as to bridge the break between verses – is quite uncommon for Luther’s time.²²⁰ Yet this practice, amply employed by Luther, accommodates mass singing most effectively; a crowd sings a verse at a time, and so each verse must make sense as a unit. Luther and his colleagues were concerned, therefore, to find ways to encourage the corporate singing of a community, and as sources of the time show, hymns of

²¹⁸ Preface to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae iucundae* 1538, *Luther’s Works*, 79 vols. [v. 53 = Liturgy and Hymns] (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955 etc.), 323.

²¹⁹ Grindal, ‘The Rhetoric of Martin Luther’s Hymns’, 180.

²²⁰ *The Works of Martin Luther*, vol 53: *Liturgy and Hymns*.

this period were widely sung inside and outside churches, in services, in families, in open, communal places, and even at work.²²¹ This serves to underscore the extent to which singing hymns was a communal activity for Luther, an expression of the unity in faith of the community and of ‘coming togetherness’. But it may also be the case that Luther’s emphasis on communal singing carried with it other intentions. Hymns today are typically directed ‘upwards’, as prayers to God, so that God becomes the ‘audience’. Luther’s hymns, it has been suggested,²²² were not intended primarily for God (to satisfy God’s need to be worshipped, for example) but for the congregation: human beings needed hymns as the vehicle by which they experienced spiritual growth. Hymns carried messages to and for Luther’s – and the singers’ – fellow human beings with the express purpose of affecting changes in behaviour. Given this interpretation, Luther’s hymns are not strictly prayers, but sermons, with the intention being that singing makes everyone a community of preachers. In his *Preface to the Babst Hymnal* in 1545, Luther wrote that God had called those who truly believed the gospel to “gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it.”²²³ By this, and as Grindal suggests, Luther may well have intended that, “the rhetorical – and evangelical – function of the Lutheran hymn is to *preach* the word of God, and thus *be* the word of God, preached to the gathered assembly by those singing it to each other.”²²⁴ This has significant implications for a community of believers. It is the difference between being taught and teaching; between being a passive recipient of the Word and becoming an active, engaged and dynamic preacher of the Word, and for the benefit of one’s neighbour, all through the singing of hymns.

²²¹ See, for example, C.B. Brown, *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

²²² Grindal, ‘The Rhetoric of Martin Luther’s Hymns’, 180.

²²³ *The Works of Martin Luther*, Vol 53: *Liturgy and Hymns*.

²²⁴ Grindal, ‘The Rhetoric of Martin Luther’s Hymns’, 180.

Thus, in the very act of singing them together, Luther's hymns bound the community together in a stance against evil; the hymns themselves were an antidote to evil. As sources of the time show, Luther's hymns were widely sung inside and outside churches, in services, by families in the home, in open places, and at work; practically from the outset, then, hymns became one of the distinguishing marks of those congregations that followed the Wittenberg Reformation.²²⁵ Indeed, with the addition of hymns as well as the Mass in the vernacular²²⁶ – a combination described as the “liturgical realisation of the priesthood of all believers”²²⁷ – the full and active participation of the congregation was not only now possible but central to the Reformation message. Given, then, that there is evil in the world, singing is the action to be taken and the means by which evil is confronted, and for Luther, there was certainly a communal aspect to this too. The singing of hymns was one expression of a communal stand against the permeating spread of evil, as well as becoming a signifier that the singer was an adherent to, and member of, the new Reforming movement.

The fruits of faith: the message of Luther's hymns

The very act of singing together is, therefore, one response to how we should live and be in the world to ward off the devil. The messages of Luther's hymns themselves also point towards various themes not often associated with Luther, but which he clearly intended as a foundation for a proactive defence against evil. Those themes can be identified as present eschatology and theosis²²⁸ – Luther's more abstract, but necessary, motifs, signifying a much-

²²⁵ D. Wendebourg, ‘Selected Hymns’ in Pastoral Writings, *The Annotated Luther* Vol 4 ed M.A. Haemig (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2016), 107.

²²⁶ Luther gave the vernacular congregational hymn a central place in the Mass and full liturgical rights. In *An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg, 1523*, Luther expressed the need for “as many songs as possible in the vernacular which the people could sing during mass.” LW 53, 31.

²²⁷ D. Wendebourg, ‘Selected Hymns’, 107.

²²⁸ As previously discussed (see footnote 105), theosis is here defined and understood using Mannermaa's interpretation of this idea to Luther's work. Rather than literally blending with the

needed reorientation in individuals (the grasping of which is essential to effect change in perception or ‘being’) – coupled with the themes of joy and fellowship. These two subsequent themes follow on from a changed realisation in the singer of the hymn, and are the ‘fruits of faith’, or the ‘solution/response’ to the problem of evil, intended to enjoin the singer to this-worldly action as the very means of combating darkness and evil. The themes present eschatology and theosis, and joy and fellowship form natural headings – or prisms – with which to examine Luther’s hymns and this is the methodological approach that has been adopted in this chapter. In exploring how Luther’s hymns achieve this, the extent to which Luther could accommodate paradoxes will once again become apparent; these themes stand, arguably, in conflict with the more familiar Luther motifs of ‘Suffering’, ‘Apocalyptic Eschatology’ and ‘Individualism’. But if the intention is not to elevate one interpretation over the other, or even to try to harmonise Luther, but rather to explore how such contrast could serve to augment and enrich our understanding of the reformer through a new interpretation, then much may be gained.

