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THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

1520

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INTRODUCTION

The primary importance of this treatise for the present-day reader of Luther lies in its courageous interpretation of the sacraments. But it is important also for its place in Luther's progressive assault upon the total position of the Romans. In *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*¹ Luther demolished the three walls behind which Rome sat entrenched in her spiritual-temporal power. Now in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* he enters and takes her central stronghold and sanctuary—the sacramental system by which she accompanied and controlled her members from the cradle to the grave. Only then could he set forth, in language of almost lyrical rapture, *The Freedom of a Christian*.²

Luther was thinking of such a treatise long before it was written. In the first of the reformatory treatises of 1520, as they have been called, we read at the close: "I know another little song about Rome, and if their ears itch to hear it, I will sing it for them and I will pitch it in a high key. Dost thou take my meaning, beloved

¹ PE 2, 55–164.

² LW 31, 327–377.

Rome?”³ In this book on the “Babylonian Captivity,” later that year, he fulfils his promise and the “little song” becomes a veritable “prelude.”

Luther intends his book to be only an introduction to his major engagement on this theme of the sacraments. He expects that after this “Prelude” the Romans will gird themselves for battle and attack him in force, but he intends to keep one step ahead of them and lead them on. In fact, he fully expects a papal bull against him threatening him with the most dire consequences if he does not recant, and in the closing paragraphs of this treatise he explains in bitter irony that he intends this document to be the beginning or prelude of his “recantation.” If he is to recant or rechant or unring what he has been singing hitherto, he will not really “change his tune,” but will only “pitch it in a higher key.”

This book is therefore only a skirmish preliminary to the main engagement, or, as a musician might say, a mere prelude introducing the main theme of the suite. It is a promise of more complete and more positive treatises on the sacraments in the future. And this promise was fulfilled. For that reason this “Prelude” is presented first among the treatises in this volume on the sacraments.

The theme that is presented by the Prelude Luther calls “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church.” The reference is clear from the contents of the document: just as the Jews were carried away from Jerusalem into captivity under the tyranny of the Babylonian Empire, so in Europe the Christians have been carried away from the Scriptures and made subject to the tyranny of the papacy. This tyranny has been exercised by the misuse of the sacraments, chiefly the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

After Luther had promised in his first reformatory treatise of 1520 that he would “sing another little song about Rome if their ears itch to hear it,” he found that some ears were itching to hear the new song. This was brought home to him especially by two writings. One of these appeared in the summer of 1520; the other had been published the previous autumn but had not reached Wittenberg until some months later. The first came from the pen of Augustinus Alveld, that “celebrated Romanist of Leipzig,” against whom Luther had fulminated in *The Papacy at Rome*, promising further disclosures if “Alveld came again.” He did come again, this time with a *Tractatus de communione sub utraque specie* [*Treatise Concerning Communion in Both Kinds*]. It was dedicated June 23, 1520. “The Leipzig ass has set up a fresh braying against me, full of blasphemies”; thus Luther describes it in a letter to Spalatin, July 22, 1520.

³ PE 2, 164.

The other work was the anonymous tract of a “certain Italian friar of Cremona,” who has only recently been identified as Isidoro Isolani, a Dominican hailing from Milan, who taught theology in various Italian cities, wrote a number of controversial works, and died in 1528. The title of the tract is *Revocatio Martini Lutheri Augustiniani ad sanctam sedem* [*The Recantation of the Augustinian Martin Luther before the Holy See*]. Its date is November 22, 1519, at Cremona. It begins and ends with a letter, and one paragraph from each of these is translated in Preserved Smith, *Luther’s Correspondence* (Philadelphia, 1913), Vol. I, No. 199.

These two writings may be regarded as the immediate occasion for the writing of *The Babylonian Captivity*, but the *Captivity* is no sense a direct reply to either of them. “I will not reply to Alveld,” Luther writes on August 5 to Spalatin, “but he will be the occasion of my publishing something by which the vipers will be more irritated than ever.”⁴ Indeed, he had promised some such work more than half a year before, in a letter to Spalatin of December 18, 1519: “There is no reason why you or anyone else should expect from me a treatise on the sacraments [besides baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and penance] until I am taught by what text I can prove that they are sacraments. I regard none of the others as a sacrament, for there is no sacrament except where there is a direct divine promise, exercising our faith. We can have no intercourse with God except by the word of Him promising, and by the faith of man receiving. At another time you shall hear more about their fables of the seven sacraments.”⁵

Thus the Prelude grows under his hand and assumes the form of an elaborate examination of the whole sacramental system of the church. He makes short work of his two opponents, and after a few pages of delicious irony, of which Erasmus was suspected in some quarters of being the author, he turns his back on them and addresses himself to a positive and constructive treatment of the larger theme, lenient toward all nonessentials, but inexorable toward everything truly essential, that is, scriptural.

Luther discusses each one of the seven sacraments of the Roman church, but devotes nearly half of the book to the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. The worst tyranny of the papacy he finds in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and to this he gives his chief attention. The first captivity is the withholding of the cup from the laity; the second is found in the doctrine of transubstantiation; and the third is the sacrifice of the mass. The Sacrament of the Altar is not a magical device by which

⁴ Smith, *op. cit.*, No. 283.

⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 206.

the priest brings God down from heaven but God's own revelation of himself where he is. In his discussion of Baptism Luther repudiates monasticism and insists that no vow should ever be taken beyond the baptismal vow.

The other five ceremonies he rejects as sacraments. Penance he would retain in purified form, but not as a sacrament, because it lacks a visible sign appointed by God; however, he strongly rejects priestly absolution. Everywhere he repudiates the authority of the church to institute new means of grace or new promises of mercy, and everywhere he bases upon the Holy Scriptures his general conception of a sacrament and his understanding of the individual sacraments.

Passage after passage, often whole pages, from the *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*,⁶ *A Treatise on Baptism*,⁷ *A Discussion of Confession*,⁸ *A Treatise on the New Testament that is the Holy Mass*⁹ and *A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament*¹⁰ are transferred bodily to this new and definitive work, and find in it the goal toward which they had been unconsciously tending.

The *Captivity* was written in Latin because it is a theological treatise and was not intended for the rank and file of the Christian congregation. In this respect the treatise stands in contrast with the other five treatises in this volume on the sacraments, all of which were written in German and were intended for the individual Christian, whether layman or theologian.

All in all, the Prelude was a deadly dagger aimed at the very heart of sacramentalism and clericalism and monasticism. It was the most devastating assault Luther had yet undertaken against Roman teaching and practice. It marked Luther's final and irrevocable break with the church of Rome. There is special significance in the fact that in the same letter to Spalatin (October 3) in which he mentions the arrival of Eck in Leipzig armed with the papal bull, he also announces the publication of his book on the captivity of the church for the following Saturday (October 6).¹¹

Both sides of the controversy took the book very seriously. In ducal Saxony it was rigorously suppressed. Before the imperial council at Worms, the middle of December, 1520, and again at the imperial diet the following February, the papal nuncio Aleander bitterly assailed the *Captivity* as completely blasphemous because

⁶ LW 31, 83–252.

⁷ PE 1, 56–71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81–101.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 294–326.

¹⁰ PE 2, 9–31.

¹¹ Smith, *op. cit.*, No. 303.

it questioned the authority of the pope. John Glapion, the father confessor of Charles V, declared that it shocked him from head to foot. Erasmus now saw that his efforts to restore peace in the church would be futile: "The breach is irreparable." The University of Paris promptly condemned the document. One of Luther's most bitter enemies, Thomas Murner, translated it into German, confident that it would expose Luther to the rank and file of the people as a radical heretic and dangerous foe of the church. Of special significance was the action of Henry VIII of England. Not content with ordering Luther's writings to be publicly burned in London, he also turned theologian and wrote a book of 78 quarto pages dedicated to the pope, denouncing Luther and defending the Catholic positions on the sacraments. Henry's book so pleased the pope that he issued a special bull declaring that it was written with the help of the Holy Spirit, granting an indulgence of ten years to everyone who would read it, and bestowing upon Henry and his successors the title "Defender of the Faith."

On the other hand, the *Captivity* cleared the atmosphere for many thoughtful people and brought Luther not a few new friends. The most outstanding example of this was John Bugenhagen, who had previously regarded Luther as a reckless heretic, but on reading through the *Captivity* was completely converted to the cause of the Reformation and became one of Luther's ablest co-workers in the movement.

Julius Köstlin, probably the most thorough among modern analysts of Luther's theological development, says of the treatise: "The whole treatment of the subject is earnest and dignified. It is based upon biblical principles and shows thorough insight into the meaning of the Bible. At the same time it shows thorough acquaintance with the positions of the opponents and uses a dialectic that is a match for all the arts of the scholastics. Among all the scientific works of Luther this one stands at the top, but it also presents with clarity and warmth the simple religious interest of the Christian soul. It is sharp in its attitude toward the errors and tyranny of Rome but conservative toward the past and considerate toward such external practices as cannot be abrogated at once without injury to human consciences."

This is the fourth published translation of this treatise into English. The first was made by Wace and Buchheim (London, 1896). The second was by A. T. W. Steinhäuser and is included in the second volume of the Philadelphia edition of Luther's works (1915). The third came from the facile pen of Bertram Lee Woolf (*Reformation Writings of Martin Luther: Vol. I, The Basis of the Protestant Reformation*) and was published by the Lutterworth Press of London in 1952.

This revision is based on Steinhäuser's translation, but in every word there has been careful comparison with the original text and with the other English translations. The result is in some measure a new translation. The English of the Steinhäuser text has been revised in order to bring it into accord with present-day usage. Effort has been made also to conform a bit more closely to Luther's words. Some changes have been made in the interest of greater readability. We have sought to limit the use of intolerably long sentences. Also, there is more frequent paragraphing. The quotations from the Bible have been changed to the Revised Standard Version, except in the few instances where the context requires the King James Version or the Vulgate. Several paragraphs in the original that were omitted by Steinhäuser have been included here. The footnotes in Steinhäuser have, for the most part, been reproduced here, and they have been supplemented a bit.

The original Latin text of the treatise is in *WA* 6, 497–573.

THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

A PRELUDE OF MARTIN LUTHER ON THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

Jesus

Martin Luther, Augustinian, to his friend, Hermann Tulich,¹ greeting.

Whether I wish it or not, I am compelled to become more learned every day, with so many and such able masters eagerly driving me on and making me work. Some two years ago I wrote on indulgences, but in such a way that I now deeply regret having published that little book.² At that time I still clung with a mighty superstition to the tyranny of Rome, and so I held that indulgences should not be altogether rejected, seeing that they were approved by the common consent of so many. No wonder, for at the time I was still engaged singlehanded in this Sisyphean

¹ Tulich was born at Steinheim, near Paderborn, in Westphalia; graduated from Wittenberg (A.B., 1511); was a proofreader in Melchior Lotter's printing-house at Leipzig. He returned to Wittenberg in 1519 and received the doctorate in 1520; became professor of poetry at the university; rector of the same, 1525. He was a staunch supporter of Luther; rector of the school at Lüneberg from 1532 until his death in 1540.

² Probably the Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses (1518). *LW* 31, 83–252.

task. Afterwards, thanks to Sylvester,³ and aided by those friars who so strenuously defended indulgences, I saw that they were nothing but impostures of the Roman flatterers, by which they rob men of their money and their faith in God. Would that I could prevail upon the booksellers and persuade all who have read them to burn the whole of my booklets on indulgences, and instead of all that I have written on this subject adopt this proposition: Indulgences are Wicked Devices of the Flatterers of Rome.

Next, Eck and Emser⁴ and their fellow-conspirators undertook to instruct me concerning the primacy of the pope. Here too, not to prove ungrateful to such learned men, I acknowledge that I have profited much from their labors. For while I denied the divine authority of the papacy, I still admitted its human authority.⁵ But after hearing and reading the super-subtle subtleties of these coxcombs,⁶ with which they so adroitly prop up their idol (for my mind is not altogether unteachable in these matters), I now know for certain that the papacy is the kingdom of Babylon and the power of Nimrod, the mighty hunter [Gen. 10:8–9]. Once more, therefore, that all may turn out to my friends' advantage, I beg both the booksellers and my readers that after burning what I have published on this subject they hold to this proposition: The Papacy Is the Grand Hunting of the Bishop of Rome. This is proved by the arguments of Eck, Emser, and the Leipzig lecturer on the Scriptures.⁷

[Communion in Both Kinds]

Now they are making a game of schooling me concerning communion in both kinds and other weighty subjects: here I must take pains lest I listen in vain to these

³ Sylvester Prierias (more properly called Mazzolini), from Prierio in Piedmont 1456–1523), was a prior of the Dominicans. He became Grand Inquisitor and Censor of Books in 1515. He and others of the order (e.g., Tetzel and Hochstraten) had written against Luther.

⁴ Johann Eck (properly Maier) from Eck in the Allgäu (1486–1543), had become professor at Ingolstadt in 1510. His criticism of the Ninety-five Theses in his *Obelisci*, to which Luther replied with the *Asterisci* (WA 1, 281–314; *St. L.* 18, 536–589), culminated in their Leipzig disputation in 1519. Jerome Emser (1477–1527) had been a humanist professor at Erfurt during Luther's student days, and was later secretary to Duke George of Saxony in Dresden. Luther is referring to the treatises both men published against him as a consequence of the disputation.

⁵ *Resolutio Lutheriana super propositione sua decima tertia de porestate papae (per autorent locupletata)* (1519). WA 2, 180–240.

⁶ *Trossulorum*, originally a designation for Roman knights who had conquered the city Trossulum, later came to have the derogatory sense of a fop, someone who pretends to rank and authority. *St. L.* 19, 6 n. 1.

⁷ Augustinus Alveld, a Franciscan. This reference by Luther is his chief claim to fame. Cf. the Introduction.

“eminent teachers”⁸ of mine. A certain Italian friar of Cremona has written a “Recantation of Martin Luther before the Holy See,”⁹ which is not that I revoke anything, as the words declare, but that he revokes me. This is the kind of Latin the Italians are beginning to write nowadays. Another friar, a German of Leipzig, that same lecturer, as you know, on the whole canon of Scripture [Alveld] has written against me concerning the sacrament in both kinds and is about to perform, as I understand, still greater and more marvelous things. The Italian [Isolani] was canny enough to conceal his name, fearing perhaps the fate of Cajetan¹⁰ and Sylvester. The man of Leipzig, on the other hand, as becomes a fierce and vigorous German, boasts on his ample title page of his name, his life, his sanctity, his learning, his office, his fame, his honor, almost his very clogs.¹¹ From him I shall doubtless learn a great deal, since he writes his dedicatory epistle to the Son of God himself: so familiar are these saints with Christ who reigns in heaven! Here it seems three magpies are addressing me, the first in good Latin, the second in better Greek, the third in purest Hebrew. What do you think, my dear Hermann, I should do, but prick up my ears? The matter is being dealt with at Leipzig by the “Observance” of the Holy Cross.¹²

Fool that I was, I had hitherto thought that it would be well if a general council were to decide that the sacrament should be administered to the laity in both kinds.¹³ This view our more than learned friar would correct, declaring that neither Christ nor the apostles had either commanded or advised that both kinds be administered to the laity; it was therefore left to the judgment of the church what to do or not to do in this matter, and the church must be obeyed. These are his words.

You will perhaps ask, what madness has entered into the man, or against whom is he writing? For I have not condemned the use of one kind, but have left the decision about the use of both kinds to the judgment of the church. This is the very

⁸ *Cratippos*. Cratippus, a peripatetic philosopher of Mytilene, had taught Cicero’s son at Athens and received the rights of Roman citizenship through the orator’s efforts. In addition to instructing the youth of Athens, he wrote on divination and the interpretation of dreams.

⁹ *Revocatio Martini Luthert Augustiniani ad sanctam sedem* by Isidoro Isolani. Cf. the Introduction. Cf. WA 6, 486–487.

¹⁰ Thomas Cajetan (1469–1534), Italian cardinal, general of the Dominican order and foremost authority on Thomistic theology, found himself unequal to the task of testing and refuting Luther at Augsburg. Cf. Proceedings at Augsburg (1518). LW 31, 253–292.

¹¹ The title page of Alveld’s treatise contained twenty-six lines. Luther’s *Calopodia* (perhaps originally intended as *calcipodium*) may have been a reference to the wooden-soled sandals worn by Alveld’s order.

¹² Concerning Alveld’s lengthy title and his peculiar spelling, IHSVH, for Jesus, which he tried to justify by arguments involving an admixture of the three languages, cf. WA 8, 485. He was a member of the stricter Observantine Franciscans, at that time separate from the Conventuals.

¹³ *A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament* (1519). PE 2, 9–10.

thing he attempts to assert, in order to attack me with this same argument. My answer is that this sort of argument is common to all who write against Luther: either they assert the very things they assail, or they set up a man of straw whom they may attack. This is the way of Sylvester and Eck and Emser, and of the men of Cologne and Louvain,¹⁴ and if this friar had not been one of their kind, he would never have written against Luther.

This man turned out to be more fortunate than his fellows, however, for in his effort to prove that the use of both kinds was neither commanded nor advised, but left to the judgment of the church, he brings forward the Scriptures to prove that the use of one kind for the laity was ordained by the command of Christ. So it is true, according to this new interpreter of the Scriptures, that the use of one kind was not commanded and at the same time was commanded by Christ! This novel kind of argument is, as you know, the one which these dialecticians of Leipzig are especially fond of using. Does not Emser profess to speak fairly of me in his earlier book,¹⁵ and then, after I had convicted him of the foulest envy and shameful lies, confess, when about to confute me in his later book,¹⁶ that both were true, and that he has written in both a friendly and an unfriendly spirit? A fine fellow, indeed, as you know!

But listen to our distinguished distinguisher of “kinds,”¹⁷ to whom the decision of the church and the command of Christ are the same thing, and again the command of Christ and no command of Christ are the same thing. With such dexterity he proves that only one kind should be given to the laity, by the command of Christ, that is, by the decision of the church. He puts it in capital letters, thus: The Infallible Foundation. Then he treats John 6[:35, 41] with incredible wisdom, where Christ speaks of the bread of heaven and the bread of life, which is He Himself. The most learned fellow not only refers these words to the Sacrament of the Altar, but because Christ says: “I am the living bread” [John 6:51] and not “I am the living cup,” he actually concludes that we have in this passage the institution of the sacrament in only one kind for the laity. But here follow the words: “For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed” [John 6:55] and, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood” [John 6:53]. When it dawned upon the good friar that these words speak undeniably for both kinds and against

¹⁴ The universities of Cologne and Louvain had ratified Eck’s “victory” over Luther at Leipzig.

¹⁵ *De disputatione Lipstcenst* (1519).

¹⁶ *A venatione Luteriana Aegocerotis Assertio* (1519).

¹⁷ *speciosum speciatorem*. In this play on words, Luther coined the second word to hint at the *species* or elements in the sacrament, while at the same time connoting ironically someone who tries to make his case appear plausible and favorable. *St. L.* 19, 9 n. 1.

one kind—presto! how happily and learnedly he slips out of the quandary by asserting that in these words Christ means to say only that whoever receives the sacrament in one kind receives therein both flesh and blood. This he lays down as his “infallible foundation” of a structure so worthy of the holy and heavenly “Observance.”

I pray you now to learn along with me from this that in John 6 Christ commands the administration of the sacrament in one kind, yet in such a way that his commanding means leaving it to the decision of the church; and further that Christ is speaking in this same chapter only of the laity and not of the priests. For to the latter the living bread of heaven, that is the sacrament in one kind, does not belong, but perhaps the bread of death from hell! But what is to be done with the deacons and subdeacons,¹⁸ who are neither laymen nor priests? According to this distinguished writer they ought to use neither the one kind nor both kinds! You see, my dear Tulich, what a novel and “Observant” method of treating Scripture this is.

But learn this too: In John 6 Christ is speaking of the Sacrament of the Altar, although he himself teaches us that he is speaking of faith in the incarnate Word, for he says: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” [John 6:29]. But we’ll have to give him credit: this Leipzig professor of the Bible can prove anything he pleases from any passage of Scripture he pleases. For he is an Anaxagorian,¹⁹ or rather an Aristotelian,²⁰ theologian for whom nouns and verbs when interchanged mean the same thing and any thing. Throughout the whole of his book he so fits together the testimony of the Scriptures that if he set out to prove that Christ is in the sacrament he would not hesitate to begin thus: “The lesson is from the book of the Revelation of St. John the Apostle.” All his quotations are as apt as this one would be, and the wiseacre imagines he is adorning his drivel with the multitude of his quotations. The rest I will pass over, lest I smother you with the filth of this vile smelling cloaca.

