
TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE DILEMMA
OF GOOD WORKS



In late March of 1520, one month after he started to prepare a sermon on good works, Martin Luther wrote happily to his contact at the Saxon court: “It will not be a sermon but rather a small book, and if my writing progresses as well as it has, this book will be the best work I have published so far.”¹ Although the better-known pamphlets of 1520 were still to appear—*Address to the Christian Nobility*, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *Freedom of a Christian*—the finished *Treatise on Good Works* fulfilled Luther’s prediction. It remains the clearest and most accessible introduction to Luther’s reforming work and the theology behind it. Luther’s main goal was not to propose a new theology to his learned colleagues but to commend a new piety to all Christians, especially to the laity. That piety was new, because at its center was a radically different meaning of good works that would transform the way believers practiced their faith. That different meaning, it turned out, was easy to misunderstand and required a detailed explanation that Luther offered in the “small book” that began as a sermon.

In modern English, the term “good works” is associated with acts of charity in general, but in late medieval theology it designated acts of religious devotion and charity that made up for sins committed by believers and gave them a better chance at salvation. The term was current before the Middle Ages and can be traced to words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”² Augustine of Hippo (354–430), the bishop and theologian whom Martin Luther

1. WABr 2:75 (March 25, 1520).

2. Matt. 5:16. The term also appears in the Vulgate text of 2 Pet. 1:10 and was therefore present in the Latin Bible of the Middle Ages; but the phrase, for which there is only moderate textual evidence, is absent from most English translations of 2 Pet. 1:10.

cited more than any other, debated with his Pelagian opponents the place of good works in the Christian life. Augustine was the source of Luther's claim that actions that appear to be good works are in fact sinful unless done in faith.³ In the *Rule of St. Benedict* (ca. 540), "good works" are given a primary role in monastic life. Chapter 4, titled "The Instruments of Good Works," concludes with the following admonition: "Behold, these are instruments of the spiritual art, which, if they have been applied without ceasing day and night and approved on judgment day, will merit for us from the Lord that reward which he has promised: 'No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.'⁴ The instruments identified by the *Rule* divided neatly into religious and charitable activities just as they were defined in a medieval dictionary of theology (1517) that was printed as the Reformation began: "Certain works are directed toward our neighbor and pertain to love of neighbor, while others are directed toward God alone and pertain to divine worship and adoration."⁵ By that time, good works so defined were a required part of the Christian life that applied not only to monks and nuns but also to every believer who desired an eternal seat in heaven.

Soon after the Reformation began, readers and listeners must have been confused by what they read and heard about good works. In both sermons and pamphlets, Luther and his colleagues were claiming that salvation came by faith alone and not by works. Their assertion was based on biblical verses like Romans 3:28: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law." The Reformers equated justification, a term that Paul adopted from the Old Testament, with salvation and buttressed their claim with verses like Ephesians

3. Hans-Ulrich Delius, *Augustin als Quelle Luthers*, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1984), 66.

4. 1 Cor. 2:9.

5. Johannes Altenstaig, *Vocabularius theologiae* (Hagenau, 1517), fol. 169b.

2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” Paul did not say that Christians had overthrown the law, by which he meant primarily the Ten Commandments, but that they “upheld” the law.⁶ Luther’s readers and listeners assumed, however, that they were free from the obligation to perform any good works at all—a complaint heard not only from Luther but also from other early preachers who were defending Luther’s views. In southern Germany, one of those preachers, Urbanus Rhegius (1489–1541), summarized the laity’s misunderstanding of Luther’s teaching—justification by faith alone and not by works—as follows: “If it is true, all the better, we need to perform no good works; we will gladly take faith alone. And if praying, fasting, holy days, and almsgiving are not required, then we will lie near the stove, warm our feet on its tiles, turn the roasting apples, open our mouths, and wait until grilled doves fly into them.”⁷

The late-medieval laity that heard good works would not save them associated those good works with religious activities that were no longer necessary for salvation. The quotation above mentions praying, fasting, observing holy days (commemorations of saints and church festivals), and almsgiving; but the list of unnecessary works recounted continually by Luther included acquiring indulgences,⁸ venerating and praying to saints, making pilgrimages to their shrines, holding private masses (said

6. Rom. 3:31.

7. Urbanus Rhegius, *Anzeigung, daß die römische Bulle merklichen Schaden in Gewissen mancher Menschen gebracht und nicht Doctor Luthers Lehre* (Augsburg, 1521), C4r–v. The examples of leisure are based on sayings related to *Schlaraffenland*, an imaginary place found in European fairy tales that was alleged to contain a surplus of everything. Luther also alludes to it. See sec. 2 in “The Seventh Commandment,” below.