Present Eschatology and Theosis Motifs in Luther’s Hymns

The references in Luther’s hymns to the promise and hope of a ‘present’ eschatology are numerous. The significance of this motif lies not only in that it challenges Oberman’s, and other scholars’, position that ‘apocalyptic’ eschatology was the only interpretation that made sense for Luther, but also because it underlines the importance of this earthly realm and provides the rationale for humans to take proactive action. In other words, the theme of Luther’s present eschatology challenges fatalism and passivity in the face of evil.

divine nature, the emphasis with this process of theosis is on taking on/receiving divine qualities. Mannermaa’s understanding of theosis anchors an individual’s ‘Christ-like’ transformation in the here and now; this research looks to apply his, and The Finnish School’s, insight that in so doing, the individual necessarily brings into her orbit the other, i.e. her neighbour. It is this insight that has implications for a response to evil and suffering.

Luther's first hymn, *A New Song Here Shall Be Begun*, 1523, was inspired by the news of the martyrdom of two young friars from his own order in the Netherlands, who had clung tenaciously to the Reformation message and consequently been burnt at the stake. The goal of the hymn is to announce that the long winter of spiritual cold has ended and that the eschatological 'summer' has already arrived; "The summer is hard at the door / the winter is past / the tender blooms are appearing / He who began it / will complete it too."²²⁹ The message of eschatological hope and joy framed here by Luther in terms of a process that is already happening on earth echoes the Song of Solomon, 2:10-12, in which, according to traditional Christian readings, Spring and Summer arrive with Jesus and not at a later date in the future.²³⁰ Similarly, in *From Heaven on High I Come to You*, 1535, Luther notes that Jesus "brings you all blessings / which God the Father already has / that you with us in the Kingdom of Heaven / should live, now and forever."²³¹ Laying emphasis on the 'now' of God's kingdom further points toward Luther's openness to alternative understandings of Eschatology, other than apocalyptic. To cite one more example of present eschatology in his hymns, Luther's versification of The Lord's Prayer in *Our Father In The Heaven Who Art*, 1539, stands out for its almost literal rendering of the prayer line by line, followed by his own catechetical interpretation of its meaning in the subsequent stanzas. This is significant because Luther interprets the following line of the prayer in a particular way: "Your Kingdom comes down to us now / and hereafter, up there for eternity / the holy Spirit abides

²²⁹ *Der Somer ist hard für der thür/ der winter ist vergangen / die zarte blümlein gehn erfür / der das hat angefangen / der wird es wol volenden.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 126.

²³⁰ 'My beloved spake and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land.' (*King James Bible*, 1769/n.d., Song of Solomon 2:10-12).

²³¹ *Er bringt euch alle seilgkeit | die Gott der Vater hat bereit | das jr mit uns im himelreich | solt leben nu und ewigleich.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 52.

with us / with his manifold gifts.”²³² Far from drawing sharp distinctions between heaven and earth – in the former where God’s Kingdom finds expression, in the latter where the absence of which is felt keenly – Luther chooses to highlight again the eschatological process that begins ‘now’ (*zu diser zeit*) and also, importantly, ‘with us’ (*bey uns*). Thus, Luther re-grounds eschatology as a process that is currently taking place in both the present, earthly realm, and also, crucially, within humankind.

Hope for an ontological change and reawakening in the individual, given this process of Present Eschatology, points to the concept described as theosis as outlined by the work of the Finnish School of Luther Scholarship (and Tuomo Mannermaa in particular) – but also seen clearly in Luther’s hymns. The hymn *From Heaven on High I Come to You* lays great emphasis on the relational exchange between human and Christ. A hymn to celebrate the Christmas story, Luther adds depth to the familiar tale by imbuing it with this message: “Ah my beloved little Jesus / make yourself a clean soft little bed / and rest in the shrine of my heart / so that I will never forget you.”²³³ The bed in which Jesus is asked to rest is the singing person’s heart. As Dorothea Wendebourg suggests, “Christ’s story is to become the Christian’s own story and this hymn makes clear how that will happen ... the initiative is Christ’s – he makes the believer’s heart his cradle, he awakes the believer’s faith in him.”²³⁴ This is a significant point in that it upholds Luther’s understanding of soteriology: only by God’s grace alone can an individual’s prospects of salvation be affected. But it also carries with it the idea that by virtue of this changed state of being and because of the process of becoming more ‘Christ-like’, and thus becoming more like God (theiosis), the Christian is

²³² *Es kom dein Reich zu diser zeit | und dort hernach in ewigkeit | Der heilig Geist uns wone bey | mit seinem gaben mancherley.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 79-80.

²³³ *Ah mein hertzliebes Jhesulin | mach dir ein rein sanfft bettelin | zu rugenI in meins hertzen schrein | das ich nimer vergesse dein.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 54.

²³⁴ Wendebourg, ‘Hymns’, 113.

then called to action in this life. This is seen most clearly in the hymn *Let God Be Blest*, 1524: “God gives us all the blessings of his grace / that we may go in his ways now / in righteous love and brotherly faithfulness.”²³⁵ The result of taking on divine qualities (such as love and faithfulness) in theosis is a call to follow in Jesus’ footsteps: to be present in this world for one’s neighbour in acts of love and loyalty. As Luther’s hymns make plain, this is God’s plan and purpose for mankind. The theosis motif leads, therefore, to action in the ‘fruit of faith’; this is captured and illustrated in Luther’s hymns as the themes of ‘Joy and Fellowship’.