In conclusion, he brings forward 1 Cor. 11[:23], where Paul says that he received from the Lord and delivered to the Corinthians the use of both the bread and the cup. Here again our distinguisher of kinds, treating the Scriptures with his usual

¹⁸ These are the sixth and fifth of the seven grades through which clergy advanced to the priesthood. Some then-contemporary Catholic theologians (e.g., Gajetan and Durandus) doubted whether the Sacrament of Order was actually received by deacons. They were later overruled by the Council of Trent which decided that it was. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (15 vols.), IV, 650.

¹⁹ Anaxagoras (circa 500–428 B.C.), a Greek philosopher, was accused of atheism by his contemporaries because of his new interpretation of the myths of the gods.

²⁰ For Luther’s opinion of Aristotle, cf. *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*. PE 2, 146–147.

brilliance, teaches that Paul permitted, but did not deliver, the use of both kinds. Do you ask where he gets his proof? Out of his own head, as he did in the case of John 6. For it does not behoove this lecturer to give a reason for his assertions; he belongs to that order whose members prove and teach everything by their visions.²¹ Accordingly we are here taught that in this passage the apostle did not write to the whole Corinthian congregation, but to the laity alone—and therefore gave no “permission” at all to the clergy, but deprived them of the sacrament altogether! Further, according to a new kind of grammar, “I have received from the Lord” means the same as “it is permitted by the Lord,” and “I have delivered to you” is the same as “I have permitted to you.” I pray you, mark this well. For by this method not only the church, but any worthless fellow, will be at liberty, according to this master, to turn all the universal commands, institutions, and ordinances of Christ and the apostles into mere “permission.”

I perceive therefore that this man is driven by a messenger of Satan [2 Cor. 12:7] and that he and his partners are seeking to make a name for themselves in the world through me, as men who are worthy to cross swords with Luther. But their hopes shall be dashed. In my contempt for them I shall never even mention their names, but content myself with this one reply to all their books. If they are worthy of it, I pray that Christ in his mercy may bring them back to a sound mind. If they are not worthy, I pray that they may never leave off writing such books, and that the enemies of truth may never deserve to read any others. There is a true and popular saying:

“This I know for certain—whenever I fight with filth, Victor or vanquished, I am sure to be defiled.”²²

And since I see that they have an abundance of leisure and writing paper, I shall furnish them with ample matter to write about. For I shall keep ahead of them, so that while they are triumphantly celebrating a glorious victory over one of my heresies (as it seems to them), I shall meanwhile be devising a new one. I too am desirous of seeing these illustrious leaders in battle decorated with many honors. Therefore, while they murmur that I approve of communion in both kinds, and are most happily engrossed with this important and worthy subject, I shall go one step further and undertake to show that all who deny communion in both kinds to the laity are wicked men. To do this more conveniently I shall compose *a prelude on*

²¹ The Franciscans. Perhaps an allusion to the seraphic vision of St. Francis.

²² The saying was also used later (1530) in the explanation to the fable about the ass and the lion in Luther’s little book on Aesop’s Fables, which included his translation of 14 of the fables. *Luthers Werke*, ed. Arnold E. Berger, III, 113. Cf. *MA*³ 2, 405–406.

*the captivity of the Roman church.*²³ In due time, when the most learned papists have disposed of this book, I shall offer more.

I take this course, lest any pious reader who may chance upon this book, should be offended by the filthy matter with which I deal and should justly complain that he finds nothing in it which cultivates or instructs his mind or which furnishes any food for learned reflection. For you know how impatient my friends are that I waste my time on the sordid fictions of these men. They say that the mere reading of them is ample confutation; they look for better things from me, which Satan seeks to hinder through these men. I have finally resolved to follow the advice of my friends and to leave to those hornets the business of wrangling and hurling invectives.

Of that Italian friar of Cremona [Isolani] I shall say nothing. He is an unlearned man and a simpleton, who attempts with a few rhetorical passages to recall me to the Holy See, from which I am not as yet aware of having departed, nor has anyone proved that I have. His chief argument in those silly passages²⁴ is that I ought to be moved by my monastic vows and by the fact that the empire has been transferred to the Germans.²⁵ Thus he does not seem to have wanted to write my “recantation” so much as the praise of the French people and the Roman pontiff. Let him attest his allegiance in this little book, such as it is. He does not deserve to be harshly treated, for he seems to have been prompted by no malice; nor does he deserve to be learnedly refuted, since all his chatter is sheer ignorance and inexperience.

[Central Premise]

To begin with, I must deny that there are seven sacraments, and for the present²⁶ maintain that there are but three: baptism, penance, and the bread.²⁷ All three have been subjected to a miserable captivity by the Roman curia, and the church has been robbed of all her liberty. Yet, if I were to speak according to the usage of the

²³ We have retained the italics of the original for the most part where they serve the purpose of emphasis, or of pointing up the organizational structure of the treatise, or both.

²⁴ Cf. p. 13 n. 9.

²⁵ Cf. *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, PE 2, 153 n. 2, and 153–158. Luther is probably referring to the fact that German kings, since Charles the Great in 800 A.D., had been called Roman Emperors after receiving papal coronation. Perhaps, though, he is referring to the election of the half-German Charles V on May 28, 1519, despite the papal agitation in favor of a French king. *Luther's Werke für das christliche Haus*, ed. Buchwald, *et al.* (Braunschweig, 1890) [hereinafter cited as Buchwald], II, 386 n. 1. Cf. LW 35, 406, n. 88.

²⁶ The “present” did not last very long as far as penance was concerned. Cf. p. 124.

²⁷ Luther uses the commonly accepted designation for the Lord's Supper, a name derived from the fact that the wine was being withheld from the laity.

Scriptures, I should have only one single sacrament,²⁸ but with three sacramental signs, of which I shall treat more fully at the proper time.

[The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper]

Now concerning the sacrament of the bread first of all.²⁹

I shall tell you now what progress I have made as a result of my studies on the administration of this sacrament. For at the time when I was publishing my treatise on the Eucharist,³⁰ I adhered to the common custom and did not concern myself at all with the question of whether the pope was right or wrong. But now that I have been challenged and attacked, nay, forcibly thrust into this arena, I shall freely speak my mind, whether all the papists laugh or weep together.

In the first place the sixth chapter of John must be entirely excluded from this discussion, since it does not refer to the sacrament in a single syllable. Not only because the sacrament was not yet instituted, but even more because the passage itself and the sentences following plainly show, as I have already stated,³¹ that Christ is speaking of faith in the incarnate Word. For he says: "My words are spirit and life" [John 6:63], which shows that he was speaking of a spiritual eating, by which he who eats has life; whereas the Jews understood him to mean a bodily eating and therefore disputed with him. But no eating can give life except that which is by faith, for that is truly a spiritual and living eating. As Augustine³² also says: "Why do you make ready your teeth and your stomach? Believe, and you have eaten."³³ For the sacramental eating does not give life, since many eat unworthily. Hence Christ cannot be understood in this passage to be speaking about the sacrament.

Some persons, to be sure, have misapplied these words in their teaching concerning the sacrament, as in the decretal *Dudum*³⁴ and many others. But it is one thing to misapply the Scriptures and another to understand them in their proper sense. Otherwise, if in this passage Christ were enjoining a sacramental eating,

²⁸ In 1 Tim. 3:16 Christ himself is called the *sacramentum* (Vulgate). Cf. *PE* 2, 177 n. 5: Julius Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther*, trans. Charles E. Hay. (Philadelphia, 1897), I, 403; and below, pp. 93–94.

²⁹ Luther inserted this sentence instead of a subtitle as in the case of the other sacraments to follow.

³⁰ *A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament* (1519). *PE* 2, 9–31.

³¹ Cf. p. 15.

³² St. Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo in North Africa.

³³ *Sermo* 112, cap. 5. Migne 38, 645.

³⁴ Luther's reference to the Decretals is correct. His citation of *Dudum* is wrong. It should have been *Quum Marthae, Decretalium Gregorii IX*, lib. iii, tit. XLI: *de celebratione missarum, et sacramento eucharistiae et divinis officiis*, cap. 6. Cf. the text in *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. Aemillus Friedberg (Graz, 1955), II, col. 638.

when he says: “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you” [John 6:53], he would be condemning all infants, all the sick, and all those absent or in any way hindered from the sacramental eating, however strong their faith might be. Thus Augustine, in his *Contra Julianum*,³⁵ Book II, proves from Innocent³⁶ that even infants eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ without the sacrament; that is, they partake of them through the faith of the church. Let this then be accepted as proved: John 6 does not belong here. For this reason I have written elsewhere³⁷ that the Bohemians³⁸ cannot properly rely on this passage in support of the sacrament in both kinds.

Now there are two passages that do bear very clearly upon this matter: the Gospel narratives of the Lord’s Supper and Paul in 1 Cor. 11. Let us examine these. Matthew [26], Mark [14], and Luke [22] agree that Christ gave the whole sacrament to all his disciples. That Paul delivered both kinds is so certain that no one has ever had the temerity to say otherwise. Add to this that Matt. [26:27] reports that Christ did not say of the bread, “eat of it, all of you,” but of the cup, “drink of it, all of you.” Mark [14:23] likewise does not say, “they all ate of it,” but “they all drank of it.” Both attach the note of universality to the cup, not to the bread, as though the Spirit foresaw this schism, by which some would be forbidden to partake of the cup, which Christ desired should be common to all. How furiously, do you suppose, would they rave against us, if they had found the word “all” attached to the bread instead of to the cup? They would certainly leave us no loophole to escape. They would cry out and brand us as heretics and damn us as schismatics. But now, when the Scripture is on our side and against them, they will not allow themselves to be bound by any force of logic. Men of the most free will³⁹ they are, even in the things that are God’s; they change and change again, and throw everything into confusion.

But imagine me standing over against them and interrogating my lords, the papists. In the Lord’s Supper, the whole sacrament, or communion in both kinds, is given either to the priests alone or else it is at the same time given to the laity. If it is given only to the priests (as they would have it), then it is not right to give it to the laity in either kind. For it must not be given rashly to any to whom Christ did

³⁵ *Contra Julianum* ii, cap. 36. Migne 44, 699–700.

³⁶ Innocent I, bishop of Rome 402–417, energetic opponent of Pelagius and other heretics.

³⁷ *Verklärung etlicher Artikel in einem Sermon rom heiligen Sakrament* (1520). WA 6, 80.

³⁸ Followers of the martyred John Huss (1369–1415); permitted by compromise agreements with Rome to administer Communion in both kinds.

³⁹ For Luther’s denial of his opponents’ doctrine of the complete freedom of the will, cf. his *De servo arbitrio* (1525), WA 18, 600–787, *St. L.* 18, 1688–1969; *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, New Jersey, 1957).

not give it when he instituted the sacrament. Otherwise, if we permit one institution of Christ to be changed, we make all of his laws invalid, and any man may make bold to say that he is not bound by any other law or institution of Christ. For a single exception, especially in the Scriptures, invalidates the whole. But if it is given also to the laity, it inevitably follows that it ought not to be withheld from them in either form. And if any do withhold it from them when they ask for it they are acting impiously and contrary to the act, example, and institution of Christ.

I acknowledge that I am conquered by this argument, which to me is irrefutable. I have neither read nor heard nor found anything to say against it. For here the word and example of Christ stand unshaken when he says, not by way of permission, but of command: “Drink of it, all of you” [Matt. 26:27]. For if all are to drink of it, and the words cannot be understood as addressed to the priests alone, then it is certainly an impious act to withhold the cup from the laymen when they desire it, even though an angel from heaven [Gal. 1:8] were to do it. For when they say that the distribution of both kinds is left to the decision of the church, they make this assertion without reason and put it forth without authority. It can be ignored just as readily as it can be proved. It is of no avail against an opponent who confronts us with the word and work of Christ; he must be refuted with the word of Christ, but this we⁴⁰ do not possess.

If, however, either kind may be withheld from the laity, then with equal right and reason a part of baptism or penance might also be taken away from them by this same authority of the church. Therefore, just as baptism and absolution must be administered in their entirety, so the sacrament of the bread must be given in its entirety to all laymen, if they desire it. I am much amazed, however, by their assertion that the priests may never receive only one kind in the mass under pain of mortal sin; and that for no other reason except (as they unanimously say) that the two kinds constitute one complete sacrament, which may not be divided. I ask them, therefore, to tell me why it is lawful to divide it in the case of the laity, and why they are the only ones to whom the entire sacrament is not given? Do they not acknowledge, by their own testimony, either that both kinds are to be given to the laity or that the sacrament is not valid when only one kind is given to them? How can it be that the sacrament in one kind is not complete in the case of the priests, yet in the case of the laity it is complete? Why do they flaunt the authority of the church and the power of the pope in my face? These do not annul the words of God and the testimony of the truth.

⁴⁰ Here Luther identifies himself with the erring priesthood.

It follows, further, that if the church can withhold from the laity one kind, the wine, it can also withhold from them the other, the bread. It could therefore withhold the entire Sacrament of the Altar from the laity and completely annul Christ's institution as far as they are concerned. By what authority, I ask. If the church cannot withhold the bread, or both kinds, neither can it withhold the wine. This cannot possibly be gainsaid; for the church's power must be the same over either kind as it is over both kinds, and if it has no power over both kinds, it has none over either kind. I am curious to hear what the flatterers of Rome will have to say to this.

But what carries most weight with me, however, and is quite decisive for me is that Christ says: "This is my blood, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."⁴¹ Here you see very clearly that the blood is given to all those for whose sins it was poured out. But who will dare to say that it was not poured out for the laity? And do you not see whom he addresses when he gives the cup? Does he not give it to all? Does he not say that it is poured out for all? "For you" [Luke 22:20], he says—let this refer to the priests. "And for many" [Matt. 26:28], however, cannot possibly refer to the priests. Yet he says: "Drink of it, all of you" [Matt. 26:27]. I too could easily trifle here and with my words make a mockery of Christ's words, as my dear trifler⁴² does. But those who rely on the Scriptures in opposing us must be refuted by the Scriptures.

This is what has prevented me from condemning the Bohemians,⁴³ who, whether they are wicked men or good, certainly have the word and act of Christ on their side, while we⁴⁴ have neither, but only that inane remark of men: "The church has so ordained." It was not the church which ordained these things, but the tyrants of the churches, without the consent of the church, which is the people of God.

But now I ask, where is the necessity, where is the religious duty, where is the practical use of denying both kinds, that is, the visible sign, to the laity, when everyone concedes to them the grace of the sacrament⁴⁵ without the sign? If they concede the grace, which is the greater, why not the sign, which is the lesser? For in every sacrament the sign as such is incomparably less than the thing signified. What

⁴¹ A harmony of Matt. 26:28 and Luke 22:20 in the Vulgate, whereby "for you" and "for many" are conjoined in the traditional manner of the canon of the mass. Cf. p. 37 n. 84, and p. 319.

⁴² Alveld, cf. above, p. 12 n. 7.

⁴³ Cf. p. 20 n. 38.

⁴⁴ Cf. p. 21 n. 41.

⁴⁵ The *res sacramenti*. The sacrament consisted of two parts—the *sacramentum*, or external sign, and the *res sacramenti*, or the thing signified, the sacramental grace.

then, I ask, is to prevent them from conceding the lesser, when they concede the greater? Unless indeed, as it seems to me, it has come about by the permission of an angry God in order to give occasion for a schism in the church, to bring home to us how, having long ago lost the grace of the sacrament, we contend for the sign, which is the lesser, against that which is the most important and the chief thing; just as some men for the sake of ceremonies contend against love. This monstrous perversion seems to date from the time when we began to rage against Christian love for the sake of the riches of this world. Thus God would show us, by this terrible sign, how we esteem signs more than the things they signify. How preposterous it would be to admit that the faith of baptism is granted to the candidate for baptism, and yet to deny him the sign of this very faith, namely, the water!

Finally, Paul stands invincible and stops the mouth of everyone when he says in 1 Cor. 11[:23]: “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.” He does not say: “I permitted to you,” as this friar of ours lyingly asserts out of his own head.⁴⁶ Nor is it true that Paul delivered both kinds on account of the contention among the Corinthians. In the first place, the text shows that their contention was not about the reception of both kinds, but about the contempt and envy between rich and poor. The text clearly states: “One is hungry and another is drunk, and you humiliate those who have nothing” [1 Cor. 11:21–22]. Moreover, Paul is not speaking of the time when he first delivered the sacrament to them, for he does not say “I receive from the Lord” and “I give to you,” but “I received” and “I delivered”—namely, when he first began to preach among them, a long while before this contention. This shows that he delivered both kinds to them, for “delivered” means the same as “commanded,” for elsewhere he uses the word in this sense. Consequently there is nothing in the friar’s fuming about permission; he has raked it together without Scripture, without reason, without sense. His opponents do not ask what he has dreamed, but what the Scriptures decree in the matter, and out of the Scriptures he cannot adduce one jot or tittle in support of his dreams, while they can produce mighty thunderbolts in support of their faith.

Rise up then, you popish flatterers, one and all! Get busy and defend yourselves against the charges of impiety, tyranny, and lèse-majesté against the gospel, and of the crime of slandering your brethren. You decry as heretics those who refuse to contravene such plain and powerful words of Scripture in order to acknowledge the mere dreams of your brains! If any are to be called heretics and schismatics, it is not

⁴⁶ The passage from Alveld is quoted in WA 6, 505 n. 1.

the Bohemians or the Greeks,⁴⁷ for they take their stand upon the Gospels. It is you Romans who are the heretics and godless schismatics, for you presume upon your figments alone against the clear Scriptures of God. Wash yourself of that, men!

But what could be more ridiculous and more worthy of this friar's brains than his saying that the Apostle wrote these words and gave this permission, not to the church universal, but to a particular church, that is, the Corinthian? Where does he get his proof? Out of one storehouse, his own impious head. If the church universal receives, reads, and follows this epistle as written for itself in all other respects, why should it not do the same with this portion also? If we admit that any epistle, or any part of any epistle, of Paul does not apply to the church universal, then the whole authority of Paul falls to the ground. Then the Corinthians will say that what he teaches about faith in the Epistle to the Romans does not apply to them. What greater blasphemy and madness can be imagined than this! God forbid that there should be one jot or tittle in all of Paul which the whole church universal is not bound to follow and keep! The Fathers never held an opinion like this, not even down to these perilous times of which Paul was speaking [2 Tim. 3:1–9] when he foretold that there would be blasphemers and blind, insensate men. This friar is one of them, perhaps even the chief.

However, suppose we grant the truth of this intolerable madness. If Paul gave his permission to a particular church, then, even from your own point of view, the Greeks and Bohemians are in the right, for they are particular churches. Hence it is sufficient that they do not act contrary to Paul, who at least gave permission. Moreover, Paul could not permit anything contrary to Christ's institution. Therefore, O Rome, I cast in your teeth, and in the teeth of all your flatterers, these sayings of Christ and Paul, on behalf of the Greeks and the Bohemians. I defy you to prove that you have been given any authority to change these things by as much as one hair, much less to accuse others of heresy because they disregard your arrogance. It is rather you who deserve to be charged with the crime of godlessness and despotism.

Concerning this point we may read Cyprian,⁴⁸ who alone is strong enough to refute all the Romanists. In the fifth book of his treatise, *On the Lapsed*, he testifies that it was the widespread custom in that church [at Carthage] to administer both

⁴⁷ Greek Church is a common designation for that entire branch of Christendom known as Eastern Orthodoxy, which was split from Western or Latin Christianity in the year 1054. Its theologies and liturgies are written mostly in the Greek language.

⁴⁸ Bishop of Carthage, (249–258), who was beheaded as a martyr for the faith. The treatise was written about 251–252.

kinds to the laity, even to children, indeed, to give the body of the Lord into their hands. And of this he gives many examples. Among other things, he reproveth some of the people as follows: “The sacrilegious man is angered at the priests because he does not immediately receive the body of the Lord with unclean hands, or drink the blood of the Lord with unclean lips.”⁴⁹ He is speaking here, you see, of irreverent laymen who desired to receive the body and the blood from the priests. Do you find anything to snarl at here, wretched flatterer? Will you say that this holy martyr, a doctor of the church endowed with the apostolic spirit, was a heretic, and that he used this permission in a particular church?

In the same place Cyprian narrates an incident that came under his own observation. He describes at length how a deacon was administering the cup to a little⁵⁰ girl, and when she drew away from him he poured the blood of the Lord into her mouth.⁵¹ We read the same of St. Donatus, and how trivially does this wretched flatterer dispose of his broken chalice!⁵² “I read of a broken chalice,” he says, “but I do not read that the blood was administered.”⁵³ No wonder! He that finds what he pleases in the Holy Scriptures will also read what he pleases in the histories. But can the authority of the church be established, or the heretics be refuted, in this way?