8. Official ecclesiastical letters that reduced the amount of penance to be performed in this life and in purgatory.

by a priest without communicants), requiring clergy to remain unmarried, making binding monastic vows, venerating relics, and so on.⁹ In the *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther takes pains to distinguish those activities, which he calls the “wrong kind of good works,” from the “right kind of good works,” namely nurturing faith and obeying the Ten Commandments in the right ways. For that reason, the treatise is for the most part a guide to how the Ten Commandments are obeyed by Christians whose faith, by which they are saved, leads inevitably to that obedience. To make it clear, Luther defines faith as the right obedience to the first commandment (“You shall have no other gods”) and then demonstrates how that obedience to the first commandment will lead to the right way of obeying the remaining commandments. This main theme appears repeatedly throughout the composition, as if to say: the right kind of good works must follow the right kind of faith, just as the last nine commandments follow the first.

Luther had preached on the Ten Commandments before the Reformation began, and he continued to preach and write about them after a new evangelical (Lutheran) church came into existence. His catechisms (1529) remain the best-known expositions of the commandments, but prior to 1529 Luther had preached and written on them six times: 1516–1517, 1518, 1520, 1522, 1525, and 1528. The sermons of 1528 contained a blunt rebuke that suggested why Luther deemed the Ten Commandments so important: “Remember how much freedom the Gospel has given you! You are not obliged to observe countless holy days; you can spend that time at work. But look how much time you spend drinking and swilling! Now that the mass is reformed, you even snore and sleep in church!” In other words, the Reformation

9. For an exhaustive list of religious practices Luther regarded as for the most part unnecessary in the “true Christian church,” see his *Exhortation to All the Clergy* (1530), written during the Diet of Augsburg (LW 34:54–59; WA vol. 30, pt. 2, 347–56).

brought Christians freedom from the wrong kind of good works, but they were abusing that freedom by not doing the right kind of good works, those taught in the Ten Commandments. The *Treatise on Good Works* had already explained that teaching in detail, but without a reminder it would not have been written.

That nudge came from George Spalatin, Elector Frederick's secretary and court chaplain, to whom later, as quoted above, Luther enthusiastically reported on his progress. One month before Luther's letter, Spalatin had reminded him of a promise to compose a sermon on good works. Luther replied that he did not remember the promise and, besides, had already published so much that nobody would buy it. Two days later, however, he wrote to Spalatin that he did remember and would get down to work. It was the beginning of a very busy twelve months. On January 9, 1520, the legal proceedings against Luther were reopened in Rome, and Pope Leo X had appointed three commissions to prepare a denunciation of the German professor. In June, the denunciation was issued in the form of a papal edict, *Exsurge Domine*, which threatened Luther with excommunication. The papal ban itself came in January of 1521. Meanwhile, Luther was lecturing on the Psalms and composing one important work after another. His rejection of the pope's claim to be the vicar of Christ and rule over the entire church appeared in May of 1520 under the title *The Papacy at Rome*. As the confrontation between Luther and the papal curia approached its climax, a treatise on good works could easily escape notice, especially since it was written in German for laity and not in Latin like the books that unleashed the conflict with Rome.

Judging by the number of reprints and editions, however, the treatise was popular and sold well. The first edition was printed by Melchior Lotter in Wittenberg and appeared in late May or early June of 1520 (frontispiece). Before the end of the year, the treatise had been reprinted eight times, and another six reprints appeared in 1521. That same year, a Latin translation was

published in Leipzig and then reprinted in Wittenberg. It was followed by translations into other languages: English, French, Dutch, and Low German, a dialect that resembled Dutch and was spoken in northern Germany. Some books refer to the treatise as the *Sermon on Good Works*, presumably because it started as a sermon and because the title of at least one edition claimed that it had been preached. The title of the first edition, however, is simply *Von den guten Werken*, best rendered in English as *Good Works* or literally as *Concerning Good Works*. As Luther said, it turned out to be a small book, and therefore I have stuck with the title *Treatise on Good Works*, which is also used by the American edition of Luther's works.