The ‘Joy’ and ‘Fellowship’ Motif in Luther’s Hymns

Luther was not afraid of the power of song to stir the emotions; indeed, in part, Luther is remembered (and praised) today because of his celebratory ethos towards *feeling*. He argued, “God has not created [us] to be a stick or a stone. [God] has given [us] five senses and a heart of flesh in order that [we] may love [our] friends, be angry with [our] enemies, and lament and grieve when [our] dear friends suffer evil”²³⁶ Moreover, Luther’s mistrust and suspicion of reason as a means for accessing the divine is well known.²³⁷ If, according to Luther, “the proper subject of theology is the sinful and lost human being and justifying God, the saviour of the sinful human being”,²³⁸ then re-connecting with God cannot be a case of relying on abstract reason; it is within the concrete business of *living and feeling* that a relationship with God is to be re-discovered. As H.-M. Barth puts it, ‘doing’ theology for Luther must be “related holistically to life”.²³⁹

²³⁵ *Gott geb uns allen seiner gnaden seggen | das wir gehn auff seinen wegen | In rechter lieb und brüderlicher trewe.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 89.

²³⁶ Luther, “Two funeral Sermons, 1532,” LW 51, 232.

²³⁷ Luther described reason as “the foremost whore the devil has ... she seduces, feeds people with untruths, nourishes passing illusions, does not take people’s real needs seriously, and remains noncommittal” Luther, “The Last Sermon in Wittenberg, Romans 12:3, 1546,” LW 51, 374.

²³⁸ Luther, “Lecture on Psalm 51, 1532,” WA 40/2, 328.

²³⁹ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 410.

Luther's hymns celebrated living and were meant to encourage a life lived in joy. Present eschatology and theosis lay the groundworks for adopting a new and changed relationship with the world and one's neighbour, but *being* joyful and connecting with others are the twin themes in Luther's hymns that offer a practical response to the question: "*given that there is evil in the world, how should I live and 'be'?*" On numerous occasions, Luther's hymns enjoin the congregation to joyfulness. *Would That The Lord Would Grant Us*, 1523, says: "So thank God and praise ye / the heathens above all; / Let all the world rejoice / and sing with hearty voice."²⁴⁰ In *Death Held Our Lord In Prison*, 1524, God himself is portrayed as the source of happiness and joviality: "So we celebrate the high festival / with joyful and gleeful hearts / that the LORD shines down on us / he is the sun himself / who through his gracious light / lightens [i.e. illuminates] our whole hearts / the sinful night is past."²⁴¹ That humankind is encouraged to be joyful serves two particular purposes for Luther, and both directly address the problem of evil question. Firstly, joy is a sign of certainty and faith; it wards off the devil's darkness and doubt with the warmth and clarity of God's light. In *Come, Holy Spirit Lord and God*, 1524, Luther understands God's comfort to be given as joy: "You holy fire / you sweet comfort / now help us (to be) happy and comforted."²⁴² Secondly, joy is connected to community. Indeed, the joy Luther speaks of in his hymns cannot be kept to oneself. In the last hymnal preface he wrote in 1545, he notes: "He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But he must gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it."²⁴³ Luther's hymns speak of personal

²⁴⁰ *So dancken Gott und loben dich | die heiden uber alle | Und alle welt die frewe sich | und sing mit grossem schalle.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 100.

²⁴¹ *So feiren wir das hohfest | mit hertzen freud und wonne | Das uns der HERR scheinen lesst | er ist selber die Sonne | Der durch seiner gnaden glantz | erleucht unser hertzen gantz | der sunden nacht ist vergangen.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 61.

²⁴² *Du heilige brunst/ süsser trost | nu hilf uns frolich und getrost.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 67.

²⁴³ Luther, "Preface to the Bapst Hymnal, 1545," LW 53, 333.

joy as reaching out and connecting with others; implicit in Luther's understanding of joy is, therefore, a communitarian aspect. In *Now Let Us Pray To The Holy Ghost*, 1524, he calls this response, rather beautifully and evocatively, the result of 'the glow': "You sweet love give us your favour / let us discover the glow of love / that we may love one another from our hearts and remain in peace / of one mind."²⁴⁴ Being joyful for Luther thus leads to action in fellowship with one's neighbour – again, the 'fruit of faith'.

The changed disposition of *being gladsome* necessarily leads, therefore, to action and participation in the world by, and through, living for one another. Indeed, the idea that *having* a certain disposition *leads* to certain actions is a common theme in Luther, as well as an effective pedagogical tool (although it has not been noted in a problem of evil context). Luther's collaboration with the artist Lucas Cranach, for example, in woodcuts such as '*Law and Grace*', 1529/30, depict the central Reformation message that good works do not make a good man, but rather a good man does good works. In this image (reproduced here in the Appendix), a healthy tree grows ripe and plentiful fruit, but for the tree that is not sustained and nourished at the roots, nothing grows except withered vines. In the context of his hymns, Luther also returns to this evocative image of the '*fruit of faith therein be showing*'. But instead of (or as well as) communicating a soteriological message about the nature of works, when seen in the context of the problem of evil prism – *how should I live and be in the face of evil?* – this idea can be interpreted as a clarion call to action, a concrete response to evil that finds expression in 'doing' for the neighbour. This theme, or 'Fellowship' motif, is found often in Luther's hymns.

²⁴⁴ *Du süsse lieb Schenk uns deine gunst | Las uns empfined der liebe brunst | das wir uns von hertzen | einander lieben | und im friede/ auff einem sinn bleiben.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 68-9.