But enough on this subject! I did not undertake this work for the purpose of answering one who is not worthy of a reply, but to bring the truth of the matter to light.

I conclude, then, that it is wicked and despotic to deny both kinds to the laity, and that this is not within the power of any angel, much less of any pope or council.

⁴⁹ St. Cyprian, “The Lapsed,” trans. Maurice Bévenot, S. J. (Westminster, Maryland, 1957), p. 31. (Vol. 25 of *Ancient Christian Writers*.)

⁵⁰ *infanti*, a child under the age of seven years. *St. L.* 19, 21 n. 2.

⁵¹ St. Cyprian, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–33.

⁵² Donatus, bishop of Arezzo, whither he had fled during the persecution of Diocletian (303–305); martyred under Julian the Apostate, August 7, 362. In a collection of legendary lives of the saints, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine (*circa* 1230–1298), it is related: “And one day, as Gregory relates in his *Dialogue*, the people were receiving the holy Communion in the Mass, and the deacon was distributing the Blood of Christ, when the pagans pushed him so rudely that he fell, and the holy chalice was shattered. As he and the people were sorely grieved thereat, Donatus gathered the fragments of the chalice, and having prayed, restored it to its former shape.” *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. Granger Bryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York, 1941), Part Two, 433–434.

⁵³ Alvelde quotes the story of the broken cup in order to refute the practice in administration of the sacrament which it implies. He says: “I read of the repairing of the chalice in Gregory, but do not find there the administration of the blood.” Cf. *WA* 6, 506 n. 2.

Nor does the Council of Constance⁵⁴ give me pause, for if its authority is valid, why not that of the Council of Basel as well, which decreed to the contrary that the Bohemians should be permitted to receive the sacrament in both kinds? That decision was reached only after considerable discussion, as the extant records and documents of the Council show. And to this Council the ignorant flatterer refers⁵⁵ in support of his dream; with such wisdom does he handle the whole matter.

[The First Captivity: Withholding the Cup]

The first captivity of this sacrament, therefore, concerns its substance or completeness, which the tyranny of Rome has wrested from us. Not that those who use only one kind sin against Christ, for Christ did not command the use of either kind, but left it to the choice of each individual, when he said: “As often as you do this, do it in remembrance of me” [1 Cor. 11:25]. But they are the sinners, who forbid the giving of both kinds to those who wish to exercise this choice. The fault lies not with the laity, but with the priests. The sacrament does not belong to the priests, but to all men. The priests are not lords, but servants in duty bound to administer both kinds to those who desire them, as often as they desire them. If they wrest this right from the laity and deny it to them by force, they are tyrants; but the laity are without fault, whether they lack one kind or both kinds. In the meantime they must be preserved by their faith and by their desire for the complete sacrament. These same servants are likewise bound to administer baptism and absolution to everyone who seeks them, because he has a right to them; but if they do not administer them, the seeker has the full merit of his faith, while they will be accused before Christ as wicked servants. Thus the holy fathers of old in the desert did not receive the sacrament in any form for many years at a time.⁵⁶

Therefore I do not urge that both kinds be seized upon by force, as if we were bound to this form by a rigorous command, but I instruct men’s consciences so that they may endure the Roman tyranny, knowing well that they have been forcibly deprived of their rightful share in the sacrament because of their own sin. This only do I desire—that no one should justify the tyranny of Rome, as if it were doing right in forbidding one kind to the laity. We ought rather to abhor it, withhold our

⁵⁴ Alvelde had cited the *Decretum Constantiense*, which approved the with-holding of the cup from the laity. Cf. WA 6, 507 n. 1.

⁵⁵ The Council of Constance did sanction withholding of the cup from the laity, and burned John Huss at the stake for disputing it (July 6, 1415). Alvelde, however, was wrong, as Luther says, in citing also the Council of Basel. That Council concluded the *Compactata* of Prague (November 30, 1433), granting to the followers of Huss (the “Bohemians”) the privilege of administering the sacrament in both kinds.

⁵⁶ Cf. *A Treatise Concerning the Ban*, PE 2, 40.

consent, and endure it just as we should do if we were held captive by the Turk and not permitted to use either kind. This is what I meant by saying that it would be a good thing, in my opinion, if this captivity were ended by the decree of a general council,⁵⁷ our Christian liberty restored to us out of the hands of the Roman tyrant, and every one left free to seek and receive this sacrament, just as he is free to receive baptism and penance. But now we are compelled by the same tyranny to receive the one kind year after year, so utterly lost is the liberty which Christ has given us. This is the due reward of our godless ingratitude.

[The Second Captivity: Transubstantiation]

The second captivity of this sacrament is less grievous as far as the conscience is concerned, yet the gravest of dangers threatens the man who would attack it, to say nothing of condemning it. Here I shall be called a Wycliffite⁵⁸ and a heretic by six hundred names. But what of it? Since the Roman bishop has ceased to be a bishop and has become a tyrant, I fear none of his decrees; for I know that it is not within his power, nor that of any general council, to make new articles of faith.

Some time ago, when I was drinking in scholastic theology, the learned Cardinal of Cambrai⁵⁹ gave me food for thought in his comments on the fourth book of the *Sentences*.⁶⁰ He argues with great acumen that to hold that real bread and real wine, and not merely their accidents,⁶¹ are present on the altar, would be much more probable and require fewer superfluous miracles—if only the church had not decreed otherwise. When I learned later what church it was that had decreed this, namely the Thomistic⁶²—that is, the Aristotelian church—I grew bolder, and after

⁵⁷ Cf. above, p. 13 n. 13.

⁵⁸ John Wycliffe (d. 1384), the most prominent English reformer before the Reformation and keenest of medieval critics of the doctrine of transubstantiation, was posthumously condemned as a heretic by the Council of Constance on May 4, 1415. Cf. p. 287 n. 17.

⁵⁹ Pierre d'Ailly (1350–1420), a pupil of Ockham, influenced Luther greatly. He was chairman of that session of the Council of Constance which examined and condemned John Huss in 1415. Luther is referring to d'Ailly's *Questiones quarti libri sententiarum*, quest. 6, E; folio cclxiv a.

⁶⁰ Famous medieval textbook of theology, compiled *circa* 1150 by Peter Lombard (d. 1160), and containing brief statements or “sentences” of the main arguments pro and con with respect to the principal themes in Christian doctrine. The fourth book treats of the sacraments in general.

⁶¹ The qualities which, in medieval thought, were held to adhere to the invisible “substance,” and together with it, form the object. In transubstantiation the “substance” of the bread and wine was changed into the “substance” of Christ's body and blood, while only the “accidents” or “form” of the bread and wine (such as shape, color, and taste) remained.

⁶² The name refers to Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), a Dominican, greatest of the scholastic theologians, still regarded as the foremost doctrinal authority in the Roman Catholic church.

floating in a sea of doubt,⁶³ I at last found rest for my conscience in the above view, namely, that it is real bread and real wine, in which Christ's real flesh and real blood are present in no other way and to no less a degree than the others assert them to be under their accidents. I reached this conclusion because I saw that the opinions of the Thomists, whether approved by pope or by council, remain only opinions, and would not become articles of faith even if an angel from heaven were to decree otherwise [Gal. 1:8]. For what is asserted without the Scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed. But this opinion of Thomas hangs so completely in the air without support of Scripture or reason that it seems to me he knows neither his philosophy nor his logic. For Aristotle speaks of subject and accidents so very differently⁶⁴ from St. Thomas that it seems to me this great man is to be pitied not only for attempting to draw his opinions in matters of faith from Aristotle, but also for attempting to base them upon a man whom he did not understand, thus building an unfortunate superstructure upon an unfortunate foundation.

Therefore I permit every man to hold either of these opinions, as he chooses. My one concern at present is to remove all scruples of conscience, so that no one may fear being called a heretic if he believes that real bread and real wine are present on the altar, and that every one may feel at liberty to ponder, hold, and believe either one view or the other without endangering his salvation. However, I shall now set forth my own view.

In the first place, I do not intend to listen or attach the least importance to those who will cry out that this teaching of mine is Wycliffite, Hussite, heretical, and contrary to the decree of the church. No one will do this except those very persons whom I have convicted of manifold heresies in the matter of indulgences, freedom of the will and the grace of God, good works and sins, etc. If Wycliffe was once a heretic, they are heretics ten times over; and it is a pleasure to be blamed and accused by heretics and perverse sophists, since to please them would be the height of impiety. Besides, the only way in which they can prove their opinions and disprove contrary ones is by saying: "That is Wycliffite, Hussite, heretical!" They carry this feeble argument always on the tip of their tongues, and they have nothing else. If you ask for scriptural proof, they say: "This is our opinion, and the church (that is, we ourselves) has decided thus." To such an extent these men, who are

⁶³ *inter sacrum et saxum*. In his *Adagia*, Erasmus says the phrase is used of those who in their perplexity are carried to the point of grave danger. *CL* 1, 438 n. 29.

⁶⁴ Aristotle held that a subject and its accidents are inseparable; neither can exist apart from the other. Cf. *MA*³ 2, 406.

reprobate concerning the faith [2 Tim. 3:8] and untrustworthy, have the effrontery to set their own fancies before us in the name of the church as articles of faith.

But there are good grounds for my view, and this above all—no violence is to be done to the words of God, whether by man or angel. They are to be retained in their simplest meaning as far as possible. Unless the context manifestly compels it, they are not to be understood apart from their grammatical and proper sense, lest we give our adversaries occasion to make a mockery of all the Scriptures. Thus Origen⁶⁵ was rightly repudiated long ago because, ignoring the grammatical sense, he turned the trees and everything else written concerning Paradise into allegories, from which one could have inferred that trees were not created by God. Even so here, when the Evangelists plainly write that Christ took bread [Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19] and blessed it, and when the Book of Acts and the Apostle Paul in turn call it bread [Acts 2:46; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:23, 26–28], we have to think of real bread and real wine, just as we do of a real cup (for even they do not say that the cup was transubstantiated). Since it is not necessary, therefore, to assume a transubstantiation effected by divine power, it must be regarded as a figment of the human mind, for it rests neither on the Scriptures nor on reason, as we shall see.

Therefore it is an absurd and unheard-of juggling with words to understand “bread” to mean “the form or accidents⁶⁶ of bread,” and “wine” to mean “the form or accidents of wine.” Why do they not also understand all other things to mean their “forms or accidents”? And even if this might be done with all other things, it would still not be right to enfeeble the words of God in this way, and by depriving them of their meaning to cause so much harm.

Moreover, the church kept the true faith for more than twelve hundred years, during which time the holy fathers never, at any time or place, mentioned this transubstantiation (a monstrous word and a monstrous idea), until the pseudo philosophy of Aristotle began to make its inroads into the church in these last three hundred years.⁶⁷ During this time many things have been wrongly defined, as for example, that the divine essence is neither begotten nor begets; that the soul is the

⁶⁵ Origen of Alexandria (*circa* 184–253) whose principles Of allegorical exegesis were the source of many lengthy controversies, beginning as early as the fourth century.

⁶⁶ cf. p. 29 n. 61.

⁶⁷ Luther is referring to the official establishment of transubstantiation as a fixed dogma by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 under Innocent III. The concept was perhaps several centuries in developing prior to that time, though the earliest documentable use of the term in its technical sense was probably in a treatise by Stephen of Autun (d. 1139). *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (12 volumes) [hereinafter cited as Schaff-Herzog], XI, 494.

substantial form of the human body. These and like assertions are made without any reason or cause, as the Cardinal of Cambrai⁶⁸ himself admits.

Perhaps they will say that the danger of idolatry demands that the bread and wine should not be really present. How ridiculous! The laymen have never become familiar with their fine-spun philosophy of substance and accidents, and could not grasp it if it were taught to them. Besides, there is the same danger in the accidents which remain and which they see, as in the case of the substance which they do not see. If they do not worship the accidents, but the Christ hidden under them, why should they worship the [substance of the] bread, which they do not see?

And why could not Christ include his body in the substance of the bread just as well as in the accidents? In red-hot iron, for instance, the two substances, fire and iron, are so mingled that every part is both iron and fire. Why is it not even more possible that the body of Christ be contained in every part of the substance of the bread?

What will they reply? Christ is believed to have been born from the inviolate womb of his mother. Let them say here too that the flesh of the Virgin was meanwhile annihilated, or as they would more aptly say, transubstantiated, so that Christ, after being enfolded in its accidents, finally came forth through the accidents! The same thing will have to be said of the shut door [John 20:19, 26] and of the closed mouth of the sepulchre,⁶⁹ through which he went in and out without disturbing them.

Out of this has arisen that Babel of a philosophy of a constant quantity distinct from the substance,⁷⁰ until it has come to such a pass that they themselves no longer know what are accidents and what is substance. For who has ever proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that heat, color, cold, light, weight, or shape are mere accidents? Finally, they have been driven to pretend that a new substance is created by God for those accidents on the altar, all on account of Aristotle, who says: "It is the nature of an accident to be in something," and endless other monstrosities. They would be rid of all these if they simply permitted real bread to be present. I rejoice greatly that the simple faith of this sacrament is still to be found, at least among the common people. For as they do not understand, neither do they dispute whether accidents are present without substance, but believe with a simple faith that Christ's

⁶⁸ Cf. p. 28 n. 59.

⁶⁹ Matt. 28:2; Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1.

⁷⁰ According to scholastic teaching the substance of the bread ceases to exist. Its quantity, however, together with the other accidents, remains the same. Cf. p. 29 n. 61.

body and blood are truly contained there, and leave to those who have nothing else to do the argument about what contains them.

But perhaps they will say: “Aristotle teaches that in an affirmative proposition subject and predicate must be identical,” or (to quote the monster’s own words in the sixth book of his *Metaphysics*)⁷¹: “An affirmative proposition requires the agreement of the subject and the predicate.” They interpret agreement to mean identity. Hence, when I say: “This is my body,” the subject cannot be identical with the bread, but must be identical with the body of Christ.

What shall we say when Aristotle and the doctrines of men are made to be the arbiters of such lofty and divine matters? Why do we not put aside such curiosity and cling simply to the words of Christ, willing to remain in ignorance of what takes place here and content that the real body of Christ is present by virtue of the words?⁷² Or is it necessary to comprehend the manner of the divine working in every detail?

But what do they say when Aristotle admits that all of the categories⁷³ of accidents are themselves a subject—although he grants that substance is the chief subject? Hence for him “this white,” “this large,” “this something,” are all subjects, of which something is predicated. If that is correct, I ask: If a “transubstantiation” must be assumed in order that Christ’s body may not be identified with the bread, why not also a “transaccidentation,” in order that the body of Christ may not be identified with the accidents? For the same danger remains if one understands the subject to be “this white or this round⁷⁴ is my body.” And for the same reason that a “transubstantiation” must be assumed, a “transaccidentation” must also be assumed, because of this identity of subject and predicate.

If however, merely by an act of the intellect, you can do away with the accident, so that it will not be regarded as the subject when you say, “this is my body,” why not with equal ease transcend the substance of the bread, if you do not want it to be regarded either as the subject, so that “this my body” is no less in the substance than

⁷¹ Luther should be referred not to the *Metaphysics* but to the *Organon*, where in chapter 6 on *De Interpretatione*, Aristotle indicates that for affirmative and negative propositions having the same subject and predicate to be truly contradictory, subject and predicate must be unequivocally (univocally) identical. In chapter 10 he holds that “the subject and predicate in an affirmation must each denote a single thing.” Richard McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York, 1941), pp. 43, 49.

⁷² Cf. *A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament* (1519). PE 2, 20.

⁷³ Namely: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, and affection. McKeon, p. 8.

⁷⁴ i.e., the host, or wafer.

in the accident? After all, this is a divine work performed by God's almighty power, which can operate just as much and just as well in the accident as it can in the substance.

Let us not dabble too much in philosophy, however. Does not Christ appear to have anticipated this curiosity admirably by saying of the wine, not *Hoc est sanguis meus*, but *Hic est sanguis meus*? [Mark 14:24]. He speaks even more clearly when he brings in the word "cup" and says: "This cup [*Hic calix*] is the new testament in my blood" [Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25]. Does it not seem as though he desired to keep us in a simple faith, sufficient for us to believe that his blood was in the cup? For my part, if I cannot fathom how the bread is the body of Christ, yet I will take my reason captive to the obedience of Christ [2 Cor. 10:5], and clinging simply to his words, firmly believe not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ. My warrant for this is the words which say: "He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'Take, eat, this (that is, this bread, which he had taken and broken) is my body' " [1 Cor. 11:23–24]. And Paul says: "The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" [1 Cor. 10:16]. He does not say "in the bread there is," but "the bread itself is⁷⁵ the participation in the body of Christ." What does it matter if philosophy cannot fathom this? The Holy Spirit is greater than Aristotle. Does philosophy fathom their transubstantiation? Why, they themselves admit that here all philosophy breaks down. That the pronoun "this," in both Greek and Latin, is referred to "body," is due to the fact that in both of these languages the two words are of the same gender. In Hebrew, however, which has no neuter gender, "this" is referred to "bread," so that it would be proper to say *Hic [bread] est corpus meum*. Actually, the idiom of the language⁷⁶ and common sense both prove that the subject ["this"] obviously points to the bread and not to the body, when he says: *Hoc est corpus meum, dos ist meyn leyp*, that is, "This very bread here [*iste panis*] is my body."

Thus, what is true in regard to Christ is also true in regard to the sacrament. In order for the divine nature to dwell in him bodily [Col. 2:9], it is not necessary for the human nature to be transubstantiated and the divine nature contained under the accidents of the human nature. Both natures are simply there in their entirety, and it is truly said: "This man is God; this God is man." Even though philosophy cannot grasp this, faith grasps it nonetheless. And the authority of God's Word is greater

⁷⁵ Not *in pane est* but *ipse pants est*.

⁷⁶ Luther assumes that the language Jesus spoke on that occasion was certainly not Greek, but probably Hebrew.

than the capacity of our intellect to grasp it. In like manner, it is not necessary in the sacrament that the bread and wine be transubstantiated and that Christ be contained under their accidents in order that the real body and real blood may be present. But both remain there at the same time, and it is truly said: “This bread is my body; this wine is my blood,” and vice versa. Thus I will understand it for the time being to the honor of the holy words of God, to which I will allow no violence to be done by petty human arguments, nor will I allow them to be twisted into meanings which are foreign to them. At the same time, I permit other men to follow the other opinion, which is laid down in the decree, *Firmiter*,⁷⁷ only let them not press us to accept their opinions as articles of faith (as I have said above).⁷⁸

[The Third Captivity: The Mass as a Sacrifice]

The third captivity of this sacrament is by far the most wicked abuse of all, in consequence of which there is no opinion more generally held or more firmly believed in the church today than this, that the mass is a good work and a sacrifice. And this abuse has brought an endless host of other abuses in its train, so that the faith of this sacrament has become utterly extinct and the holy sacrament has been turned into mere merchandise, a market, and a profit-making business. Hence participations,⁷⁹ brotherhoods,⁸⁰ intercessions, merits, anniversaries,⁸¹ memorial days⁸² and the like wares are bought and sold, traded and bartered, in the church. On these the priests and monks depend for their entire livelihood.

I am attacking a difficult matter, an abuse perhaps impossible to uproot, since through century-long custom and the common consent of men it has become so firmly entrenched that it would be necessary to abolish most of the books now in vogue, and to alter almost the entire external form of the churches and introduce, or rather reintroduce, a totally different kind of ceremonies. But my Christ lives, and we must be careful to give more heed to the Word of God than to all the thoughts of men and of angels. I will perform the duties of my office and bring to light the facts

⁷⁷ *Firmiter*, *Decretalium Gregorii IX*, lib. i, tit I: *de summa trinitate et catholica*, cap. 1, sec. 3. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, *op. cit.*, II col. 5.

⁷⁸ Cf. p. 28.

⁷⁹ Though not actually present, one could obtain spiritual “participation” in masses which, for example, were read in a monastery.

⁸⁰ These confraternities and sodalities paid to have masses said for them, and engaged in devotional exercises for gaining merit. Membership in such an association provided each person the benefits accruing from the “good works” (prayers and attendance at masses) of all the other members.

⁸¹ Masses said on behalf of the soul of a deceased person daily for a year or annually on the anniversary of his death.

⁸² Masses for the dead were read on memorial days.

in the case. As I have received the truth freely [Matt. 10:8], I will impart it without malice. For the rest let every man look to his own salvation; I will do my part faithfully so that no one may be able to cast on me the blame for his lack of faith and his ignorance of the truth when we appear before the judgment seat of Christ [2 Cor. 5:10].