Luther argues that the right kind of good works for a Christian to perform are actions and attitudes through which the Ten Commandments are obeyed. The first commandment is obeyed through faith, which is the first and chief good work that leads to and undergirds all the others. Some commandments, however, are obeyed through more than one kind of good work that proceeds from faith. Luther distinguishes several "works" for each of the second, third, and fourth commandments, but for the rest he specifies only one "work," which he then elaborates on. The result is a certain unclarity about the term "work" or "good work." Sometimes the term is applied to the commandment, but it means not just the command itself but also the ways of obeying or fulfilling it. For example, faith is the work of the first commandment because that commandment is obeyed only through faith; that is, to have no other gods is to put one's trust or faith in the Lord God alone. When Luther is ready to explain the second commandment against taking God's name in vain, he does it under the heading of "the second good work." By that he means the ways through which the second commandment is obeyed, and he identifies four of those ways, each of which he calls a work of the second commandment. In this case, the term "good work" refers both collectively to obeying the second

commandment and specifically to the ways in which that obedience can take place. The double reference of “work” or “good work” also occurs in his explanations of the third and fourth commandments, but after that Luther realizes his sermon has indeed become a book and devotes less space to the last six commandments. His commentary on the last two commandments is compressed into one paragraph.

The headings under which the work or works of each commandment are explained are not uniform. At the fourth commandment, the traditional division of the commandments into two tables leads Luther to call the fourth commandment “the first commandment of the second table of Moses.” In many of Luther’s writings, the paragraphs are numbered consecutively throughout the entire treatise. In this treatise, Luther numbers the paragraphs consecutively through the first two commandments, but after that the numbering of paragraphs starts over within each commandment. His explanations of the first four commandments are much longer than those of the last six, and his treatment of prayer, which is the third work of the third commandment, is a little treatise in itself.

References to biblical passages are translated as Luther cited or phrased them so that readers may compare Luther’s rendering to modern translations of their choice. Luther frequently alluded to or paraphrased a biblical passage without crafting a literal translation of the Hebrew, Greek, or Latin text he had learned. Sometimes he identified the passage only by the name or author of the biblical book; sometimes he gave the number of the chapter, but he never gave the number of a verse or verses within a chapter. The numbering of verses and the citing of passages by chapter *and* verse were not common in the sixteenth century. To insert a chapter and verse reference into Luther’s text gives a false impression of the way he thought and the way in which the text was read. Instead, I have placed biblical references in notes, and when Luther’s own quotation of a verse or passage deviates

significantly from the NRSV, I have preceded the reference with “cf.” (compare). Luther was most familiar with the Vulgate, or Latin version of the Bible, which he read, heard, and sang as a monk but also used as the basis for his lectures on biblical books. The Vulgate, translated mainly by the early Christian theologian Jerome (d. 420) from the Hebrew and Greek texts, numbers the psalms after Psalm 10 differently from the Hebrew Psalter, on which the numbering of modern English texts is based. The reference for the English biblical text is given in the footnotes.

This translation is based primarily on the text in Luther’s German edited by Hans-Ulrich Delius and Rudolf Mau in *Martin Luther Studienausgabe*.¹⁰ That text is taken from the first printed edition that came from the press of Melchior Lotter Jr. in Wittenberg around the end of May 1520. The editors also took into consideration the text of Luther’s manuscript that was discovered in 1892. A comparison of the printed edition with the manuscript revealed a number of variations and alterations, some of which were introduced by the printer. The text of the manuscript can be found in volume 9 of the Weimar edition, pages 226–301, and the text of the print as edited in the year 1888 in volume 6 of the same edition, pages 196–276. In addition, I have consulted the following modern German versions:

Die guten Werke. In *Martin Luther Taschenausgabe*. Vol. 4, *Evangelium und Leben*. Edited by Horst Beintker. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983, 36–131.

Von den guten Werken. Edited by Werner Jetter. In *Martin Luther Ausgewählte Schriften*. Vol. 1, *Aufbruch zur Reformation*. Edited by Karin Bornkamm and Gerhard Ebeling. 2nd ed. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1983, 38–149.

10. *Martin Luther Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, ed. Hans-Ulrich Delius (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1982), 12–88.

On the advice of Spalatin, Luther decided to dedicate the treatise to Duke John, the brother of Luther's first prince, Elector Frederick of Saxony. After Luther was excommunicated and declared an outlaw in the Holy Roman Empire in 1521, Elector Frederick protected Luther and allowed the Reformation to gain a tenuous foothold first in Wittenberg and then throughout his part of Saxony. After four years, however, while the Reformation was still far from established, Elector Frederick died without leaving a child suitable for ruling and Duke John became the new elector. John was firmly committed to Luther and his colleagues and did all he could to ensure the survival and endurance of the Reformation in Saxony and beyond. Besides leading the Saxon delegation at the Diet of Augsburg and signing the Augsburg Confession (1530), Elector John endorsed the inspection and reorganization of parishes in which the evangelical forms of worship and piety recommended by Luther were embedded and secured for the future. Although Luther could not have foreseen it in 1520, he could not have dedicated a more fitting piece to Duke John than the *Treatise on Good Works*.