Firstly – and running counter to popular notions of Luther as the ‘father of individualism’ – his hymns emphasise the dangers of being ‘*incurvatus in se*’ – the hubris of self-obsession and conceit. Indeed, *Although the Fools Say with Their Mouth*, 1523, condemns an attitude that elevates the individual above all else: “There was no one on the right path / they were all straying / each followed his own whim / and held lost customs; / it did no one any good.”²⁴⁵ Luther does indeed seek to highlight the folly of assuming our own self-imposed good works lead us to salvation, but in diagnosing one problem, he also uses his hymns to point to the corrective: he reminds us that God’s commandments drive us to our neighbours so that we may be the benefit of their salvation. Many of Luther’s hymns follow this problem/solution, sickness/cure ‘theodicean model’. *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, 1529 for example, first describes the vanity of our own efforts to defeat the devil, that raging “old evil enemy”²⁴⁶; Luther goes on to conclude that people’s consciences will be cleared by going out and living in this world, ready to serve their neighbours.²⁴⁷

Secondly, faith entails action towards family, neighbour, community. Luther never tired of praising the married estate as a divine institution. In *Happy who in God’s Fear Doth stay*, 1524, he makes a direct link between the severing of the ‘old curse’, or alienated state between God and man, and having a wife and family as the means of restoring that bond and experiencing the new ‘city of Jerusalem’ in this life: “Your wife will be in your house / fine like a vine heavy with grapes / and your children sit at your table / like olive plants healthy and fresh. / Out of Zion God will bless you / that you continually behold / the good fortune of

²⁴⁵ *Da war niemand auff rechter ban | sie warn all ausgeschriten | Ein jeder gieng nach seinem wahn | und hielt verlorne sitten / Es thet jr keiner doch kein gut.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 93-4.

²⁴⁶ *Der alt böse feind.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 97.

²⁴⁷ Grindal, “The Rhetoric of Martin Luther’s Hymns, 182.

the city of Jerusalem.”²⁴⁸ In addition to another use of the healthy and blossoming fruit analogy, Luther states clearly that family and fellowship make God happy; indeed, such states counterbalance sadness, darkness and evil by bringing its opposite - ‘good things’, happiness, and peace: “... pleasing to God in [his] grace. He will extend your life / and will always be with you with good things / that you will see (your) children’s children / and that Israel will find peace.”²⁴⁹

Time and time again, Luther’s hymns emphasise that Christians fulfil their humanity in exercising their God-given callings to serve Him by serving others. The first stanza of *Our Father Who Art in Heaven*, 1539, says: “Our Father in the Kingdom of Heaven / you who bid us all equally / to be brothers and to call on you.”²⁵⁰ Explicitly in the Lord’s Prayer, therefore, Luther perceives a call to action towards the neighbour – to *be* a brother first, even before calling on God. This is necessarily dialogical; you cannot be a ‘brother’ in a vacuum, alone. Stanza 6 goes on to say: “Make us all ready to serve / in righteous love and unity.”²⁵¹ In fact, Luther’s hymns are shot through with the language of community. Congregational singing would have undoubtedly engendered an ‘in this together’ mindset (as Luther was fully aware), but the lyrics and even titles of many of his hymns also stress ‘us’, ‘we’, ‘one heart’, rather than ‘me’ or ‘I’. By way of example, the following references underline this point: the entire hymn *God The Father With Us Be*, 1524,²⁵² which focuses exclusively on precisely this sense of ‘us’, the community. In *Let God Be Blest*, 1524, Luther has his congregation sing the line:

²⁴⁸ *Dein weib wird in deinem hause sein | wie ein reben vol drauben fein | Und dein kinder umb deinen tisch | wie ölplantzen gesund und frisch. Aus Sion wird gott segnen dich | das du wirkst schawen stetiglich | Das gluck der stadt Jerusalem.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 103.

²⁴⁹ *Für Gott in gnaden angemem. Fristen wird er das leben dein | und mit güte stets bey dir sein | Das du sehen wirst kindes kind | und das Israel friede find.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 103.

²⁵⁰ *Vater unser im himelreich | der du uns alle heissest gleich | brüder sein und dich ruffen an.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 79.

²⁵¹ *Zu dienen mach uns all bereit | in rechter lieb und einigkeit.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 79.

²⁵² Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 70-1.

“LORD, let your holy Ghost never leave us / grant that he keeps us in right mind.”²⁵³ His choice of the uniting word ‘us’ again serves to amplify the strong communal aspect in his thinking. In *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word*, 1541/2, he includes the line: “God, Holy Ghost you who are the comforter / give your people one [united] mind on earth.”²⁵⁴ Luther lays emphasis here, once again, on the uniform body of believers, coming together as one in worship. And finally, in *From Heaven The Angel Troop Came Near*, 1543, Luther adds the line: “your brother is (that) eternal good,”²⁵⁵ which clearly stresses the priority of the other for Luther.

“*Fruit of faith... appear!*” is, therefore, the participatory, proactive, and self-fulfilling mantra of Luther’s hymns. This stanza closes Luther’s hymn *Jesus Christ, Our God and Saviour*, 1524, as a reminder that faith is not idle but cannot but bring forth works of love for the neighbour: “The fruit should also not fail to appear: / you should love your neighbour / that he enjoys [the same treatment] from you / that God has granted you.”²⁵⁶ Seen in the context of the problem of evil, such a faith that moves you to action on behalf of the other *is* Luther’s response to evil; indeed, it is his existential answer to how we should live and be in the world.

Dear Christians, Let Us Now Rejoice (1523): A case study within a case study.

In one hymn, *Dear Christians, Let Us Now Rejoice*, all four themes – present eschatology and theosis and joy and fellowship – are present and intertwined. Because of this hymn’s importance in answering the question ‘*given that evil exists, how should I live and ‘be’ in the world?*’, this hymn will be examined separately.

²⁵³ *HERR dein heilig Geist uns nimer las | der uns geb zu halten rechte mas.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 89.

²⁵⁴ *Gott heiliger Geist du tröster werd | gib dein volck einrley sinn auff erd.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 108.

²⁵⁵ *ewr bruder ist das ewig gut.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 55.

²⁵⁶ *Der frucht sol auch nicht aus bleiben | deinen nechsten soltu lieben | Das er dein geniessen kan | Wie dein Gott an dir hat gethan.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 87.