In the first place, in order that we might safely and happily attain to a true and free knowledge of this sacrament, we must be particularly careful to put aside whatever has been added to its original simple institution by the zeal and devotion of men: such things as vestments, ornaments, chants, prayers, organs, candles, and the whole pageantry of outward things.⁸³ We must turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and this alone, and set nothing before us but the very word of Christ by which he instituted the sacrament, made it perfect, and committed it to us. For in that word, and in that word alone, reside the power, the nature, and the whole substance of the mass. All the rest is the work of man, added to the word of Christ, and the mass can be held and remain a mass just as well without them. Now the words of Christ, in which he instituted this sacrament, are these:

“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body, which is given for you.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you; for this cup is the new testament in my blood, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me.’”⁸⁴

These words the Apostle also delivers and more fully expounds in 1 Cor. 11[:23–26]. On them we must rest; on them we must build as on a firm rock, if we would not be carried about with every wind of doctrine [Eph. 4:14], as we have till now been carried about by the wicked doctrines of men who reject the truth [Titus 1:14]. For in these words nothing is omitted that pertains to the completeness, the use, and the blessing of this sacrament; and nothing is included that is superfluous and not necessary for us to know. Whoever sets aside these words and meditates or teaches concerning the mass will teach monstrous and wicked doctrines, as they have done who have made of the sacrament an *opus operatum*⁸⁵ and a sacrifice.

⁸³ Cf. *A Treatise on the New Testament that is the Holy Mass. PE 1, 296–297.*

⁸⁴ Luther’s rendering of the Words of Institution is similar to that of the canon of the mass in that it represents a harmony of the several scriptural accounts, incorporating features from all of them—Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–25. It differs from the canon of the mass in that it excludes all phrases not explicitly found in the scriptural accounts themselves, Vulgate version. Cf. the canon of the mass text on p. 319. Cf. also *PE 6, 74, 107–108, 126, 160.*

⁸⁵ A work accomplished or finished, which is supposed to impart grace simply by virtue of its having been properly performed, without reference to any faith or lack of faith on the part of the person for whom it is

Let this stand, therefore, as our first and infallible proposition—the mass or Sacrament of the Altar is Christ’s testament, which he left behind him at his death to be distributed among his believers. For that is the meaning of his words, “This cup is the new testament in my blood” [Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25]. Let this truth stand, I say, as the immovable foundation on which we shall base all that we have to say. For, as you will see, we are going to overthrow all the godless opinions of men which have been imported into this most precious sacrament. Christ, who is the truth, truly says that this is the new testament in his blood, poured out for us [Luke 22:20]. Not without reason do I dwell on this sentence; the matter is of no small moment, and must be most deeply impressed on our minds.

Thus, if we enquire what a testament is, we shall learn at the same time what the mass is, what its right use and blessing, and what its wrong use.

A testament, as everyone knows, is a promise made by one about to die, in which he designates his bequest and appoints his heirs. A testament, therefore, involves first, the death of the testator, and second, the promise of an inheritance and the naming of the heir. Thus Paul discusses at length the nature of a testament in Rom. 4; Gal. 3 and 4, and Heb. 9. We see the same thing clearly also in these words of Christ. Christ testifies concerning his death when he says: “This is my body, which is given, this is my blood, which is poured out” [Luke 22:19–20]. He names and designates the bequest when he says “for the forgiveness of sins” [Matt. 26:28]. But he appoints the heirs when he says “For you [Luke 22:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:24] and for many” [Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24], that is, for those who accept and believe the promise of the testator. For here it is faith that makes men heirs, as we shall see.

You see, therefore, that what we call the mass is a promise of the forgiveness of sins made to us by God, and such a promise as has been confirmed by the death of the Son of God. For the only difference between a promise and a testament is that the testament involves the death of the one who makes it. A testator is a promiser who is about to die, while a promiser (if I may put it thus) is a testator who is not about to die. This testament of Christ is foreshadowed in all the promises of God from the beginning of the world; indeed, whatever value those ancient promises possessed was altogether derived from this new promise that was to come in Christ. Hence the words “compact,” “covenant,” and “testament of the Lord” occur so frequently in the Scriptures. These words signified that God would one day die. “For where there is a testament, the death of the testator must of necessity occur”

performed. Cf. *A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament* (1519), PE 2, 22–23, where Luther discusses this term.

(Heb. 9[:16]). Now God made a testament; therefore, it was necessary that he should die. But God could not die unless he became man. Thus the incarnation and the death of Christ are both comprehended most concisely in this one word, “testament.”

From the above it will at once be seen what is the right and what is the wrong use of the mass, and what is the worthy and what the unworthy preparation for it. If the mass is a promise, as has been said, then access to it is to be gained, not with any works, or powers, or merits of one’s own, but by faith alone. For where there is the Word of the promising God, there must necessarily be the faith of the accepting man. It is plain therefore, that the beginning of our salvation is a faith which clings to the Word of the promising God, who, without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy takes the initiative and offers us the word of his promise. “He sent forth his word, and thus [*sic*] healed them,”⁸⁶ not: “He accepted our work, and thus healed us.” First of all there is God’s Word. After it follows faith; after faith, love; then love does every good work, for it does no wrong, indeed, it is the fulfilling of the law [Rom. 13:10]. In no other way can man come to God or deal with him than through faith. That is to say, that the author of salvation is not man, by any works of his own, but God, through his promise; and that all things depend on, and are upheld and preserved by, the word of his power [Heb. 1:3], through which he brought us forth, to be a kind of first fruits of his creatures [Jas. 1:18].

Thus, in order to raise up Adam after the fall, God gave him this promise when he said to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” [Gen. 3:15]. In this word of promise Adam, together with his descendants, was carried as it were in God’s bosom, and by faith in it he was preserved, waiting patiently for the woman who should bruise the serpent’s head, as God had promised. And in that faith and expectation he died, not knowing when or who she would be, yet never doubting that she would come. For such a promise, being the truth of God, preserves even in hell those who believe it and wait for it. After this came another promise, made to Noah—to last until the time of Abraham—when a bow was set in the clouds as a sign of the covenant [Gen. 9:12–17], by faith in which Noah and his descendants found God gracious. After that, he promised Abraham that all the nations should be blessed in his seed [Gen. 22:18]. And this is Abraham’s bosom [Luke 16:22], into which his descendants have been received. Then to Moses and the children of Israel [Deut. 18:18], especially to David [2 Sam.

⁸⁶ Ps. 107:20. *Sic* is Luther’s own interpolation into the Vulgate text.

7:12–16], he gave the plainest promise of Christ. and thereby at last made clear what the promise to the men of old really was.

And so it finally came to the most perfect promise of all, that of the new testament, in which, with plain words, life and salvation are freely promised, and actually granted to those who believe the promise. And he distinguishes this testament from the old one by a particular mark when he calls it the “new testament” [Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25]. For the old testament given through Moses was not a promise of forgiveness of sins or of eternal things, but of temporal things, namely, of the land of Canaan, by which no man was renewed in spirit to lay hold on the heavenly inheritance. Wherefore also it was necessary that, as a figure of Christ, a dumb beast should be slain, in whose blood the same testament might be confirmed, as the blood corresponded to the testament and the sacrifice corresponded to the promise. But here Christ says “the new testament in my blood” [Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25], not somebody else’s, but his own, by which grace is promised through the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, that we may obtain the inheritance.

According to its substance, therefore, the mass is nothing but the aforesaid words of Christ: “Take and eat, etc.” [Matt. 26:26], as if he were saying: “Behold, O sinful and condemned man, out of the pure and unmerited love with which I love you, and by the will of the Father of mercies [2 Cor. 1:3], apart from any merit or desire of yours, I promise you in these words the forgiveness of all your sins and life everlasting. And that you may be absolutely certain of this irrevocable promise of mine, I shall give my body and pour out my blood, confirming this promise by my very death, and leaving you my body and blood as a sign and memorial of this same promise. As often as you partake of them, remember me, proclaim and praise my love and bounty toward you, and give thanks.”

From this you will see that nothing else is needed for a worthy holding of mass than a faith that relies confidently on this promise, believes Christ to be true in these words of his, and does not doubt that these infinite blessings have been bestowed upon it. Hard on this faith there follows, of itself, a most sweet stirring of the heart, whereby the spirit of man is enlarged and enriched (that is love, given by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ), so that he is drawn to Christ, that gracious and bounteous testator, and made a thoroughly new and different man. Who would not shed tears of gladness, indeed, almost faint for joy in Christ, if he believed with unshaken faith that this inestimable promise of Christ belonged to him? How could he help loving so great a benefactor, who of his own accord offers, promises, and

grants such great riches and this eternal inheritance to one who is unworthy and deserving of something far different?

Therefore it is our one and only misfortune that we have many masses in the world, and yet none, or very few of us, recognize, consider, and receive these promises and riches that are offered to us. Actually, during the mass, we should do nothing with greater zeal (indeed, it demands all our zeal) than to set before our eyes, meditate upon, and ponder these words, these promises of Christ—for they truly constitute the mass itself—in order to exercise, nourish, increase, and strengthen our faith in them by this daily remembrance. For this is what he commands, when he says: “Do this in remembrance of me” [Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24]. This should be done by the preachers of the gospel in order to impress this promise faithfully upon the people, to commend it to them, and to awaken their faith in it.

But how many are there today who know that the mass is the promise of Christ? I will say nothing of those godless preachers of fables, who teach human ordinances instead of this great promise. And even if they teach these words of Christ, they do not teach them as a promise or testament, neither therefore as a means of obtaining faith.

What we deplore in this captivity is that nowadays they take every precaution that no layman should hear these words of Christ, as if they were too sacred to be delivered to the common people. So mad are we priests⁸⁷ that we arrogate to ourselves alone the so-called words of consecration, to be said secretly,⁸⁸ yet in such a way that they do not profit even us, for we too fail to regard them as promises or as a testament for the strengthening of the faith. Instead of believing them, we reverence them with I know not what superstitious and godless fancies. What else is Satan trying to do to us through this misfortune of ours but to remove every trace of the [true] mass out of the church, though he is meanwhile at work filling every corner of the globe with [false] masses, that is, with abuses and mockeries of God’s testament—burdening the world more and more heavily with most grievous sins of idolatry, to its deeper condemnation? For what more sinful idolatry can there be than to abuse God’s promises with perverse opinions and to neglect or extinguish faith in them?

⁸⁷ Cf. p. 21 n. 40.

⁸⁸ The words of consecration, indeed of the whole canon of the mass, were spoken very softly. Cf. *The Abomination of the Secret Mass* (1525) in this volume, pp. 310 and 314.

For God does not deal, nor has he ever dealt, with man otherwise than through a word of promise, as I have said. We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise. He does not desire works, nor has he need of them; rather we deal with men and with ourselves on the basis of works. But God has need of this: that we consider him faithful in his promises [Heb. 10:23], and patiently persist in this belief, and thus worship him with faith, hope, and love. It is in this way that he obtains his glory among us, since it is not of ourselves who run, but of him who shows mercy [Rom. 9:16], promises, and gives, that we have and hold all good things. Behold, this is that true worship and service of God which we ought to perform in the mass. But if the words of promise are not delivered, what exercise of faith can there be? And without faith, who can have hope or love? Without faith, hope, and love, what service of God can there be? There is no doubt, therefore, that in our day all priests and monks, together with their bishops and all their superiors, are idolators, living in a most perilous state by reason of this ignorance, abuse, and mockery of the mass, or sacrament, or promise of God.

For anyone can easily see that these two, promise and faith, must necessarily go together. For without the promise there is nothing to be believed; while without faith the promise is useless, since it is established and fulfilled through faith. From this everyone will readily gather that the mass, since it is nothing but promise, can be approached and observed only in faith. Without this faith, whatever else is brought to it by way of prayers, preparations, works, signs, or gestures are incitements to impiety rather than exercises of piety. It usually happens that those who are thus prepared imagine themselves legitimately entitled to approach the altar, when in reality they are less prepared than at any other time or by any other work, by reason of the unbelief which they bring with them. How many celebrants you can see everywhere, every day, who imagine they—wretched men—have committed criminal offenses when they make some petty mistake, such as wearing the wrong vestment, or forgetting to wash their hands, or stumbling over their prayers! But the fact that they have no regard for or faith in the mass itself, namely, the divine promise, causes them not the slightest qualms of conscience. O worthless religion of this age of ours, the most godless and thankless of all ages!

Hence the only worthy preparation and proper observance is faith, the faith by which we believe in the mass, that is, in the divine promise. Whoever, therefore, desires to approach the altar or receive the sacrament, let him beware lest he appear emptyhanded [Exod. 23:15; 34:20; Deut. 16:16] before the face of the Lord God. But he will be empty-handed unless he has faith in the mass, or this new testament. By what godless work could he sin more grievously against the truth of God, than

by this unbelief of his? By it, as much as in him lies, he convicts God of being a liar and a maker of empty promises. The safest course, therefore, will be to go to the mass in the same spirit in which you would go to hear any other promise of God, that is, prepared not to do or contribute much yourself, but to believe and accept all that is promised you there, or proclaimed as promises through the ministry of the priest. If you do not come in this spirit, beware of attending at all, for you will surely be going to your condemnation [1 Cor. 11:29].

I was right then in saying that the whole power of the mass consists in the words of Christ, in which he testifies that forgiveness of sins is bestowed on all those who believe that his body is given and his blood poured out for them. This is why nothing is more important for those who go to hear mass than to ponder these words diligently and in full faith. Unless they do this, all else that they do is in vain. This is surely true, that to every promise of his, God usually adds some sign as a memorial or remembrance of the promise, so that thereby we may serve him the more diligently and he may admonish us the more effectually. Thus, when he promised Noah that he would not again destroy the world by a flood, he added his bow in the clouds, to show that he would be mindful of his covenant [Gen. 9:8–17]. And after promising Abraham the inheritance in his seed, he gave him circumcision as a mark of his justification by faith [Gen. 17:3–11]. Thus he granted to Gideon the dry and the wet fleece to confirm his promise of victory over the Midianites [Judg. 6:36–40]. And through Isaiah he offered to Ahaz a sign that he would conquer the king of Syria and Samaria, to confirm in him his faith in the promise [Isa. 7:10–17]. And we read of many such signs of the promises of God in the Scriptures.

So in the mass also, the foremost promise of all, he adds as a memorial sign of such a great promise his own body and his own blood in the bread and wine, when he says: “Do this in remembrance of me” [Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24–25]. And so in baptism, to the words of promise he adds the sign of immersion in water. We may learn from this that in every promise of God two things are presented to us, the word and the sign, so that we are to understand the word to be the testament, but the sign to be the sacrament. Thus, in the mass, the word of Christ is the testament, and the bread and wine are the sacrament. And as there is greater power in the word than in the sign, so there is greater power in the testament than in the sacrament; for a man can have and use the word or testament apart from the sign or sacrament. “Believe,” says Augustine, “and you have eaten.”⁸⁹ But what does one believe, other than the word of the one who promises? Therefore I can hold mass every day,

⁸⁹ Cf. p. 19 n. 33.

indeed, every hour, for I can set the words of Christ before me and with them feed and strengthen my faith as often as I choose. This is a truly spiritual eating and drinking.

Here you may see what great things our theologians of the *Sentences*⁹⁰ have produced in this matter. In the first place, not one of them treats of that which is first and foremost, namely, the testament and the word of promise. And thus they make us forget faith and the whole power of the mass. In addition, they discuss exclusively the second part of the mass, namely, the sign or sacrament; yet in such a way that here too they do not teach faith, but their preparations and *opera operata*,⁹¹ participations⁹² and fruits of the mass. They come then to the profundities, babble of transubstantiation and endless other metaphysical trivialities, destroy the proper understanding and use of both sacrament and testament together with faith as such, and cause Christ's people to forget their God—as the prophet says, days without number [Jer. 2:32]. Let the others tabulate the various benefits of hearing mass; you just apply your mind to this, that you may say and believe with the prophet that God has here prepared a table before you in the presence of your enemies [Ps. 23:5], at which your faith may feed and grow fat. But your faith is fed only with the word of divine promise, for “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” [Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4]. Hence, in the mass you must pay closest heed above all to the word of promise, as to a most lavish banquet—your utterly green pastures and sacred still waters [Ps. 23:2], in order that you might esteem this word above everything else, trust in it supremely, and cling to it most firmly, even through death and all sins. If you do this, you will obtain not merely those tiny drops and crumbs of “fruits of the mass” which some have superstitiously invented, but the very fountainhead of life, namely, that faith in the Word out of which every good thing flows, as is said in John 4:⁹³ “He who believes in me, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ ” And again, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him, it will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” [John 4:14].

Now there are two things that are constantly assailing us, so that we fail to gather the fruits of the mass. The first is that we are sinners, and unworthy of such great things because of our utter worthlessness. The second is that, even if we were worthy, these things are so high that our fainthearted nature does not dare to aspire

⁹⁰ Commentators on Peter Lombard's textbook. Cf. p. 29 n. 60.

⁹¹ Cf. p. 37 n. 85.

⁹² Cf. p. 35 n. 79.

⁹³ John 7:38. Luther apparently had his next quotation in mind when he cited John 4.

to them or hope for them. For who would not simply stand awe-struck before the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting rather than seeking after them, once he had weighed properly the magnitude of the blessings which come through them, namely, to have God as father, to be his son and heir of all his goods! Against this twofold faintness of ours we must lay hold on the word of Christ, and fix our gaze much more steadfastly on it than on these thoughts of our own weakness. For “great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who have pleasure in them” [Ps. 111:2], who is able to give “more abundantly than all that we ask or think” [Eph. 3:20]. If they did not surpass our worthiness, our grasp, and all our thoughts, they would not be divine. Thus Christ also encourages us when he says: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” [Luke 12:32]. For it is just this incomprehensible overflowing of God’s goodness, showered upon us through Christ, that moves us above all to love him most ardently in return, to be drawn to him with fullest confidence, and, despising all else, be ready to suffer all things for him. Wherefore this sacrament is rightly called “a fountain of love.”

Let us take an illustration of this from human experience.⁹⁴ If a very rich lord were to bequeath a thousand gulden to a beggar or to an unworthy and wicked servant, it is certain that he would boldly claim and accept them without regard to his unworthiness and the greatness of the bequest. And if anyone should seek to oppose him on the grounds of his unworthiness and the large amount of the legacy, what do you suppose the man would say? He would likely say: “What is that to you? What I accept, I accept not on my merits or by any right that I may personally have to it. I know that I am receiving more than a worthless one like me deserves; indeed, I have deserved the very opposite. But I claim what I claim by the right of a bequest and of another’s goodness. If to him it was not an unworthy thing to bequeath so great a sum to an unworthy person, why should I refuse to accept it because of my unworthiness? Indeed, it is for this very reason that I cherish all the more his unmerited gift—because I am unworthy!” With that same thought every man ought to fortify his conscience against all qualms and scruples, so that he may lay hold on the promise of Christ with unwavering faith, and take the greatest care to approach the sacrament not trusting in confession, prayer, and preparation, but rather, despairing of all these, with firm confidence in Christ who gives the promise. For, as we have said often enough, the word of promise must reign alone here in pure faith; such faith is the one and only sufficient preparation.

⁹⁴ Repeated in a similar context in *A Treatise on the New Testament that is the Holy Mass* (1520). PE 1, 304–305.

Hence we see how great is God's wrath with us, in that he has permitted godless teachers to conceal the words of this testament from us, and thereby to extinguish this same faith, as far as they could. It is already easy to see what is the inevitable result of this extinguishing of the faith, namely, the most godless superstition of works. For where faith dies and the word of faith is silent, there works and the prescribing of works immediately crowd into their place. By them we have been carried away out of our own land, as into a Babylonian captivity, and despoiled of all our precious possessions. This has been the fate of the mass; it has been converted by the teaching of godless men into a good work. They themselves call it an *opus operatum*,⁹⁵ and by it they presume themselves to be all-powerful with God. Next they proceed to the very height of madness, and after inventing the lie that the mass is effective simply by virtue of the act having been performed, they add another one to the effect that the mass is none the less profitable to others even if it is harmful to some wicked priest who may be celebrating it. On such a foundation of sand they base their applications, participations,⁹⁶ brotherhoods,⁹⁷ anniversaries,⁹⁸ and numberless other lucrative and profitable schemes of that kind.

These fraudulent disguises are so powerful, so numerous, and so firmly entrenched that you can scarcely prevail against them unless you exercise unremitting care and bear well in mind what the mass is and what has been said above. You have seen that the mass is nothing else than the divine promise or testament of Christ, sealed with the sacrament of his body and blood. If that is true, you will understand that it cannot possibly be in any way a work; nobody can possibly do any thing in it, neither can it be dealt with in any other way than by faith alone. However, faith is not a work, but the lord and life of all works.⁹⁹ Who in the world is so foolish as to regard a promise received by him, or a testament given to him, as a good work, which he renders to the testator by his acceptance of it? What heir will imagine that he is doing his departed father a kindness by accepting the terms of the will and the inheritance it bequeaths to him? What godless audacity is it, therefore, when we who are to receive the testament of God come as those who would perform a good work for him! This ignorance of the testament, this captivity of so great a sacrament—are they not too sad for tears? When we ought to be grateful for benefits received, we come arrogantly to give that which we ought to

⁹⁵ Cf. p. 37 n. 85.

⁹⁶ Cf. p. 35 n. 79.

⁹⁷ Cf. p. 35 n. 80.

⁹⁸ Cf. p. 36 n. 81.

⁹⁹ On the relation between faith and works compare *A Treatise on Good Works* (1520), where Luther says faith is the first and highest of all good works. *PE* 1, 187. Cf. also p. 62.

take. With unheard-of perversity we mock the mercy of the giver by giving as a work the thing we receive as a gift, so that the testator, instead of being a dispenser of his own goods, becomes the recipient of ours. Woe to such sacrilege!

Who has ever been so mad as to regard baptism as a good work, or what candidate for baptism has believed that he was performing a work which he might offer to God on behalf of himself and communicate to others? If, then, there is no good work that can be communicated to others in this one sacrament and testament, neither will there be any in the mass, since it too is nothing else than a testament and sacrament. Hence it is a manifest and wicked error to offer or apply the mass for sins, for satisfactions, for the dead, or for any needs whatsoever of one's own or of others. You will readily see the obvious truth of this if you firmly hold that the mass is a divine promise, which can benefit no one, be applied to no one, intercede for no one, and be communicated to no one, except only to him who believes with a faith of his own. Who can receive or apply, in behalf of another, the promise of God, which demands the personal faith of each one individually? Can I give to another the promise of God, even if he does not believe? Can I believe for another, or cause another to believe? But this is what must happen if I am able to apply and communicate the mass to others; for there are but two things in the mass, the divine promise and the human faith, the latter accepting what the former promises. But if it is true that I can do this, then I can also hear and believe the gospel for another, I can be baptized for another, I can be absolved from sins for another, I can also partake of the Sacrament of the Altar for another, and—to go through the list of their sacraments also—I can marry a wife for another, get ordained for another, be confirmed for another, and receive extreme unction for another!

In short, why did not Abraham believe for all the Jews? Why was faith in the promise made to Abraham demanded of every individual Jew?

Therefore, let this irrefutable truth stand fast: Where there is a divine promise, there every one must stand on his own feet; his own personal faith is demanded, he will give an account for himself and bear his own load [Gal. 6:5]; as it is said in the last chapter of Mark [16:16]: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." Even so each one can derive personal benefit from the mass only by his own personal faith. It is absolutely impossible to commune on behalf of anyone else. Just as the priest is unable to administer the sacrament to anyone on behalf of another, but administers the same sacrament to each one individually by himself. For in consecrating and administering, the priests are our servants. Through them we are not offering a good work or communicating

something in an active sense. Rather, we are receiving through them the promises and the sign; we are being communicated unto in the passive sense. This is the view that has persisted with respect to the laity right up to the present day, for of them it is said not that they do something good but that they receive it. But the priests have strayed into godless ways; out of the sacrament and testament of God, which ought to be a good gift received, they have made for themselves a good deed performed, which they then give to others and offer up to God.

But you will say: What is this? Will you not overturn the practice and teaching of all the churches and monasteries, by virtue of which they have flourished all these centuries? For the mass is the foundation of their anniversaries, intercessions, applications, communications, etc., that is to say, of their fat income. I answer: This is the very thing that has constrained me to write of the captivity of the church. For it is in this manner that the sacred testament of God has been forced into the service of a most impious traffic. It has come through the opinions and ordinances of wicked men, who, passing over the Word of God, have dished up to us the thoughts of their own hearts and led the whole world astray. What do I care about the number and influence of those who are in this error? The truth is mightier than all of them. If you are able to refute Christ, who teaches that the mass is a testament and a sacrament, then I will admit that they are in the right. Or, if you can bring yourself to say that that man is doing a good work who receives the benefit of the testament, or to that end uses this sacrament of promise, then I will gladly condemn my teachings. But since you can do neither, why do you hesitate to turn your back on the multitude who go after evil? Why do you hesitate to give God the glory and to confess his truth—that all priests today are perversely mistaken who regard the mass as a work by which they may relieve their own needs and those of others, whether dead or alive? I am uttering unheard of and startling things, but if you will consider what the mass is, you will realize that I have spoken the truth. The fault lies with our false sense of security, which blinds us to the wrath of God that is raging against us.

I am ready to admit, however, that the prayers which we pour out before God when we are gathered together to partake of the mass are good works or benefits, which we impart, apply and communicate to one another, and which we offer for one another. Thus James [5:16] teaches us to pray for one another that we may be healed, and Paul in 1 Tim. 2[:1–2] commands “that supplications, prayers, and intercessions be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions.” Now these are not the mass, but works of the mass—if the prayers of heart and lips may be called works—for they flow from the faith that is kindled or increased in the

sacrament. For the mass, or the promise of God, is not fulfilled by praying, but only by believing. However, as believers we pray and perform every good work. But what priest offers up the sacrifice in this sense, that he believes he is offering up only the prayers? They all imagine that they are offering up Christ himself to God the Father as an all-sufficient sacrifice, and performing a good work for all those whom they intend to benefit, for they put their trust in the work which the mass accomplishes, and they do not ascribe this work to prayer. In this way the error has gradually grown, until they have come to ascribe to the sacrament what belongs to the prayers, and to offer to God what should be received as a benefit.

We must therefore sharply distinguish the testament and sacrament itself from the prayers which we offer at the same time. Not only this, but we must also bear in mind that the prayers avail utterly nothing, either to him who offers them or to those for whom they are offered, unless the testament is first received in faith, so that it will be faith that offers the prayers; for faith alone is heard, as James teaches in his first chapter [Jas. 1:6]. There is therefore a great difference between prayer and the mass. Prayer may be extended to as many persons as one desires, while the mass is received only by the person who believes for himself, and only to the extent that he believes. It cannot be given either to God or to men. Rather it is God alone who through the ministration of the priest gives it to men, and men receive it by faith alone without any works or merits. Nor would anyone dare to be so foolish as to assert that a ragged beggar does a good work when he comes to receive a gift from a rich man. But the mass (as I have said)¹⁰⁰ is the gift of the divine promise, proffered to all men by the hand of the priest.

It is certain, therefore, that the mass is not a work which may be communicated to others, but the object of faith (as has been said),¹⁰¹ for the strengthening and nourishing of each one's own faith.

Now there is yet a second stumbling block that must be removed, and this is much greater and the most dangerous of all. It is the common belief that the mass is a sacrifice, which is offered to God. Even the words of the canon¹⁰² seem to imply this, when they speak of "these gifts, these presents, these holy sacrifices," and further on "this offering." Prayer is also made, in so many words, "that the sacrifice may be accepted even as the sacrifice of Abel," etc. Hence Christ is termed "the

¹⁰⁰ Cf. pp. 38–43.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² The canon of the mass is the invariable part of the liturgy of the mass in which the consecration of the bread and wine is effected. Its text was translated by Luther from the Latin in his treatise on *The Abomination of the Secret Mass* (1525), and appears on pp. 314–327 in this volume.

sacrifice of the altar.” Added to these are the sayings of the holy fathers, the great number of examples, and the widespread practice uniformly observed throughout the world.

Over against all these things, firmly entrenched as they are, we must resolutely set the words and example of Christ. For unless we firmly hold that the mass is the promise or testament of Christ, as the words clearly say, we shall lose the whole gospel and all its comfort. Let us permit nothing to prevail against these words—even though an angel from heaven should teach otherwise [Gal. 1:8]—for they contain nothing about a work or a sacrifice. Moreover, we also have the example of Christ on our side. When he instituted this sacrament and established this testament at the Last Supper, Christ did not offer himself to God the Father, nor did he perform a good work on behalf of others, but, sitting at the table, he set this same testament before each one and proffered to him the sign. Now, the more closely our mass resembles that first mass of all, which Christ performed at the Last Supper, the more Christian it will be. But Christ’s mass was most simple, without any display of vestments, gestures, chants, or other ceremonies, so that if it had been necessary to offer the mass as a sacrifice, then Christ’s institution of it was not complete.

Not that any one should revile the church universal for embellishing and amplifying the mass with many additional rites and ceremonies. But what we contend for is this: No one should be deceived by the glamor of the ceremonies and entangled in the multitude of pompous forms, and thus lose the simplicity of the mass itself, and indeed practice a sort of transubstantiation by losing sight of the simple “substance” of the mass and clinging to the manifold “accidents” of outward pomp. For whatever has been added to the word and example of Christ is an “accident” of the mass, and ought to be regarded just as we regard the so-called monstrances and corporal cloths in which the host itself is contained. Therefore, just as distributing a testament or accepting a promise differs diametrically from offering a sacrifice, so it is a contradiction in terms to call the mass a sacrifice, for the former is something that we receive and the latter is something that we give. The same thing cannot be received and offered at the same time, nor can it be both given and accepted by the same person, any more than our prayer can be the same thing as that which our prayer obtains, or the act of praying be the same thing as the act of receiving that for which we pray.

What shall we say then of the canon of the mass and the patristic authorities? First of all, I would answer: If there were nothing at all to be said against them, it would be safer to reject them all than admit that the mass is a work or a sacrifice,

lest we deny the word of Christ and destroy faith together with the mass. Nevertheless, in order to retain them, we shall say that we are instructed by the Apostle in 1 Cor. 11[:21, 33] that it was customary for Christ's believers, when they came together for mass, to bring with them food and drink. These they called "collections," and they distributed them among all who were in want, after the example of the apostles in Acts 4[:34–35]. From this store was taken the portion of the bread and wine that was consecrated in the sacrament. And since all this store was consecrated by the word and prayer [1 Tim. 4:5], by being "lifted up" according to the Hebrew rite of which we read in Moses [Num. 18:30–32],¹⁰³ the words and rite of this lifting up or offering have come down to us, although the custom of bringing along and collecting that which was offered or lifted up has long since fallen into disuse. Thus, in Isa. 37[:4] Hezekiah commanded Isaiah to lift up his prayer in the sight of God for the remnant. In the Psalms we read: "Lift up your hands to the holy place" [Ps. 134:2]. And again: "To thee I will lift up my hands" [Ps. 63:4]. And in 1 Tim. 2[:8]: "In every place lifting holy hands." For this reason the words "sacrifice" and "offering" must be taken to refer not to the sacrament and testament, but to the collections themselves. From this source also the word "collect" has come down to us for the prayers said in the mass.

The same thing happens when the priest elevates the bread and the cup immediately after consecrating them. By this he does not show that he is offering anything to God, for he does not say a single word here about a victim or an offering. But this elevation is either a survival of that Hebrew rite of lifting up what was received with thanksgiving and returned to God, or else it is an admonition to us to provoke us to faith in this testament which the priest has set forth and exhibited in the words of Christ, so that now he also shows us the sign of the testament. Thus the oblation of the bread properly accompanies the demonstrative "this" in the words, "this is my body," and by the sign the priest addresses us gathered about him; and in a like manner the oblation of the cup properly accompanies the demonstrative "this" in the words, "this cup is the new testament, etc." For it is faith that the priest ought to awaken in us by this act of elevation. And would to God that as he elevates the sign, or sacrament, openly before our eyes, he might also sound in our ears the word, or testament, in a loud, clear voice, and in the language of the people, whatever it may be, in order that faith may be the more effectively awakened. For why may mass be said in Greek and Latin and Hebrew, but not in German or any other language?

¹⁰³ Cf. LW 35, 95, n. 24

Therefore, let the priests who offer the sacrifice of the mass in these corrupt and most perilous times take heed, first, that they do not refer to the sacrament the words of the greater and lesser canon,¹⁰⁴ together with the collects, because they smack too strongly of sacrifice. They should refer them instead to the bread and the wine to be consecrated, or to their own prayers. For the bread and wine are offered beforehand for blessing in order that they may be sanctified by the word and by prayer [1 Tim. 4:5], but after they have been blessed and consecrated they are no longer offered, but received as a gift from God. And in this rite let the priest bear in mind that the gospel is to be set above all canons and collects devised by men, and that the gospel does not sanction the idea that the mass is a sacrifice, as has been shown.

Further, when a priest celebrates public mass, he should determine to do nothing else than to commune himself and others by means of the mass. At the same time, however, he may offer prayers for himself and others, but he must beware lest he presume to offer the mass. But let him that holds private masses¹⁰⁵ determine to commune himself. The private mass does not differ in the least from the ordinary communion which any layman receives at the hand of the priest, and has no greater effect. The difference is in the prayers, and in the fact that the priest consecrates the elements for himself and administers them to himself. As far as the blessing¹⁰⁶ of the mass and sacrament is concerned we are all equals, whether we are priests or laymen.

If a priest is requested by others to celebrate so-called “votive” masses,¹⁰⁷ let him beware of accepting a fee for the mass, or of presuming to offer any votive sacrifice. Rather, he should take pains to refer all this to the prayers which he offers for the dead or the living, saying to himself: “Lo, I will go and receive the sacrament for myself alone, and while doing so I will pray for this one and that one.” Thus he will receive his fee for the prayers, not for the mass, and can buy food and clothing with it. Let him not be disturbed because all the world holds and practices the contrary. You have the utmost certainty of the gospel, and by relying

¹⁰⁴ In printed missals prior to the Council of Trent, *canon minor* was the term used to designate collectively those offertory prayers within the canon itself which immediately preceded the consecration of the elements. These collects were of comparatively late origin, coming only gradually into use during the late middle ages. Valentin Thalhoffer, *Handbuch der katholischen Liturgik* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1890), II, 159.

¹⁰⁵ The private mass does not require the presence of a congregation. Besides the celebrant there need be present only a ministrant. There is no music; the mass is only read.

¹⁰⁶ The *res sacramenti*. Cf. p. 23 n. 45.

¹⁰⁷ Masses celebrated on the request of congregations or individuals in connection with specific purposes or occasions, or in honor of certain mysteries (e.g., of the Holy Trinity, of the Holy Spirit, or of angels).

on it, you may well disregard the belief and opinions of men. But if you disregard me and insist upon offering the mass and not the prayers alone, remember that I have faithfully warned you, and that I will be without blame on the day of judgment; you will have to bear your sin alone. I have said what I was bound to say to you as brother to brother for your salvation; yours will be the gain if you observe it, yours the loss if you neglect it. And if some should even condemn what I have said, I will reply in the words of Paul: “But evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” [2 Tim 3:13].

From the above every one will readily understand the often quoted saying of Gregory¹⁰⁸: “A mass celebrated by a wicked priest is not to be considered of less effect than one celebrated by a good priest. Neither would a mass of St. Peter have been better than that of Judas the traitor, if they had offered the sacrifice of the mass.” This saying has served many as a cloak to cover their godless doings, and because of it they have invented the distinction between the *opus operatum* and the *opus operantis*,¹⁰⁹ so as to be free to lead wicked lives themselves and yet benefit other men. Gregory speaks the truth, only they misunderstand his words. For it is true beyond a question that the testament or sacrament is given and received through the ministration of wicked priests no less completely than through the ministration of the most saintly. For who has any doubt that the gospel is preached by the ungodly? Now the mass is part of the gospel; indeed, it is the sum and substance of it. For what is the whole gospel but the good tidings of the forgiveness of sins? Whatever can be said about forgiveness of sins and the mercy of God in the broadest and richest sense is all briefly comprehended in the word of this testament. For this reason popular sermons ought to be nothing else than expositions of the mass, or explanations of the divine promise of this testament; this would be to teach the faith and truly to edify the church. But in our day the expounders of the mass make mockery and jest with allegorical explanations of human ceremonies.

Therefore, just as a wicked priest may baptize, that is, apply the word of promise and the sign of water to the candidate for baptism, so he may also set forth the promise of this sacrament and administer it to those who partake, and even partake himself, as did Judas the traitor at the supper of the Lord [Matt. 26:23–25]. It still remains the same sacrament and testament, which works its own work in the

¹⁰⁸ Pope Gregory I (590–604).

¹⁰⁹ The former is the properly executed performance of the ritual of the mass—“the work wrought” (cf. p. 37 n. 85). The latter is the inner disposition, the faith, either of the recipient or of the celebrant—“the work of the doer.”

believer but an “alien work”¹¹⁰ in the unbeliever. But when it comes to offering a sacrifice the case is quite different. For not the mass but the prayers are offered to God, and therefore it is as plain as day that the offerings of a wicked priest avail nothing, but, as Gregory says again: When an unworthy person is sent as the intercessor, the heart of the judge is only turned to greater disfavor. Therefore these two things—mass and prayer, sacrament and work, testament and sacrifice—must not be confused; for the one comes from God to us through the ministration of the priest and demands our faith, the other proceeds from our faith to God through the priest and demands his hearing. The former descends, the latter ascends. The former, therefore, does not necessarily require a worthy and godly minister, but the latter does indeed require such a one, for “God does not listen to sinners” [John 9:31]. He knows how to do good through evil men, but he does not accept the work of any evil man; as he showed in the case of Cain [Gen. 4:5], and as is said in Prov. 15[:8]: “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord,” and in Rom. 14[:23]: “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”

But let us bring this first part to an end, though I am ready to go on with the argument if an opponent should arise. From all that has been said we conclude that the mass was provided only for those who have a sad, afflicted, disturbed, perplexed and erring conscience, and that they alone commune worthily. For, since the word of divine promise in this sacrament sets forth the forgiveness of sins, let every one draw near fearlessly, whoever he may be, who is troubled by his sins, whether by remorse or by temptation. For this testament of Christ is the one remedy against sins, past, present and future, if you but cling to it with unwavering faith and believe that what the words of the testament declare is freely granted to you. But if you do not believe this, you will never, anywhere, by any works or efforts of your own, be able to find peace of conscience. For faith alone means peace of conscience. while unbelief means only distress of conscience.

The Sacrament of Baptism

Blessed be God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to the riches of his mercy [Eph. 1:3, 7] has preserved in his church this sacrament at least, untouched and untainted by the ordinances of men, and has made it free to all nations and classes of mankind, and has not permitted it to be oppressed by the filthy and godless monsters of greed and superstition. For he desired that by it little

¹¹⁰ Its own work is salvation. The “alien work” is condemnation. The expression derives from Isa. 28:21.

children, who were incapable of greed and superstition, might be initiated and sanctified in the simple faith of his Word; even today baptism has its chief blessing for them. But if the intention had been to give this sacrament to adults and older people, I do not believe that it could possibly have retained its power and its glory against the tyranny of greed and superstition which has overthrown all things divine among us. Here too the wisdom of the flesh would doubtless have devised its preparations and dignities, its reservations, restrictions, and other like snares for catching money, until water brought as high a price as parchment¹¹¹ does now.

But Satan, though he could not quench the power of baptism in little children, nevertheless succeeded in quenching it in all adults, so that now there are scarcely any who call to mind their own baptism, and still fewer who glory in it; so many other ways have been discovered for remitting sins and getting to heaven. The source of these false opinions is that dangerous saying of St. Jerome¹¹²—either unhappily phrased or wrongly interpreted—in which he terms penance “the second plank after shipwreck,” as if baptism were not penance. Hence, when men have fallen into sin, they despair of the “first plank,” which is the ship, as if it had gone under, and begin to put all their trust and faith in the second plank, which is penance. This has given rise to those endless burdens of vows, religious orders, works, satisfactions, pilgrimages, indulgences, and monastic sects, and from them in turn has arisen that flood of books, questions, opinions, and man-made ordinances which the whole world cannot contain. Thus the church of God is incomparably worse off under this tyranny than the synagogue or any other nation under heaven ever was.

It was the duty of the pontiffs to remove all these evils and to put forth every effort to recall Christians to the true understanding of baptism, so that they might know what manner of men they were and how Christians ought to live. But instead of this, their only work today is to lead the people as far astray as possible from their baptism, to immerse all men in the flood of their tyranny, and to cause the people of Christ (as the prophet says) to forget him days without number [Jer. 2:32]. How unregenerate are all who bear the name of pontiff today! For they neither know nor do what is becoming to pontiffs, but they are ignorant of what they ought to know and do. They fulfil what Isa. 56[:10, 11] says: “His watchmen are blind,

¹¹¹ Letters of indulgence.

¹¹² St. Jerome (d. 420), ascetic, zealous exponent of the monastic life, prolific writer against the heretics, translator of an important Latin version of the Bible, was also the author of many letters—to one of which Luther is referring. *Epistola* 130, par. 9. Migne 22, 1115.

they are all without knowledge; the shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, etc.”