Arguably, this is one of Luther's most theologically significant hymns. Detailing the struggle between God and the devil over sinful mankind, one could say it is *the* hymn of the Reformation (as Dorothea Wendebourg does²⁵⁷); indeed, it was included in Lutheran hymnals from the beginning and its popularity is reflected in the fact that it was circulated with three different tunes.²⁵⁸ The nine stanzas (2-10) tell the struggle-and-rescue story – or evil-and-solution/response story – that is the existential fate of all mankind. The first act (stanza 2) tells the familiar story of the singer's being lost under the devil, death and sin; his or her awareness and then frustration that good works amount to nothing, and the ensuing vice-like grip of *Anfechtung*-like anguish and despair:

I was a captive of the devil,
In death was I lost
My sin weighed heavy on me, night and day
That [sin] in which was I born.
I fell even deeper into that [sin]
There was no goodness in my life:
Sin possessed me.²⁵⁹

The second act details God's decision to send his Son Incarnate to rescue the captive, and the final act, stanzas 7-10, are unusual in that Luther has Jesus himself addressing the singer in one long speech, enjoining Christians to "hold on to" Him. Tellingly, the story is told from the point of view of the happy result that all Christians have now been saved and in this context, the hymn starts with hope, dance, song, praise, joyfulness and celebration:

²⁵⁷ Wendebourg, 'Hymns', 110

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 112.

²⁵⁹ *Dem Teuffel ich gefangen lag / im tod war ich verloren / Mein sund mich quelet nacht und tag / darin ich war geboren / Ich fiel auch imer tieffer drein / es war kein guts am leben mein / die sund hat mich besessen.* (Heimrath and Korth (eds.) 112).

Now rejoice together, beloved Christians
And let us jump²⁶⁰ for joy
That we, with good cheer and united voice,
may sing with pleasure and love
About what God has bestowed on us.²⁶¹

In this way, and from the outset, Luther provides one very accessible response to our existential battles: song in communion, in ‘one voice’: the fellowship theme. But this opening stanza also points towards the joy motif as a response to evil in the world and how we should aim to ‘be’. The themes of theosis and present eschatology are similarly captured and give further expression to, and justification for, the proactive business of ‘being’ and acting in this world in a certain way when faced with evil and suffering. In stanzas 6 and 7 Luther articulates his understanding of how theosis works and what it means:

The Son was obedient to the Father,
He came to me on earth
From a virgin pure and tender
He should become my brother
Secretly he wielded his strength
He went in my poor form²⁶²
He would catch the devil.

He said to me: hold on to me
All shall be well with you now,

²⁶⁰ *Springen* = literally jump, but could also denote dancing.

²⁶¹ *Nu freud euch lieben Christen gmein / und lasst uns frölich springen / Das wir getrost und all in ein delete line break?*

mit lust und liebe singen / Was Gott an uns gewendet hat. Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 112.

²⁶² i.e. the human form.

I give myself up for you completely
I will fight for you
For I am yours / and you are mine
And where I am / you will also be;
The enemy shall not part us.²⁶³

Thus, Luther encourages the singers of his hymns to view Jesus in this relational perspective; theosis – the idea that Jesus takes on humankind’s sins, and likewise, that mankind subsequently becomes ‘Christ-like’ in the process (“And where I am / you will also be”) – is foundational and fundamental here, and the building block on which a new relationship with God and one’s neighbour can take place. In the context of a response to evil, and as Jesus goes on to say, the salient point is that his life served to inspire action and reciprocal collaboration with others:

What I have done and taught
Should you do and teach.

With that, the kingdom of heaven will be built up.²⁶⁴

The theosis theme goes hand in hand with the present eschatology theme, seen here in the final stanza of *Dear Christians*. Singers of the hymn are urged to do as Jesus has said and done in an act of participation and engagement with the world, made easier because of the process of theosis (which, for the Christian, is a process of becoming Christ-like). The rationale for such a response is given in the line “With that, the kingdom of heaven will be

²⁶³ *Der Son dem Vater ghorsam ward / er kam zu mir auff erden / Von einer Jungfraw rein und zart / er solt mein bruder werden / Gar heimlich furt er sein gewalt / er gieng in meiner armen gestalt / den Teuffel wolt er fangen.*

Er sprach zu mir halt dich an mich / es sol dir jtz gelingen / Ich geb mich selber gantz für dich da wil ich für dich ringen / Denn ich bin dein/ und du bist mein/ und wo ieh bleib / da soltu sein / uns sol der feind nicht scheiden. Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 114.

²⁶⁴ *Was ich gethan hab und gelert / das soltu thun und leren / Damit das reich Gotts werd gemehrt.* Heimrath and Korth (eds.), 115.

built up”. That God’s kingdom spreads in this realm on earth, as a direct result of this changed and reorientated state in human beings, points to at least an awareness in Luther that eschatology could (and indeed, should) be interpreted as something other than ‘apocalyptic’.

The message of the hymn *Dear Christians, Let Us Now Rejoice* points, therefore, to a new appreciation of a uniquely Lutheran theodicy. As expressed succinctly here by Luther, suffering and angst can be interpreted as the necessary vehicles for ridding oneself of hubris – a process of *kenosis*, or self-emptying (shot through with personal pain and struggle though it may be) – in order that one is receptive to the life-affirming process of theosis. This new mode of being in the individual necessarily precipitates the ‘spreading’ of God’s kingdom in this world because it entails a ‘reaching out’ to one’s neighbour, thus enacting Jesus’ own example and teachings. Finally, although there is initial pain and sorrow, what Luther stresses in this hymn and in many others, is that this new mode of being also necessarily includes joyfulness. If *Dear Christians, Let Us Now Rejoice* outlines the reasons behind Jesus’ self-sacrifice, it aims at becoming the “basis and sense of the Christian’s life today: uniting Christ and the Christian.”²⁶⁵ One way in which this hymn does that is by making sense of suffering and evil by offering a blueprint for living. Present Eschatology and Theosis may seem like abstract concepts, but in the context of the problem of evil, via Joy, they point to the concrete and tangible theme of Fellowship, the practical and necessary action one must take to mitigate evil’s effects.