[The First Part of Baptism: The Divine Promise]

Now, the *first* thing to be considered about baptism is the divine promise, which says: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” [Mark 16:16]. This promise must be set far above all the glitter of works, vows, religious orders, and whatever else man has introduced, for on it all our salvation depends. But we must so consider it as to exercise our faith in it, and have no doubt whatever that, once we have been baptized, we are saved. For unless faith is present or is conferred in baptism, baptism will profit us nothing; indeed, it will become a hindrance to us, not only at the moment when it is received, but throughout the rest of our lives. That kind of unbelief accuses God’s promise of being a lie, and this is the greatest of all sins. If we set ourselves to this exercise of faith, we shall at once perceive how difficult it is to believe this promise of God. For our human weakness, conscious of its sins, finds nothing more difficult to believe than that it is saved or will be saved; and yet, unless it does believe this, it cannot be saved, because it does not believe the truth of God that promises salvation.

This message should have been impressed upon the people untiringly, and this promise should have been dinned into their ears without ceasing. Their baptism should have been called to their minds again and again, and their faith constantly awakened and nourished. For just as the truth of this divine promise, once pronounced over us, continues until death, so our faith in it ought never to cease, but to be nourished and strengthened until death by the continual remembrance of this promise made to us in baptism. Therefore, when we rise from our sins or repent, we are merely returning to the power and the faith of baptism from which we fell, and finding our way back to the promise then made to us, which we deserted when we sinned. For the truth of the promise once made remains steadfast, always ready to receive us back with open arms when we return. And this, if I mistake not, is what they mean when they say, though obscurely, that baptism is the first sacrament and the foundation of all the others, without which none of the others can be received.

It will therefore be no small gain to a penitent to remember above all his baptism, and, confidently calling to mind the divine promise which he has forsaken, acknowledge that promise before his Lord, rejoicing that he is still within the fortress of salvation because he has been baptized, and abhorring his wicked ingratitude in falling away from its faith and truth. His heart will find wonderful

comfort and will be encouraged to hope for mercy when he considers that the promise which God made to him, which cannot possibly lie, is still unbroken and unchanged, and indeed, cannot be changed by sins, as Paul says (2 Tim. 2[:13]): “If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.” This truth of God, I say, will sustain him, so that if all else should fail, this truth, if he believes in it, will not fail him. In it the penitent has a shield against all assaults of the scornful enemy, an answer to the sins that disturb his conscience, an antidote for the dread of death and judgment, and a comfort in every temptation—namely, this one truth—when he says: “God is faithful in his promises [Heb. 10:23; 11:11], and I received his sign in baptism. If God is for me, who is against me?” [Rom. 8:31].

The children of Israel, whenever they turned to repentance, remembered above all their exodus from Egypt, and remembering turned back to God who had brought them out. Moses impressed this memory and this protection upon them many times, and David afterwards did the same. How much more ought we to remember our exodus from Egypt, and by this remembrance turn back to him who led us through the washing of regeneration [Titus 3:5], remembrance of which is commended to us for this very reason! This can be done most fittingly in the sacrament of bread and wine. Indeed, in former times these three sacraments—penance, baptism, and the bread—were all celebrated at the same service, and each one supplemented the other. We also read of a certain holy virgin¹¹³ who in every time of temptation made baptism her sole defense, saying simply, “I am a Christian”; and immediately the enemy recognized the power of baptism and of her faith, which clung to the truth of a promising God, and fled from her.

Thus you see how rich a Christian is, that is, one who has been baptized! Even if he would, he could not lose his salvation, however much he sinned, unless he refused to believe. For no sin can condemn him save unbelief alone. All other sins, so long as the faith in God’s promise made in baptism returns or remains, are immediately blotted out through that same faith, or rather through the truth of God, because he cannot deny himself if you confess him and faithfully cling to him in his promise. But as for contrition, confession of sins, and satisfaction,¹¹⁴ along with all those carefully devised exercises of men: if you rely on them and neglect this truth of God, they will suddenly fail you and leave you more wretched than before. For whatever is done without faith in God’s truth is vanity of vanities and vexation of spirit [Eccles. 1:2, 14].

¹¹³ This may be a reference to Blandina, a young slave and Christian martyr, whose courage during the persecution under the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (161–180), was extolled by Eusebius. *CL* 1, 462.

¹¹⁴ The three parts of the sacrament of penance.

You will likewise see how perilous, indeed, how false it is to suppose that penance is “the second plank after shipwreck,”¹¹⁵ and how pernicious an error it is to believe that the power of baptism is broken, and the ship dashed to pieces, because of sin. The ship remains one, solid, and invincible; it will never be broken up into separate “planks.” In it are carried all those who are brought to the harbor of salvation, for it is the truth of God giving us its promise in the sacraments. Of course, it often happens that many rashly leap overboard into the sea and perish; these are those who abandon faith in the promise and plunge into sin. But the ship itself remains intact and holds its course unimpaired. If any one is able somehow by grace to return to the ship, it is not on any plank, but in the solid ship itself that he is borne to life. Such a person is the one who returns through faith to the abiding and enduring promise of God. Therefore Peter, in 2 Pet. 1[:9], rebukes those who sin, because they have forgotten that they were cleansed from their old sins, and he clearly rebukes their wicked unbelief and their ingratitude for the baptism they had received.

What is the good, then, of writing so much about baptism and yet not teaching this faith in the promise? All the sacraments were instituted to nourish faith. Yet these godless men pass over it so completely as even to assert that a man dare not be certain of the forgiveness of sins or the grace of the sacraments. With such wicked teaching they delude the world, and not only take captive, but altogether destroy, the sacrament of baptism, in which the chief glory of our conscience consists. Meanwhile they madly rage against the miserable souls of men with their contritions, anxious confessions, circumstances,¹¹⁶ satisfactions, works, and endless other such absurdities. Therefore read with great caution the “Master Of the *Sentences*”¹¹⁷ in his fourth book; better yet, despise him with all his commentators, who at their best write only of the “matter” and “form”¹¹⁸ of the sacraments; that is, they treat of the dead and death-dealing letter [2 Cor. 3:6] of the sacraments, but leave untouched the spirit, life, and use, that is, the truth of the divine promise and our faith.

Beware, therefore, that the external pomp of works and the deceits of man-made ordinances do not deceive you, lest you wrong the divine truth and your faith. If you

¹¹⁵ Cf. p. 58 n. 112.

¹¹⁶ The penitent had to relate the conditions attendant upon his transgression to help the priest determine his state of heart and degree of guilt. Cf. Buchwald, *op. cit.*, II, 433 n. 1.

¹¹⁷ Cf. p. 29 n. 60.

¹¹⁸ These terms, derived from the philosophy of Aristotle, were introduced by scholastic theologians of the thirteenth century into their explanations of the sacraments. Matter was the sign, e.g., water in baptism. Form was the word, e.g., the Words of Institution.

would be saved, you must begin with the faith of the sacraments, without any works whatever. The works will follow faith, but do not think too lightly of faith, for it is the most excellent and difficult of all works.¹¹⁹ Through it alone you will be saved, even if you should be compelled to do without any other works. For faith is a work of God, not of man, as Paul teaches [Eph. 2:8]. The other works he works through us and with our help, but this one alone he works in us and without our help.

From this we can clearly see the difference in baptism between man who administers the sacrament and God who is its author. For man baptizes, and yet does not baptize. He baptizes in that he performs the work of immersing the person to be baptized; he does not baptize, because in so doing he acts not on his own authority but in God's stead. Hence we ought to receive baptism at human hands just as if Christ himself, indeed, God himself, were baptizing us with his own hands. For it is not man's baptism, but Christ's and God's baptism, which we receive by the hand of a man, just as everything else that we have through the hand of somebody else is God's alone. Therefore beware of making any distinction in baptism by ascribing the outward part to man and the inward part to God. Ascribe both to God alone, and look upon the person administering it as simply the vicarious instrument of God, by which the Lord sitting in heaven thrusts you under the water with his own hands, and promises you forgiveness of your sins, speaking to you upon earth with a human voice by the mouth of his minister.

This the words themselves indicate, when the priest says: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen," and not: "I baptize you in my own name." It is as though he said: "What I do, I do not by my own authority, but in the name and stead of God, so that you should regard it just as if our Lord himself had done it in a visible manner. The Doer and the minister are different persons, but the work of both is the same work, or rather, it is the work of the Doer alone, through my ministry." For I hold that "in the name of" refers to the person of the Doer, so that the name of the Lord is not only to be uttered and invoked while the work is being done; but the work itself is to be done as something not one's own—in the name and stead of Another. In this sense Christ says in Matt. 24[:5], "Many will come in my name," and Rom. 1[:5] says, "Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about obedience for the sake of his name among all the nations."

This view I heartily endorse, for there is great comfort and a mighty aid to faith in the knowledge that one has been baptized, not by man, but by the Triune God

¹¹⁹ Cf. p. 47 n. 99.

himself, through a man acting among us in His name. This will put an end to that idle dispute about the “form” of baptism, as they term the words which are used. The Greeks say: “May the servant of Christ be baptized,” while the Latins say: “I baptize.”¹²⁰ Others again, adhering rigidly to their pedantry, condemn the use of the words, “I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ,”¹²¹ although it is certain the apostles used this formula in baptizing, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles [2:38; 10:48; 19:5]; they would allow no other form to be valid than this: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” But their contention is in vain, for they bring no proof, but merely assert their own dreams. Baptism truly saves in whatever way it is administered, if only it is administered not in the name of man, but in the name of the Lord. Indeed, I have no doubt that if anyone receives baptism in the name of the Lord, even if the wicked minister should not give it in the name of the Lord, he would yet be truly baptized in the name of the Lord. For the power of baptism depends not so much on the faith or use of the one who confers it as on the faith or use of the one who receives it. We have an example of this in the story of a certain actor who was baptized in jest.¹²² These and similar perplexing disputes and questions are raised for us by those who ascribe nothing to faith and everything to works and rituals, whereas we owe everything to faith alone and nothing to rituals. Faith makes us free in spirit from all those scruples and fancies.

[The Second Part of Baptism: The Sign]

The *second* part of baptism is the sign, or sacrament, which is that immersion in water from which it derives its name, for the Greek *baptizo* means “I immerse,” and *baptisma* means “immersion.” For, as has been said, along with the divine promises signs have also been given to picture that which the words signify, or as they now say, that which the sacrament “effectively signifies.” We shall see how much truth there is in this.

¹²⁰ Cf. p. 24 n. 47. The dispute had already been decided by the fifteenth-century popes: Eugene IV, Sixtus IV, and Alexander VI, who accepted the validity of the imperative or deprecatory formula of the Eastern church.

¹²¹ Alexander of Hales (d. 1245) denied the validity of baptism “in the name of Jesus”; Peter Lombard defended it

¹²² Mentioned also in Luther’s *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*, LW 31, 105, the incident is more fully described in a sermon on Matthew 18, WA 47, 302–303. The court jester of a certain Roman emperor, in mockery of the Christian sacrament, had himself liberally drenched in public. But while the spectators guffawed, the fool was converted through the appearance of an angel showing him a book in which were written the words of Eph. 4:5–6. He acknowledged the mock baptism to be valid, confessed Christ, and was martyred.

A great majority have supposed that there is some hidden spiritual power in the word and water, which works the grace of God in the soul of the recipient. Others deny this and hold that there is no power in the sacraments, but that grace is given by God alone, who according to his covenant is present in the sacraments which he has instituted.¹²³ Yet all are agreed that the sacraments are “effective signs” of grace, and they reach this conclusion by this one argument: if the sacraments of the New Law were mere signs, there would be no apparent reason why they should surpass those of the Old Law. Hence they have been driven to attribute such great powers to the sacraments of the New Law that they think the sacraments benefit even those who are in mortal sin; neither faith nor grace are required—it is sufficient that no obstacle be set in the way, that is, no actual intention to sin again.

Such views, however, must be carefully avoided and shunned, because they are godless and infidel, contrary to faith and inconsistent with the nature of the sacraments. For it is an error to hold that the sacraments of the New Law differ from those of the Old Law in the effectiveness of their signs. For in this respect they are the same. The same God who now saves us by baptism and the bread, saved Abel by his sacrifice, Noah by the rainbow, Abraham by circumcision, and all the others by their respective signs. So far as the signs are concerned, there is no difference between a sacrament of the Old Law and one of the New, provided that by the Old Law you mean that which God did among the patriarchs and other fathers in the days of the Law. But those signs which were given to the patriarchs and fathers must be clearly distinguished from the legal symbols [*figurae*] which Moses instituted in his law, such as the priestly usages concerning vestments, vessels, foods, houses, and the like. For these are vastly different, not only from the sacraments of the New Law, but also from those signs which God occasionally gave to the fathers living under the law, such as the sign of Gideon’s fleece [Judg. 6:36–40], Manoah’s sacrifice [Judg. 13:16–23], or that which Isaiah offered to Ahaz in Isa. 7[:10–14]. In each of these alike some promise was given which required faith in God.

The difference, then, between the legal symbols and the new and old signs is that the legal symbols do not have attached to them any word of promise requiring faith. Hence they are not signs of justification, for they are not sacraments of the faith that alone justifies, but only sacraments of works. Their whole power and nature

¹²³ A point at issue among the scholastics of the Middle Ages. Some held that the grace of the sacrament was contained in the sacramental sign and directly imparted through it; thus Hugo of St. Victor. Others contended that the sign was merely a symbol, but that God, according to a *pactio*, or agreement, imparted the grace of the sacrament when the sign was being used; thus Bonaventura, and especially Duns Scotus.

consisted in works, not in faith. Whoever performed them fulfilled them, even if he did it without faith. But our signs or sacraments, as well as those of the fathers, have attached to them a word of promise which requires faith, and they cannot be fulfilled by any other work. Hence they are signs or sacraments of justification, for they are sacraments of justifying faith and not of works. Their whole efficacy, therefore, consists in faith itself, not in the doing of a work. Whoever believes them, fulfils them, even if he should not do a single work. This is the origin of the saying: “Not the sacrament, but the faith of the sacrament, justifies.” Thus circumcision did not justify Abraham and his seed, and yet the Apostle calls it the seal of the righteousness by faith [Rom. 4:11], because faith in the promise, to which circumcision was added, justified him and fulfilled what the circumcision signified. For faith was the spiritual circumcision of the foreskin of the heart [Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4], which was symbolized by the literal circumcision of the flesh. In the same way it was obviously not Abel’s sacrifice that justified him, but it was his faith [Heb. 11:4] by which he offered himself wholly to God, and this was symbolized by the outward sacrifice.

Thus it is not baptism that justifies or benefits anyone, but it is faith in that word of promise to which baptism is added. This faith justifies, and fulfils that which baptism signifies. For faith is the submersion of the old man and the emerging of the new [Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:9–10]. Therefore the new sacraments cannot differ from the old sacraments, for both alike have the divine promises and the same spirit of faith, although they do differ vastly from the old symbols—on account of the word of promise, which is the sole effective means of distinguishing them. Even so, today, the outward show of vestments, holy places, foods, and all the endless ceremonies doubtless symbolize excellent things to be fulfilled in the spirit, yet, because there is no word of divine promise attached to these things, they can in no way be compared with the signs of baptism and the bread. Neither do they justify, nor benefit one in any way, since they are fulfilled in their very observance, even in their observance apart from faith. For while they are taking place, or being performed, they are being fulfilled, as the Apostle says of them in Col. 2[:22]: “Which all perish as they are used, according to human precepts and doctrines.” The sacraments, on the contrary, are not fulfilled when they are taking place, but when they are being believed.

It cannot be true, therefore, that there is contained in the sacraments a power efficacious for justification, or that they are “effective signs” of grace. All such things are said to the detriment of faith, and out of ignorance of the divine promise. Unless you should call them “effective” in the sense that they certainly and

effectively impart grace where faith is unmistakably present. But it is not in this sense that efficacy is now ascribed to them; as witness the fact that they are said to benefit all men, even the wicked and unbelieving, provided they do not set an obstacle in the way—as if such unbelief were not in itself the most obstinate and hostile of all obstacles to grace. To such an extent have they exerted themselves to turn the sacrament into a command and faith into a work. For if the sacrament confers grace on me because I receive it, then indeed I receive grace by virtue of my work, and not by faith; and I gain not the promise in the sacrament but only the sign instituted and commanded by God. Thus you see clearly how completely the sacraments have been misunderstood by the theologians of the *Sentences*. In their discussions of the sacraments they have taken no account either of faith or of promise. They cling only to the sign and the use of the sign, and draw us away from faith to the work, away from the word to the sign. Thus, as I have said,¹²⁴ they have not only taken the sacraments captive, but have completely destroyed them, as far as they were able.

Therefore let us open our eyes and learn to pay heed more to the word than to the sign, more to faith than to the work or use of the sign. We know that wherever there is a divine promise, there faith is required, and that these two are so necessary to each other that neither can be effective apart from the other. For it is not possible to believe unless there is a promise, and the promise is not established unless it is believed. But where these two meet, they give a real and most certain efficacy to the sacraments. Hence, to seek the efficacy of the sacrament apart from the promise and apart from the faith is to labor in vain and to find condemnation. Thus Christ says: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” [Mark 16:16]. He shows us in this word that faith is such a necessary part of the sacrament that it can save even without the sacrament, and for this reason he did not add: “He who does not believe, and is not baptized.”

[Baptism Signifies Death and Resurrection]

Baptism, then, signifies two things—death and resurrection, that is, full and complete justification. When the minister immerses the child in the water it signifies death, and when he draws it forth again it signifies life. Thus Paul expounds it in Rom. 6[:4]: “We were buried therefore with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” This death and resurrection we call the new creation, regeneration, and spiritual birth. This should not be understood only

¹²⁴ Cf. p. 61.

allegorically as the death of sin and the life of grace, as many understand it, but as actual death and resurrection. For baptism is not a false sign. Neither does sin completely die, nor grace completely rise, until the sinful body that we carry about in this life is destroyed, as the Apostle says in the same passage [Rom. 6:6–7]. For as long as we are in the flesh, the desires of the flesh stir and are stirred. For this reason, as soon as we begin to believe, we also begin to die to this world and live to God in the life to come; so that faith is truly a death and a resurrection, that is, it is that spiritual baptism into which we are submerged and from which we rise.

It is therefore indeed correct to say that baptism is a washing away of sins, but the expression is too mild and weak to bring out the full significance of baptism, which is rather a symbol of death and resurrection. For this reason I would have those who are to be baptized completely immersed in the water, as the word says¹²⁵ and as the mystery indicates. Not because I deem this necessary, but because it would be well to give to a thing¹²⁶ so perfect and complete a sign that is also complete and perfect. And this is doubtless the way in which it was instituted by Christ. The sinner does not so much need to be washed as he needs to die, in order to be wholly renewed and made another creature, and to be conformed to the death and resurrection of Christ, with whom he dies and rises again through baptism. Although you may say that when Christ died and rose again he was washed clean of mortality, that is a less forceful way of putting it than if you said that he was completely changed and renewed. Similarly it is far more forceful to say that baptism signifies that we die in every way and rise to eternal life, than to say that it signifies merely that we are washed clean of sins.

Here again you see that the sacrament of baptism, even with respect to its sign, is not a matter of the moment, but something permanent. Although the ceremony itself is soon over the thing it signifies continues until we die, yes, even until we rise on the last day. For as long as we live we are continually doing that which baptism signifies, that is, we die and rise again. We die, not only mentally and spiritually by renouncing the sins and vanities of this world, but in very truth we begin to leave this bodily life and to lay hold on the life to come, so that there is, as they say, a “real” and bodily passing out of this world unto the Father.

We must therefore beware of those who have reduced the power of baptism to such small and slender dimensions that, while they say grace is indeed in-poured by it, they maintain that afterwards it is poured out again through sin, and that then one

¹²⁵ Cf. p. 64, above, and *PE* 1, 56.

¹²⁶ *res*; cf. p. 23 n. 45, above.

must reach heaven by another way, as if baptism had now become entirely useless. Do not hold such a view, but understand that this is the significance of baptism, that through it you die and live again. Therefore, whether by penance or by any other way, you can only return to the power of your baptism, and do again that which you were baptized to do and which your baptism signified. Baptism never becomes useless, unless you despair and refuse to return to its salvation. You may indeed wander away from the sign for a time, but the sign is not therefore useless. Thus, you have been once baptized in the sacrament, but you need continually to be baptized by faith, continually to die and continually to live. Baptism swallowed up your whole body and gave it forth again; in the same way that which baptism signifies should swallow up your whole life, body and soul, and give it forth again at the last day, clad in the robe of glory and immortality. We are therefore never without the sign of baptism nor without the thing it signifies. Indeed, we need continually to be baptized more and more, until we fulfil the sign perfectly at the last day.

You will understand, therefore, that whatever we do in this life which mortifies the flesh or quickens the spirit has to do with our baptism. The sooner we depart this life, the more speedily we fulfil our baptism; and the more cruelly we suffer, the more successfully do we conform to our baptism. Hence the church was at its best at the time when martyrs were being put to death every day and accounted as sheep for the slaughter [Ps. 44:22; Rom. 8:36], for then the power of baptism reigned supreme in the church, whereas today we have lost sight of this power amid the multitude of works and doctrines of men. For our whole life should be baptism, and the fulfilling of the sign or sacrament of baptism, since we have been set free from all else and given over to baptism alone, that is, to death and resurrection.

This glorious liberty of ours and this understanding of baptism have been taken captive in our day, and to whom can we give the blame except the Roman pontiff with his despotism? More than all others, as chief shepherd it was his first duty to proclaim this doctrine and defend this liberty, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 4[:1]: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries, or sacraments,¹²⁷ of God.” Instead he seeks only to oppress us with his decrees and laws, and to ensnare us as captives to his tyrannical power. By what right, I ask you, does the pope impose his laws upon us (to say nothing of his wicked and damnable neglect to teach us these mysteries)? Who gave him power to deprive us of this liberty of ours, granted to us in baptism? One thing only, as I have said, has been

¹²⁷ Cf. pp. 93–95.

enjoined upon us to do all the days of our lives—to be baptized, that is, to be put to death and to live again through faith in Christ. This and this alone, should have been taught, especially by the chief shepherd. But now faith is passed over in silence, and the church is smothered with endless laws concerning works and ceremonies; the power and understanding of baptism are set aside, and faith in Christ is obstructed.

Therefore I say: Neither pope nor bishop nor any other man has the right to impose a single syllable of law upon a Christian man without his consent; if he does, it is done in the spirit of tyranny. Therefore the prayers, fasts, donations, and whatever else the pope ordains and demands in all of his decrees, as numerous as they are iniquitous, he demands and ordains without any right whatever; and he sins against the liberty of the church whenever he attempts any such thing. Hence it has come to pass that the churchmen of our day are such vigorous guardians of “ecclesiastical liberty”—that is, of wood and stone, of lands and rents (for to such an extent has “ecclesiastical” today come to mean the same as “spiritual”!). Yet with such verbal fictions they not only take captive the true liberty of the church; they utterly destroy it, even worse than the Turk, and in opposition to the word of the Apostle: “Do not become slaves of men” [1 Cor. 7:23]. For to be subjected to their statutes and tyrannical laws is indeed to become slaves of men.

This impious and desperate tyranny is fostered by the pope’s disciples, who here twist and pervert that saying of Christ: “He who hears you hears me” [Luke 10:16]. With puffed cheeks they inflate this saying to a great size in support of their own ordinances. Though Christ spoke this word to the apostles when they went forth to preach the gospel, and though it should apply only to the gospel, they pass over the gospel and apply it only to their fables. For he says in John 10[:27, 5]: “My sheep hear my voice, but the voice of a stranger they do not hear.” He left us the gospel so that the pontiffs might sound the voice of Christ. Instead they sound their own voices, and yet hope to be heard. Moreover, the Apostle says that he was not sent to baptize, but to preach the gospel [1 Cor. 1:17]. Therefore, no one is obliged to obey the ordinances of the pope, or required to listen to him, except when he teaches the gospel and Christ. And the pope should teach nothing but faith without any restrictions. But since Christ says, “He who hears you [plural] hears me” [Luke 10:16], why does not the pope also hear others? Christ does not say to Peter alone, “He who hears you” [singular]. In short, where there is true faith, there the word of faith must of necessity be also. Why then does not an unbelieving pope now and then hear a believing servant of his, who has the word of faith? Blindness, sheer blindness, reigns among the pontiffs.

Others, even more shameless, arrogantly ascribe to the pope the power to make laws, on the basis of Matt. 16[:19], “Whatever you bind, etc.,” although Christ in this passage treats of binding and loosing sins, not of taking the whole church captive and oppressing it with laws. So this tyranny treats everything with its own lying words and violently twists and perverts the words of God. I admit indeed that Christians ought to bear this accursed tyranny just as they would bear any other violence of this world, according to Christ’s word: “If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” [Matt. 5:39]. But this is my complaint: that the godless pontiffs boastfully claim to do this by right, that they pretend to be seeking the church’s welfare with this Babylon of theirs, and that they foist this fiction upon all mankind. For if they did these things and we suffered their violence, both sides being well aware that it was godlessness and tyranny, then we might easily number it among those things that contribute to the mortifying of this life and the fulfilling of our baptism, and might with a good conscience glory in the inflicted injury. But now they seek to deprive us of this consciousness of our liberty, and would have us believe that what they do is well done, and must not be censured or complained of as wrongdoing. Being wolves, they masquerade as shepherds, and being Antichrists, they wish to be honored as Christ.

I lift my voice simply on behalf of liberty and conscience, and I confidently cry: No law, whether of men or of angels, may rightfully be imposed upon Christians without their consent, for we are free of all laws. And if any laws are imposed upon us, we must bear them in such a way as to preserve that sense of freedom which knows and affirms with certainty that an injustice is being done to it, even though it glories in bearing this injustice—so taking care neither to justify the tyrant nor to murmur against his tyranny. “Now who is there to harm you,” says Peter, “if you are zealous for what is right?” [1 Pet. 3:13]. “All things work together for good to them that are the elect” [Rom. 8:28].

Nevertheless, since but few know this glory of baptism and the blessedness of Christian liberty, and cannot know them because of the tyranny of the pope, I for one will disengage myself, and keep my conscience free by bringing this charge against the pope and all his papists: Unless they will abolish their laws and ordinances, and restore to Christ’s churches their liberty and have it taught among them, they are guilty of all the souls that perish under this miserable captivity, and the papacy is truly the kingdom of Babylon and of the very Antichrist. For who is “the man of sin” and “the son of perdition” [2 Thess. 2:3] but he who with his doctrines and his laws increases the sins and perdition of souls in the church, while sitting in the church as if he were God? [2 Thess. 2:4]. All this the papal tyranny has

fulfilled, and more than fulfilled, these many centuries. It has extinguished faith, obscured the sacraments and oppressed the gospel; but its own laws, which are not only impious and sacrilegious, but even barbarous and foolish, it has decreed and multiplied without end.

Behold, then, our miserable captivity. “How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the cities has become a vassal. She has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, etc.” [Lam. 1:1–2]. There are so many ordinances, so many rites, so many sects,¹²⁸ so many vows, so many exertions and so many works, in which Christians are engaged today, that they lose sight of their baptism. Because of this swarm of locusts, palmerworms, and cankerworms [Joel 1:4], no one is able to remember that he is baptized, or what blessings baptism has brought him. We should be even as little children, when they are newly baptized, who engage in no efforts or works, but are free in every way, secure and saved solely through the glory of their baptism. For we are indeed little children, continually baptized anew in Christ.

In contradiction to what has been said, some might cite the *baptism of infants* who do not comprehend the promise of God and cannot have the faith of baptism; so that therefore either faith is not necessary or else infant baptism is without effect. Here I say what all¹²⁹ say: Infants are aided by the faith of others, namely, those who bring them for baptism. For the Word of God is powerful enough, when uttered, to change even a godless heart, which is no less unresponsive and helpless than any infant. So through the prayer of the believing church which presents it, a prayer to which all things are possible [Mark 9:23], the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by in-poured faith. Nor should I doubt that even a godless adult could be changed, in any of the sacraments, if the same church prayed for and presented him, as we read of the paralytic in the Gospel, who was healed through the faith of others [Mark 2:3–12]. I should be ready to admit that in this sense the sacraments of the New Law are efficacious in conferring grace, not only to those who do not, but even to those who do most obstinately present an obstacle.¹³⁰ What obstacle cannot be removed by the faith of the church and the prayer of faith? Do we not believe that Stephen converted Paul the Apostle by this power? [Acts 7:58–8:1]. But then

¹²⁸ Luther means the divergences, rivalries, and jealousies between the various monastic orders and theological factions. E.g., cf. p. 78 n. 138.

¹²⁹ This was the position of Thomas Aquinas, going back to Augustine; it was ratified by Clement V at the Council of Vienna, 1311–12. *PE* 2, 236 n. 1.

¹³⁰ Cf. p. 65.

the sacraments do what they do not by their own power, but by the power of faith, without which they do nothing at all, as I have said.¹³¹

The question remains whether an unborn infant, with only a hand or a foot projecting from the womb, can be baptized. Here I will confess my ignorance and make no hasty decision. I am not sure whether the reason they give is sufficient—that in any part of the body whatsoever the entire soul resides. For it is not the soul but the body that is externally baptized with water. But neither do I share the view of those who insist that he who is not yet born cannot be born again (even though it has considerable force). I leave these things to the teaching of the Spirit, and meanwhile allow everyone to enjoy his own opinion [Rom. 14:5].

[Religious Vows Versus Baptism]

One thing I will add—and I wish that I could persuade everyone to do it—namely, that *all vows should be completely abolished and avoided*, whether of religious orders, or about pilgrimages or about any works whatsoever, that we may remain in that which is supremely religious and most rich in works—the freedom of baptism. It is impossible to say how much that most widespread delusion of vows detracts from baptism and obscures the knowledge of Christian liberty, to say nothing now of the unspeakable and infinite peril of souls which that mania for making vows and that ill-advised rashness daily increase. O most godless pontiffs and unregenerate pastors, who slumber on unheeding and indulge in your evil lusts, without pity for this most dreadful and perilous “ruin of Joseph”! [Amos 6:4–6].

Vows should either be abolished by a general edict, especially those taken for life, and all men recalled to the vows of baptism, or else everyone should be diligently warned not to take a vow rashly. No one should be encouraged to do so; indeed, permission should be given only with difficulty and reluctance. For we have vowed enough in baptism, more than we can ever fulfil; if we give ourselves to the keeping of this one vow, we shall have all we can do. But now we traverse sea and land to make many proselytes [Matt. 23:15]; we fill the world with priests, monks, and nuns, and imprison them all in lifelong vows. You will find those who argue and decree that a work done in fulfilment of a vow ranks higher than one done without a vow, and in heaven is to be rewarded above others with I know not what great rewards. Blind and godless Pharisees, who measure righteousness and holiness by the greatness, number, or other quality of the works! But God measures

¹³¹ Cf. pp. 66–67.

them by faith alone, and with him there is no difference among works, except insofar as there is a difference in faith.

With such bombast wicked men by their inventions puff up human opinion and human works, in order to lure on the unthinking masses who are almost always led by the glitter of works to make shipwreck of their faith, to forget their baptism and to injure their Christian liberty. For a vow is a kind of law or requirement. When vows are multiplied, laws and works are necessarily multiplied, and when these are multiplied, faith is extinguished and the liberty of baptism is taken captive. Others, not content with these wicked allurements, assert in addition that entrance into a religious order is like a new baptism, which may afterward be repeated as often as the purpose to live the monastic life is renewed. Thus these votaries have appropriated to themselves all righteousness, salvation, and glory, and left to those who are merely baptized nothing to compare with them. Now the Roman pontiff, that fountain and source of all superstitions, confirms, approves, and adorns this mode of life with high-sounding bulls¹³² and dispensations, while no one deems baptism worthy of even a thought. And with such glittering pomp, as I have said, they drive the pliable people of Christ into a false sense of security,¹³³ so that in their ingratitude toward baptism they presume to achieve greater things by their works than others achieve by their faith.

Therefore, God again shows himself “perverse with the crooked” [Ps. 18:26], and to punish the makers of vows for their ingratitude and pride, he brings it about that they break their vows, or keep them only with prodigious labor, and remain sunk in them, never knowing the grace of faith and of baptism; that they continue in their hypocrisy to the end, since their spirit is not approved of God; and that at last they become a laughingstock to the whole world, ever pursuing righteousness and never attaining Righteousness, so that they fulfil the word of Isa. 2[:8]: “Their land is filled with idols.”

I am indeed far from forbidding or discouraging anyone who may desire to vow something privately and of his own free choice; for I would not altogether despise and condemn vows. But I would most strongly advise against setting up and

¹³² *bullā*. An official mandate of the pope, which takes its name from the leaden seal with which the document was authenticated in the Middle Ages—a circular plate in form resembling an air bubble floating upon water.

¹³³ *in quascunque volent symplegadas*. Luther is alluding to the Symplegades rocks at the entrance to the Black Sea, through which, according to Greek legend, Jason had to lead his Argonauts in quest of the Golden Fleece. While they seemed to afford secure passage, the two cliffs actually moved on their bases and crushed whatever sought to pass.

sanctioning the making of vows as a public mode of life. It is enough that every one should have the private right to take a vow at his own peril; but to commend the vowing of vows as a public mode of life—this I hold to be most pernicious to the church and to simple souls. First, because it runs directly counter to the Christian life, for a vow is a kind of ceremonial law and a human ordinance or presumption, from which the church has been set free through baptism; for a Christian is subject to no law but the law of God. Second, because there is no instance in Scripture of such a vow, especially of lifelong chastity, obedience, or poverty.¹³⁴ But whatever is without warrant of Scripture is most hazardous and should by no means be urged upon any one, much less established as a common and public mode of life, even if it be permitted to somebody who wishes to make the venture at his own peril. For certain works are wrought by the Spirit in a few men, but they must not be made an example or a mode of life for all.

Moreover, I greatly fear that these votive modes of life of the religious orders belong to those things which the Apostle foretold: “They will be teaching lies in hypocrisy, forbidding marriage and enjoining abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving” [1 Tim. 4:2–3]. Let no one retort by pointing to SS. Bernard, Francis, Dominic,¹³⁵ and others, who founded or fostered monastic orders. Terrible and marvelous is God in his counsels toward the sons of men. He could keep Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael [Dan. 1:6–21] holy at the court of the king of Babylon (that is, in the midst of godlessness); why could he not sanctify those men also in their perilous mode of living or guide them by the special operation of his Spirit, yet without desiring it to be an example to others? Besides, it is certain that none of them was saved through his vows and his “religious”¹³⁶ life; they were saved through faith alone, by which all men are saved, and to which that showy subservience to vows is more diametrically opposed than anything else.

But every one may hold his own view on this. I will return to my argument. Speaking now in behalf of the church’s liberty and the glory of baptism, I feel myself in duty bound to set forth publicly the counsel I have learned under the Spirit’s guidance. I therefore counsel those in high places in the churches, first of all, to abolish all those vows and religious orders, or at least not to approve and

¹³⁴ The threefold vow of the monastic orders involved a pledge of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

¹³⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) founded 163 Cistercian monasteries in different parts of Europe, which by his death had increased in number to 343. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) founded the Franciscan Order. Dominic (*circa* 1170–1221) founded the Order of Preachers, commonly known as the Dominican Order.

¹³⁶ *religio*. In medieval Latin this was a special designation for the particular piety of the monastic orders.

extol them. If they will not do this, then I counsel all men who would be assured of their salvation to abstain from all vows, above all from the major and lifelong vows. I give this counsel especially to teen-agers and young people. This I do, first, because this manner of life has no witness or warrant in the Scriptures, as I have said, but is puffed up solely by the bulls (and they truly are “bulls”)¹³⁷ of human popes. Second, because it greatly tends to hypocrisy, by reason of its outward show and unusual character, which engender conceit and a contempt of the common Christian life. And if there were no other reason for abolishing these vows, this one would be reason enough, namely, that through them faith and baptism are slighted and works are exalted, which cannot be done without harmful results. For in the religious orders there is scarcely one in many thousands who is not more concerned about his works than about faith, and on the basis of this madness, they claim superiority over each other, as being “stricter” or “laxer,” as they call it.¹³⁸

Therefore I advise no one to enter any religious order or the priesthood, indeed, I advise everyone against it—unless he is forearmed with this knowledge and understands that the works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone, as Jer. 5[:3] says: “O Lord, do not thy eyes look for faith?”¹³⁹ and Eccles. 32[:23]: “In all thy works believe with faith in thy heart, for this is to keep the commandments of God.” Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith. Since, therefore, vows nowadays seem to tend only to the glorification of works and to pride, it is to be feared that there is nowhere less of faith and of the church than among the priests, monks, and bishops. These men are in truth heathen or hypocrites. They imagine themselves to be the church, or the heart of the church, the “spiritual” estate and the leaders of the church, when they are everything else but that. This is indeed “the people of the captivity,” among whom all things freely

¹³⁷ *bulla* also means “bubble.” Cf. p. 75 n. 132.

¹³⁸ Divisions resulting from disputes over the interpretation of their “rules” were common among and within the religious orders. In the case of the Franciscans, for example, there were the factions known as the *zelanti* and *relaxti* in earlier times, and later on the division between the “Strict Observance” and the “Conventuals.” Cf. p. 13 n. 12.

¹³⁹ Vulgate version.

given to us in baptism are held captive, while the few poor “people of the earth”¹⁴⁰ who are left behind, such as the married folk,¹⁴¹ appear vile in their eyes.

From what has been said we recognize two glaring errors of the Roman pontiff.

In the first place, he grants dispensation from vows, and does it as if he alone of all Christians possessed this authority; so great is the temerity and audacity of wicked men. If it is possible to grant a dispensation from a vow, then any brother may grant one to his neighbor, or even to himself.¹⁴² But if one’s neighbor cannot grant a dispensation, neither has the pope any right to do so. For where does he get this authority? From the power of the keys? But the keys belong to all, and avail only for sins (Matt. 18[:15–18])¹⁴³ Now they themselves claim that vows are “of divine right.” Why then does the pope deceive and destroy the poor souls of men by granting dispensations in matters of divine right, in which no dispensations can be granted? In the section, “Of vows and their redemption,”¹⁴⁴ he babbles indeed of having the power to change vows, just as in the law the firstborn of an ass was changed for a sheep [Exod. 13:13; 34:20] as if the firstborn of an ass, and the vow he commands to be offered everywhere and always, were one and the same thing; or as if when the Lord decrees in his law that a sheep shall be changed for an ass, the pope, a mere man, may straightway claim the same power, not in his own law, but in God’s! It was not a pope, but an ass changed for a pope, that made this decretal; it is so egregiously senseless and godless.

The second error is this: The pope decrees, on the other hand, that a marriage is dissolved if one party enters a monastery without the consent of the other, provided that the marriage has not yet been consummated. Now I ask you, what devil puts such monstrous things into the pope’s mind? God commands men to keep faith and not break their word to one another, and again, to do good with that which is their own, for he hates “robbery with a burnt offering,” as he says by the mouth of Isaiah [61:8]. But one spouse is bound by the marriage contract to keep faith with the other, and he is not his own. He cannot break his faith by any right, and whatever he

¹⁴⁰ The reference is to the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. “The people of the captivity” is an expression taken from the Latin title to Psalm 64 (65) in the Vulgate. Nebuchadnezzar carried into captivity in Babylon only the better classes of the population. The “people of the earth,” *am haarez*, the common people, were left behind (2 Kings 24:14–16) and became the nucleus of the hybrid Samaritan nation.

¹⁴¹ Persons under the vow of chastity held the estate of marriage to be beneath their own in terms of holiness.

¹⁴² Cf. *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*. PE 2, 123.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁴⁴ *Magnae devotionis, Decretalium Gregorii IX*, lib iii, tit. XXXIV: *de voto voti redemptione*, cap. 7. *Corpus Iuris Canonici, op. cit.*, II col 593.

does with himself is robbery, if it is done without the other's consent. Why does not one who is burdened with debt follow this same rule and obtain admission into a religious order, so as to be released from his debts and be free to break his word? O blind, blind men! Which is greater, the fidelity commanded by God or a vow devised and chosen by men? Are you a shepherd of souls, O pope? And you who teach these things, are you doctors of sacred theology? Why then do you teach them? No doubt because you have decked out your vow as a better work than marriage; you do not exalt faith, which alone exalts all things, but works, which are nothing in the sight of God, or which are all alike as far as merit is concerned.

I am sure, therefore, that neither men nor angels can grant a dispensation from vows, if they are proper vows. But I am not fully clear in my own mind whether all the things that men vow nowadays come under the head of vows. For instance, it is simply foolish and stupid for parents to dedicate their children, before birth or in infancy, to the "religious life," or to perpetual chastity; indeed, it is certain that this can by no means be termed a vow. It seems to be a kind of mockery of God for them to vow things which are not at all in their power. As to the triple vow of the monastic orders,¹⁴⁵ the longer I consider it, the less I comprehend it, and I wonder where the custom of exacting this vow arose. Still less do I understand at what age vows may be taken in order to be legal and valid. I am pleased to find unanimous agreement that vows taken before the age of puberty are not valid. Nevertheless, they deceive many young children who are ignorant both of their age and of what they are vowing. They do not observe the age of puberty in receiving such children; but the children, after making their profession, are held captive and consumed by a troubled conscience as though they had afterward given their consent. As if a vow which was invalid could finally become valid with the passing of the years!