Conclusion

Luther wanted his hymns to be simple enough so that people could understand them, be moved by them, and be brought to faith by them. He was inspired by Augustine’s version of

²⁶⁵ Wendebourg, ‘Hymns’, 111.

Cicero's dictum that rhetoricians should "teach, please, and move."²⁶⁶ He remained convinced of the power of music to influence human behaviour; indeed, the purpose of his hymns was to cause people to "experience faith".²⁶⁷ Thus, with this pedagogical device, Luther strongly exhorts the singer of his hymns to act in this life for the benefit and advancement of others, as a means of combating evil. Following an examination of Luther's hymns, therefore, it is difficult to uphold H.-M. Barth's view that: "For Luther, Christian existence is not characterized by specific duties and opportunities within the congregation but, insofar as he describes it at all, by confession and suffering ... Luther scarcely ever has in view that one's lifestyle within the congregation and the specific ethos of community could be a witness ... The more that Christian and common ethical consciousness diverge, the less can Protestantism orient itself to Luther in this regard."²⁶⁸ In fact, Luther's hymns show that a 'lifestyle within the congregation' was, indeed, *uppermost* in his mind. The fellowship theme in Luther – like the present eschatology, joy, and theosis themes – have been much marginalised. A central aim of this research has been to highlight the ways in which such motifs have been overlooked. This chapter has hinted at the possibilities within Luther scholarship when such themes are taken seriously, particularly seen through the problem-of-evil prism. Given the implications this chapter has had for Luther's theodicy, it is the purpose of the final chapter to draw together some concluding comments, and point towards a potential future direction for Luther scholarship.

²⁶⁶ Grindal, 'The Rhetoric of Martin Luther's Hymns', 180.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 181.

²⁶⁸ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 367.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This project began to take shape with a quotation and a question. The quotation came from Warren Quanbeck who made a comparison between Erasmus and Luther. Quanbeck commented that “Erasmus ‘does’ theology like a man lying on the brow of a hill, overlooking a warm, sunny valley spreading out below; Luther like a man crawling through the valley in the dark, during a storm.”²⁶⁹ I was struck by this perceived contrast of complacent detachment in Erasmus and agitated involvement in Luther. Moreover, I noted particularly Luther’s participation in, and engagement with, not the warm, sun-soaked valley, but with the dark and the storm: with the everyday trials of living and being human; with the acknowledgment that the problem of evil was at the very centre of his, and everyone else’s, existence. The quotation conjured up an image of a man who rolled up his sleeves to tackle the business of living head on, for good or for bad. Of course, Luther *did* embrace life, including every dazzling shade of it. That led me to the question why? Why would a Reformation theologian – well-known for his views on the ‘depravity of the will’, coupled with the accepted wisdom that, according to Luther, the problem of evil is only ‘solved’ in the afterlife – embrace and even *celebrate* living? What would be the point? Why engage with the dark, stormy world *at all* if the only thing that mankind could do about the brute fact of evil was to endure it? Why bother crawling through that valley? Did Luther really intend to consign mankind to a lifetime of passivity and inaction or did he have a response to the problem of evil that was, in fact, *anchored* in the very business of living?

²⁶⁹ Quanbeck quoted in G. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 18.

This research has sought to illuminate the ways in which Luther's response was precisely that. It has attempted to highlight how dominant interpretive frameworks of Luther have obscured and frustrated any quest for his response to the problem of evil. In addition, it has suggested that these frameworks have contributed to something akin to misreadings of Luther's message in regards to two central misconceptions. The first misconception is that he advocated doing nothing in the face of evil; the second is that his theology was predominantly concerned with the individual *only*. The findings from this thesis have illustrated that neither reading tells the complete story, and that furthermore, in relation to Luther's response to the problem of evil, the two are, in fact, closely linked.

The tradition is slow to die that "Luther was convinced [that]... our readiness to suffer is our acknowledgment that before God there is nothing we can do but wait on the grace of God... the grace of God is the only source of consolation in our experiences of loneliness, despair and abandonment."²⁷⁰ In addition to the 'mankind can do nothing in response to evil' motif, many scholars have attributed Luther's theology to "psychomatic suffering, morbid fantasies and an exceptional degree of self-absorption"²⁷¹, and this is particularly so for those seeking to underscore the importance of 'the individual' in his thinking. Because Luther is often cited as the 'father' of this trend for individualism (Christopher Ferrara, in fact, calls Luther "Patient Zero in an epidemic that would spread throughout the Western world"²⁷²), it is easy to dismiss or ignore anything he did say on humans-in-community, or worse, to assume he did not say anything at all. One of the goals of this research has, therefore, been to shed light on the possibility of an ingrained 'individualistic' bias in our reading of Luther, and to re-examine him anew, free from such dominant paradigmatic lenses.

²⁷⁰ K.D. Billman, and D.L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 52.

²⁷¹ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 22.

²⁷² C.A. Ferrara, 'Luther's Disembodied Grace and the Graceless Body Politic', in Rao (ed.), *Luther and His Progeny*, 135.

Addressing these two misreadings of Luther has been of central importance to this research. It has been argued that according to Luther, God, in fact, resided in *this* world as well as the next, and that the reformer was, therefore, *on the side of life*, and of living. Taking a good look around the actual world in which God had placed human beings in and giving glory to God by daring to embrace life, is as important a theme in Luther as ‘The End Times’.

Breaking bread around the table with the many students to whom he and his wife, Katherine von Bora, opened their house to, Luther would cite a favourite passage from Ecclesiastes that mirrored this sentiment: “There is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil – this is the gift of God.”²⁷³ Examples such as these – indeed, the very way he chose to live his life – suggest that Luther can, and should, be read through a ‘humans-in-community’ prism.

In fact, Luther emphasised that the Christian always lives *in relatione*: in relation to other people. “You see, now we are talking about a Christian in-relation: not about his being a Christian, but about his life and obligation in it to some other person, whether under him or even over him or even alongside him, like a lord or a lady, a wife or children or neighbours, whom he is obliged, if possible, to defend, guard and protect.”²⁷⁴ As has been demonstrated via a representative selection of Luther’s hymns, the underlying drumbeat of Luther’s communal ethic was clear to see, sing and hear, for contemporaries and subsequent generations alike. But it is a message to be found elsewhere, too, and in particular in his pastoral writings where he sought to communicate directly with congregations and laypeople. From his earliest comments on the Lord’s prayer, for example, published in 1519, Luther

²⁷⁴ Luther, “Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (Mtt 5-7), 1532,” WA 32, 390.

concludes: “Finally, notice how carefully Christ organised this prayer. For he does not allow individuals to pray simply for themselves alone but the entire assembly of all people. For he does not teach us to say, ‘My Father’ but ‘Our Father’. This prayer is spiritual community property. Thus, a person should deprive no one of it, not even enemies. For since he is the Father of us all, he desires that we ought to be brothers [and sisters] among ourselves, love one another dearly, and pray for each other just as ourselves”.²⁷⁵

Indeed, it is not hard to find Luther, himself, contradicting attitudes that have dominated and endured in scholarly circles. As this quotation illustrates, for example, Luther summarily dismisses any question of inaction in the face of evil:

I hear people say, ‘If war or the Turks come, one should not flee from his village or town but stay and await God’s punishment by the sword.’ ... By such reasoning, when a house is on fire, no one should run outside or rush to help because such a fire is also a punishment from God. Anyone who falls into deep water dare not save himself by swimming but must surrender to the water as to a divine punishment. ... Likewise, if someone breaks a leg, is wounded or bitten, he should not seek medical aid but say, ‘It is God’s punishment. I shall bear it until it heals by itself.’ Freezing weather and winter are also God’s punishment and can cause death. Why run to get inside or near a fire? Be strong and stay outside until it becomes warm again. We should then need no apothecaries or drugs or physicians because all illnesses are punishment from God. Hunger and thirst are also great punishments and torture. Why do you eat and drink instead of letting yourself be punished until hunger and thirst stop of themselves? Ultimately such talk will lead to the point where we abbreviate the Lord’s Prayer and no longer pray, ‘deliver us

²⁷⁵ Luther, “An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen, 1519,” WA 2, 86.

from evil, Amen', since we would have to stop praying to be saved from hell and stop seeking to escape it. It, too, is God's punishment as is every kind of evil. Where would all this end?²⁷⁶

Luther's exasperation at those who would advocate total resignation in the face of evil and suffering is perfectly captured here. Moreover, when mankind encounters evil in the world, any response that is tantamount to 'doing nothing' is diagnosed by Luther as an obvious and glaring 'problem'. In this regard, and as a response to evil, he is unequivocal in his criticism. But no one criticises in a vacuum – not even Martin Luther – they do so because they affirm in something else; a different framework of beliefs, perhaps; a commitment to a different philosophical/theological schema. In Luther's case, the ambiguity lies in uncovering this schema – his proactive 'solution' that counters and corrects the problematic, 'do nothing' response – and that is because the scholarship surrounding Luther has, itself, been so problematic. This research has attempted to engage with this ambiguity by acknowledging where, and in what ways, the scholarship may have overlooked or ignored a response to evil that Luther would have endorsed, as well as then attempting to trace the contours of what, in practice, that response would have looked like in Luther's eyes.

Engaging with ambiguity is unavoidable if one's subject matter is Martin Luther. Indeed, and from the outset, this research has been clear that it has not been its intention to embark on a project of harmonising Luther (nor could any such project be successful). Much like the vast majority of people to whom he reached out in order to comfort and connect with, Luther was, in fact, infrequently in harmony with himself, let alone on the page (a point on which he was

²⁷⁶ Luther, "Letter to John Hess, Wittenberg, 1528," LW 49, 196-199.

honest²⁷⁷ and which continues to resonate with the majority of us today who also experience the discombobulation of being utterly at odds with oneself²⁷⁸). Indeed, how are scholars to harmonise the obvious contradictions in, for example, Luther's attitude towards death? He stated *both* that "no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death, alone"²⁷⁹, *and* "give to thy folk on earth one heart; stand by us breathing our last breath."²⁸⁰ Highlighting the ways in which Luther (and Luther scholars) oscillated between prioritising the individual and the community (one's *own* battle and *our* battle) has been a central component of this research. This study has argued that the goal has not been to 'smooth out' Luther's more overtly contradictory positions, but instead, to explore his attitudes in more depth in order to gain a richer understanding of the reformer's insights. Given the driving problem-of-evil question of this research, tensions have inevitably arisen between interpretive models and their findings. The intention of this research, however, has not been to challenge an 'apocalyptic' reading of Luther's eschatology, so much as to challenge that it is the *only* reading. In so doing, this body of work has aimed to test the confident scholarly conviction that: "there is no position that can escape the difficult eschatological tensions that Luther recognised in the ethical demands of Christian existence."²⁸¹ Adopting a 'present' eschatological framework does indeed afford scholars one such 'position' – or at least, a starting point – with which to make sense of Luther's insights on Christian existence, the role of the community, and the problem of evil.

²⁷⁷ For more on Luther's honest commentary on his own experiences of *Anfechtung*, see 'Melancholia Coram Deo: Luther's Theology of *Anfechtung*', in S.D. Podmore, *Struggling With God: Kierkegaard and the Temptation of Spiritual Trial* (Cambridge, London: The Lutterworth Press, James Clark & Co., 2013), pp. 100-126.

²⁷⁸ This sense of being out of kilter with the world, captured in Paul's message in Romans 7:15, is as prevalent as ever: "For that which I do I allow not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I."

²⁷⁹ Luther, "Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, 1522," LW 51, 70.

²⁸⁰ Luther, *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast In Thy Word, 1542*, LW 53, 305.

²⁸¹ P.T. Kroeker, 'Eschatology and ethics: Luther and the Radical Reformers', *Consensus*, vol 27, no. 1 (May 2001), 20.

Finally, it could be questioned whether adopting an either/or interpretive Luther prism – either prioritising his ‘apocalyptic’ eschatology, or his ‘present’ eschatology; either the individual in Luther’s thought, or the community – is appropriate. Was the reformer interested in *the* human being or in human *beings*? The self or the community? Perhaps scholars should let Luther be the nuanced thinker he was and explore in more depth the insight that, for him, “the human person is not only one theologically determined by law and gospel before God, but also lives an embodied life in relation to others”²⁸². It could, of course, be the case that on the theme of Luther’s response to evil, when these models are taken together, much may be gained; such readings could serve to augment one another, thus enriching our understanding of Luther. With regards to this methodological approach, more work is needed. But in the context of the discussions outlined in this work, if Luther located the goal of mankind to ‘self-empty’ and rid itself of hubris in order to mend the broken relationship between God and one another, then this process could, conceivably, be best achieved by *both* ‘the individual’ and ‘the community’ working together, and at the same time, towards this common aim. Luther does indeed make this link explicit in *Freedom of a Christian*, 1520: “Although a Christian is ... free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant ... and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbour as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him.”²⁸³ As this research has highlighted, Luther could, and did, accommodate *both* ‘individuals before God’ *and* ‘humans-in-community before God’; both ‘alone’ and ‘together’ are, therefore, themes in Luther that merit further examination in tandem with one another, and in relation to, the problem of evil.

²⁸² C. Helmer (ed.), *The Global Luther*, 8.

²⁸³ Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520,” LW 31, 366.

This research has engaged with both a project of theological revisionism and construction. Such a methodological approach has proved illuminating. Adopting a problem-of-evil prism and subjecting it to certain aspects of Luther's pastoral writings has shed much light on the reformer's response to evil. Indeed, given the insights in Luther's thought uncovered here, it is arguably the case that much may be gained by re-examining other aspects of his pastoral writings and asking of them the same driving question: '*given that evil exists, how should I live and 'be' in the world?*'. This could include, for example, his *Small and Large Catechisms*, his *Sermons*, and *Table Talk*. Roland H. Bainton once commented that there is hardly any aspect of Reformation history that does not require further research or that could not benefit from re-examination.²⁸⁴ Given the findings of this research, a re-examination of Luther's response to the problem of evil surely qualifies as one such aspect.

Luther's response to the problem of evil remains under-explored and the questions raised in this research warrant further investigation. They warrant investigation not only because a better-defined understanding of Luther's attitude towards evil draws us closer to the man himself and his theology, but also because the problem of evil is a question that continues to ferment in mankind, like the yeast in the dough. We remain driven to, and drawn by, the philosophical aporia of making sense of a world that seems to be "too often out of its mind"²⁸⁵. As well as reflecting on the ways in which the problem of evil reveals much about Luther's thought, new perspectives on Luther also reveal much about the problem of evil. Indeed, his thoughts provide a rich resource for wider theological reflection on the problem

²⁸⁴ Quoted in L.W. Spitz, 'Current Accents in Luther Study: 1960-1967', *Theological Studies*, vol 28, no 3, (September 1967), 549.

²⁸⁵ V.M. Karkkainen, 'Evil, Love and the Left Hand of God': The Contribution of Luther's Theology of the Cross to an Evangelical Theology of Evil', *The Evangelical Quarterly*, vol 74, no 3 (July-September, 2002), 234.

of evil – particularly in his vision (through the blueprint or roadmap he sketches via his hymns) that there *is* a way for evil to be met ‘head on’ and in the ‘real world’. In fact, Luther proves himself to be a fruitful conversational partner with the ‘anti-theodicians’ whose clarion call for practical guidance on the issue of evil for the twenty-first century, is certainly addressed by the reformer of the sixteenth. On the problem of evil and Martin Luther, Paul Ricoeur’s question provides an apt concluding comment: “Do we find an invitation to think less or a provocation to think more – or to think differently?”²⁸⁶ Five hundred years on, scholars are still finding ways to engage with Luther and reconceptualize his message in interdisciplinary contexts. It is hoped that this research has continued and contributed to that tradition.

²⁸⁶ P. Ricoeur, ‘Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol 53, no 4 (December, 1985), 635.

APPENDIX

'The Last Judgment', St. Lazare, Autun Cathedral, France, sculpted by Gislebertus c1130CE
<https://www.francetoday.com/travel/5-emblematic-religious-buildings-in-burgundy/>



'Law and Gospel' (or 'Law and Grace'), Woodcut painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder, c 1529 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cranach_law_and_grace_woodcut.jpg



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