It seems absurd to me that the effective date of a legitimate vow should be predetermined for others by people who cannot predetermine it for themselves. Nor do I see why a vow taken at eighteen years of age should be valid, but not one taken at ten or twelve years. It will not do to say that at eighteen a man feels his carnal desires. What if he scarcely feels them at twenty or thirty, or feels them more keenly at thirty than at twenty? Why not also set a certain age limit for the vows of poverty and obedience? But what age will you set, by which a man should feel his greed and pride, when even the most spiritual persons hardly become aware of these emotions? Therefore, no vow will ever become binding and valid until we have become spiritual, and no longer have any need of vows. You see that these are

¹⁴⁵ Cf. p. 76 n. 134.

uncertain and most perilous matters, and it would therefore be a wholesome counsel to keep such lofty modes of living free of vows, and leave them to the Spirit alone as they were of old, and never in any way to change them into a mode of life which is perpetually binding.

However, let this be sufficient for the present concerning baptism and its liberty. In due time I shall perhaps discuss vows at greater length,¹⁴⁶ and truly there is an urgent need for this.

The Sacrament of Penance

In the third place, we are to discuss the sacrament of penance. On this subject I have already given no little offense to many people by the treatises and disputations¹⁴⁷ already published, in which I have amply set forth my views. These I must now briefly repeat in order to unmask the tyranny that is rampant here no less than in the sacrament of the bread. For, because these two sacraments furnish opportunity for gain and profit, the greed of the shepherds has raged in them with incredible zeal against the flock of Christ, although, as we have just seen in our discussion of vows, baptism too has sadly declined among adults and become the servant of greed.

The first and chief abuse of this sacrament is that they have completely abolished it. Not a vestige of the sacrament remains. For this sacrament, like the other two, consists in the word of divine promise and our faith, and they have undermined both of them. For they have adapted to their own tyranny the word of promise which Christ speaks in Matt. 16[:19] and 18[:18]: “Whatever you bind, etc.,” and in the last chapter of John [20:23]: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, etc.” By these words the faith of penitents is aroused for obtaining the forgiveness of sins. But in all their writing, teaching, and preaching, their sole concern has been, not to teach what is promised to Christians in these words, or what they ought to believe, and what great consolation they might find in them, but only through force and violence to extend their own tyranny far, wide, and deep. It has finally come to

¹⁴⁶ This Luther did in November, 1521, during his sojourn at the Wartburg, in *De votis monasticis Martini Lutheri iudicium*. WA 8, 573–669.

¹⁴⁷ These include, among others, the Ninety-five Theses (1517), LW 31, 25–33, WA 1, 233–238; *A Sermon on Indulgence and Grace* (1517), Woolf, *op. cit.*, I, 50–55, WA 1, 239–246; *Sermo de poenitentia* (1518), WA 1, 319–324; *Eine Freiheit des Sermons päpstlichen Ablass und Gnade Belangend* (1518), WA 1, 383–393; *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses* (1518), LW 31, 83–252, WA 1, 525–628; and *A Discussion of Confession* (1520), PE 1, 81–101, WA 6, 157–169.

such a pass that some of them have begun to command the very angels in heaven,¹⁴⁸ and to boast in incredible, mad wickedness that in these words they have obtained the right to rule in heaven and earth, and possess the power to bind even in heaven. Thus they say nothing of faith which is the salvation of the people, but babble only of the despotic power of the pontiffs, whereas Christ says nothing at all of power, but speaks only of faith.

For Christ has not ordained authorities or powers or lordships in his church, but ministries, as we learn from the Apostle, who says: “This is how one should regard us, as ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” [1 Cor. 4:1]. Just as, when he said: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” [Mark 16:16], he was calling forth the faith of those who were to be baptized, so that by this word of promise a man might be certain of his salvation if he was baptized in faith. There was no conferring of any power there, but only the instituting of the ministry of those who baptize. Similarly, here where he says, “Whatever you bind, etc.” [Matt. 16:19; 18:18], he is calling forth the faith of the penitent, so that by this word of promise he might be certain that if he is absolved in faith, he is truly absolved in heaven. Here there is no mention at all of power, but only of the ministry of the one who absolves. One cannot but wonder what happened to these blind and overbearing men that they did not arrogate to themselves a despotic power from the promise of baptism; or, if they did not do it there, why they presumed to do it from the promise of penance? For in both there is a like ministry, a similar promise, and the same kind of sacrament. It cannot be denied: if baptism does not belong to Peter alone, then it is a wicked usurpation of power to claim the power of the keys for the pope alone.

Again, when Christ says: “Take, this is my body, which is given for you. This is the cup in my blood, etc.” [1 Cor. 11:24–25], he is calling forth the faith of those who eat, so that when their conscience has been strengthened by these words they might be certain through faith that they receive the forgiveness of sins when they have eaten. Here too, nothing is said of power, but only of the ministry.

¹⁴⁸ In the jubilee year of 1500, as thousands of pilgrims died of the plague on their way through war-ravaged Lombardy toward Rome, a spurious bull of Pope Clement VI from the year 1350 was widely promulgated, in which were the words: “We command the angels of paradise that their souls (the souls of pilgrims who died en route) be taken directly to the bliss of paradise, as being fully redeemed from purgatory.” WA 30^{II} 282; Buchwald, *op. cit.*, II, 457 n. 1. In *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* (1521), Luther writes: “This is what happened in the days of John Huss. In those days the pope commanded the angels in heaven to lead to heaven the souls of those pilgrims who died on the way to Rome. John Huss objected to this horrible blasphemy and more than diabolic presumption. This protest cost him his life, but he at least caused the pope to change his tune and, embarrassed by this sacrilege, to refrain from such proclamation.” LW 32, 74–75.

So the promise of baptism remains to some extent, at least for infants; but the promise of the bread and the cup has been destroyed and made subservient to greed, faith has become a work and the testament has become a sacrifice. The promise of penance, however, has been transformed into the most oppressive despotism, being used to establish a sovereignty which is more than merely temporal.

Not content with these things, *this Babylon of ours has so completely extinguished faith* that it insolently *denies its necessity in this sacrament*. Indeed, with the wickedness of Antichrist it brands it as heresy for anyone to assert that faith is necessary. What more could this tyranny do than it has done? Truly, “by the waters of Babylon we sit down and weep, when we remember thee, O Zion. On the willows there we hang up our lyres” [Ps. 137:1–2]. May the Lord curse the barren willows of those streams! Amen.

Now that promise and faith have been thus blotted out and overthrown, let us see what they have put in their place. *They have divided penance into three parts—contrition, confession, and satisfaction;* but in such a way that they have removed whatever was good in each of them, and have established in each of them their caprice and tyranny.

[Contrition]

In the first place, they teach that contrition takes precedence over, and is far superior to, faith in the promise, as if contrition were not a work of faith, but a merit; indeed, they do not mention faith at all. They stick so closely to works and to those passages of Scripture where we read of many who obtained pardon by reason of their contrition and humility of heart; but they take no account of the faith which effected this contrition and sorrow of heart, as is written of the men of Nineveh in Jon. 3[:5]: “And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, etc.” Others again, more bold and wicked, have invented a so-called “attrition,”¹⁴⁹ which is converted into contrition by the power of the keys, of which they know nothing. This attrition they grant to the wicked and unbelieving, and thus abolish contrition altogether. O the intolerable wrath of God, that such things should be taught in the church of Christ! Thus, with both faith and its work destroyed, we go on secure in the doctrines and opinions of men, or rather we perish in them. A contrite heart is a precious thing, but it is found only where there is an ardent faith in the promises and

¹⁴⁹ Contrition involved a detestation of sin arising out of love for God and regret at having offended him. Attrition involved a hatred of sin arising out of lesser motives, such as loss of heaven, fear of hell, or the heinousness of guilt. Attrition, though imperfect, was held to be sufficient, since it predisposed the sinner to receive through the sacrament of penance that grace which transformed it into perfect contrition. Cf. LW 31, 21.

threats of God. Such faith, intent on the immutable truth of God, makes the conscience tremble, terrifies it and bruises it; and afterwards, when it is contrite, raises it up, consoles it, and preserves it. Thus the truth of God's threat is the cause of contrition, and the truth of his promise the cause of consolation, if it is believed. By such faith a man "merits" the forgiveness of sins. Therefore faith should be taught and aroused before all else. Once faith is obtained, contrition and consolation will follow inevitably of themselves.

Therefore, although there is some truth in their teaching that contrition is to be attained by the enumeration and contemplation (as they call it) of their sins, yet their teaching is perilous and perverse so long as they do not teach first of all the beginnings and causes of contrition—the immutable truth of God's threat and promise which calls forth faith—so that men may learn to pay more heed to the truth of God, by which they are cast down and lifted up, than to the multitude of their sins. If their sins are regarded apart from the truth of God, they will excite afresh and increase the desire for sin rather than lead to contrition. I will say nothing now of the insurmountable task which they have imposed upon us, namely, that we are to frame a contrition for every sin. That is impossible. We can know only the smaller part of our sins; and even our good works are found to be sins, according to Ps. 143[:2]¹⁵⁰: "Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee." It is enough if we lament the sins which distress our conscience at the present moment, as well as those which we can readily call to mind. Whoever is in this frame of mind is without doubt ready to grieve and fear for all his sins, and will grieve and fear whenever they are brought to his knowledge in the future.

Beware then, of putting your trust in your own contrition and of ascribing the forgiveness of sins to your own remorse. God does not look on you with favor because of that, but because of the faith by which you have believed his threats and promises, and which has effected such sorrow within you. Thus we owe whatever good there may be in our penance, not to our scrupulous enumeration of sins, but to the truth of God and to our faith. All other things are the works and fruits which follow of their own accord. They do not make a man good, but are done by the man who is already made good through faith in the truth of God. Even so, "smoke goes up in his wrath; because he is angry he shakes the mountains and sets them on fire," as it is said in Ps. 18[:8, 7]). First comes the terror of this threatening, which sets the wicked on fire; then faith, accepting this, sends up smoke-clouds of contrition, etc.

¹⁵⁰ Where Luther cites correctly the Vulgate version, in which Psalms 10–146 are numbered differently than in the RSV, we have given the corresponding RSV Psalm reference.

But the trouble is not so much that contrition has been exposed to tyranny and avarice, as that it has been given over completely to wickedness and pestilent teaching. It is confession and satisfaction that have become the chief workshops of greed and power.

[Confession]

Let us first take up *confession*. There is no doubt that confession of sins is necessary and commanded of God, in Matt. 3[:6]: “They were baptized by John in the river Jordan, confessing their sins,” and in 1 John 1[:9–10]: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” If the saints may not deny their sin, how much more ought those who are guilty of great and public sins to make confession! But the institution of confession is proved most effectively of all by Matt. 18[:15–17], where Christ teaches that a sinning brother should be told of his fault, brought before the church, accused, and if he will not hear, be excommunicated. He “hears” if he heeds the rebuke and acknowledges and confesses his sin.

As to the current practice of private confession, I am heartily in favor of it, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures. It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences. For when we have laid bare our conscience to our brother and privately made known to him the evil that lurked within, we receive from our brother’s lips the word of comfort spoken by God himself. And, if we accept this in faith, we find peace in the mercy of God speaking to us through our brother. There is just one thing about it that I abominate, and that is the fact that this kind of confession has been subjected to the despotism and extortion of the pontiffs. They reserve¹⁵¹ to themselves even the secret sins, and command that they be made known to confessors named by them, only to trouble the consciences of men. They merely play the pontiff, while they utterly despise the true duties of pontiffs, which are to preach the gospel and to care for the poor. Indeed, the godless despots leave the great sins to the common priests, and reserve to themselves only those sins which are of less consequence, such as those ridiculous and fictitious things in the bull *Coena domini*.¹⁵² To make the wickedness

¹⁵¹ In “reserved cases,” *casus episcopales* or *casus papales*, only the bishop or pope, or one appointed by them, could absolve. Cf. *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*. PE 2, 105–106.

¹⁵² *Coena domini* was a papal bull published annually against heretics since 1364 in the Lateran Church at Rome on Holy Thursday. But to the condemnation of their heresies were added those offenses, absolvable only by the pope or by his authorization, which might conceivably endanger or impair the papal state Luther was

of their error even more apparent, they not only fail to reserve, but actually teach and approve things which are against the service of God, against faith and the chief commandments—such as their running about on pilgrimages, the perverse worship of the saints, the lying saints’ legends, the various ways of trusting in works and ceremonies and practicing them. Yet in all of these faith in God is extinguished and idolatry fostered, as we see in our day. As a result we have the same kind of priests today as Jeroboam ordained of old in Dan and Beersheba, ministers of the golden calves [1 Kings 12:26–32], men who are ignorant of the law of God, of faith, and of whatever pertains to the feeding of Christ’s sheep. They inculcate in the people nothing but their own inventions with fear and violence.

Although I urge that this outrage of reserved cases should be borne patiently, even as Christ bids us bear all the tyranny of men, and teaches us that we should obey these extortioners; nevertheless, I deny that they have the right to make such reservations, and I do not believe that they can bring one jot or tittle of proof that they have it. But I am going to prove the contrary. In the first place, Christ speaks in Matt. 18[:15–17] of public sins and says that if our brother hears us, when we tell him his fault, we have saved the soul of our brother, and that he is to be brought before the church only if he refuses to hear us, so that his sin can be corrected among brethren. How much more will it be true of secret sins, that they are forgiven if one brother freely makes confession to another? So it is not necessary to tell it to the church, that is, as these babblers interpret it, to the prelate or priest. On this matter we have further authority from Christ, where he says in the same chapter: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” [Matt. 18:18]. For this is said to each and every Christian. Again, he says in the same place: “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my father in heaven” [Matt. 18:19]. Now, the brother who lays his secret sins before his brother and craves pardon, certainly agrees with his brother on earth, in the truth which is Christ. Of this Christ says even more clearly, confirming his preceding words: “For truly, I say to you, where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” [Matt. 18:20].

Hence, I have no doubt but that every one is absolved from his secret sins when he has made confession, privately before any brother, either of his own accord or after being rebuked, and has sought pardon and amended his ways, no matter how much the violence of the pontiffs may rage against it. For Christ has given to every

named in the bull for the first time on March 28, 1521, along with Wycliffe and Huss. In 1522 Luther translated this bull into German as a New Year’s present for the pope. *WA* 8, 691; cf. *PE* 2, 105–106.

one of his believers the power to absolve even open sins. Add yet this little point: If any reservation of secret sins were valid, so that one could not be saved unless they were forgiven, then a man's salvation would be prevented most of all by those aforementioned good works and idolatries which are taught by the popes nowadays. But if these most grievous sins do not prevent one's salvation, how foolish it is to reserve those lighter sins! In truth, it is the foolishness and blindness of the shepherds that produce these monstrous things in the church. Therefore I would admonish those princes of Babylon and bishops of Beth-aven¹⁵³ to refrain from reserving any cases whatsoever. Let them, moreover, permit all brothers and sisters most freely to hear the confession of secret sins, so that the sinner may make his sins known to whomever he will and seek pardon and comfort, that is, the word of Christ, by the mouth of his neighbor. For with these presumptions of theirs they only ensnare the consciences of the weak without necessity, establish their wicked despotism, and fatten their avarice on the sins and ruin of their brethren. Thus they stain their hands with the blood of souls; sons are devoured by their parents. Ephraim devours Judah, and Syria Israel, with an open mouth, as Isaiah [9:20–21] says.

To these evils they have added the “circumstances,”¹⁵⁴ and also the mothers, daughters, sisters, sisters-in-law, branches and fruits of sins; since these most astute and idle men have worked out, if you please, a kind of family tree of relationships and affinities even among sins—so prolific is wickedness coupled with ignorance. For this conception, whatever rogue may be its author, has become a public law, like many others. Thus do the shepherds keep watch over the church of Christ: whatever new work or superstition those most stupid devotees may have dreamed of, they immediately drag to the light of day, deck out with indulgences, and fortify with bulls. So far are they from suppressing such things and preserving for God's people true faith and liberty. For what has our liberty to do with the tyranny of Babylon?

My advice would be to ignore all “circumstances” whatsoever. With Christians there is only one circumstance—that a brother has sinned. For there is no person to be compared with a Christian brother. And the observance of places, times, days, persons,¹⁵⁵ and all other rank superstition, only magnifies the things that are

¹⁵³ Hos. 4:15; 10:5. The prophet altered the name Bethel (house of God) to Beth-aven (house of nothingness or idolatry) because of the images which had been erected there. Cf. p. 221.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. p. 61 n. 116.

¹⁵⁵ Sins were assessed differently according to whether they were committed at a holy place or not, on holy days or on ordinary days. Murder of a priest was a more grievous sin than murder of a layman. Buchwald, *op. cit.*, II, 465.

nothing, to the injury of the things which are everything; as if anything could be of greater weight or importance than the glory of Christian brotherhood! Thus they bind us to places, days, and persons, so that the name of “brother” loses its value, and we serve in bondage instead of being free—we, to whom all days, places, persons, and all external things are one and the same.

[Satisfaction]

How unworthily they have dealt with *satisfaction*, I have abundantly shown in the controversies concerning indulgences.¹⁵⁶ They have grossly abused it, to the ruin of Christians in body and soul. To begin with, they have taught it in such a manner that the people have never had the slightest understanding what satisfaction really is, namely, the renewal of a man’s life. Then, they so continually harp on it and emphasize its necessity, that they leave no room for faith in Christ. With these scruples they torture poor consciences to death; and one runs to Rome, one to this place, another to that; this one to Chartreuse,¹⁵⁷ that one to some other place; one scourges himself with rods, another mortifies his body with fasts and vigils; and all cry with the same mad zeal: “Lo, here is Christ! Lo, there!” believing that the kingdom of Christ, which is within us, will come with observation.¹⁵⁸

For these monstrous things we are indebted to you, O Roman See, and to your murderous laws and ceremonies, with which you have corrupted all mankind, so that they believe they can with works make satisfaction for sin to God, when he can be satisfied only by the faith of a contrite heart! Not only do you keep this faith silent with this uproar of yours, but you even oppress it, only so that your insatiable bloodsucker may have those to whom it may say, “Give, give!” [Prov. 30:15] and may traffic in sins.

Some have gone even farther and have constructed those instruments for driving souls to despair, their decrees that the penitent must rehearse all sins anew for which he neglected to make the imposed satisfaction. What would they not venture to do, these men who were born for the sole purpose of carrying all things into a tenfold captivity? Moreover, how many, I ask, are possessed with the notion that they are in a saved state and are making satisfaction for their sins, if they only mumble over, word for word, the prayers imposed by the priest, even though meanwhile they never give a thought to the amending of their way of life! They

¹⁵⁶ Cf. p. 81 n. 147; especially in the *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*, LW 31, 85, 94–96, 152–153.

¹⁵⁷ This was the mother cloister and headquarters of the rigidly ascetic Carthusian order.

¹⁵⁸ Luke 17:20–21. A play on *observantia*, which also means “observance,” a fling at the Observants. Cf. p. 78 n. 138.

believe that their life is changed in the one moment of contrition and confession, and there remains only to make satisfaction for their past sins. How should they know better if they have not been taught otherwise? No thought is given here to the mortifying of the flesh, no value is attached to the example of Christ, who, when he absolved the woman caught in adultery, said: “Go, and do not sin again” [John 8:11], thereby laying upon her the cross, that is, the mortifying of her flesh. This perverse error is greatly encouraged by the fact that we absolve sinners before the satisfaction has been completed, so that they are more concerned about completing the satisfaction, which is a lasting thing, than they are about contrition, which they suppose to be over and done with when they have made confession. Absolution ought rather to follow on the completion of satisfaction, as it did in the early church, with the result that, after completing the work, penitents gave themselves with much greater diligence to faith and the living of a new life.

But this must suffice in repetition of what I have said more fully in connection with indulgences, and *in general this must suffice for the present concerning the three sacraments*, which have been treated, and yet not treated, in so many harmful books on the *Sentences* and on the laws. It remains to attempt some discussion of the other “sacraments”¹⁵⁹ also, lest I seem to have rejected them without cause.

Confirmation

It is amazing that it should have entered the minds of these men to make a sacrament of confirmation out of the laying on of hands. We read that Christ touched the little children in that way [Mark 10:16], and that by it the apostles imparted the Holy Spirit [Acts 8:17; 19:6], ordained presbyters [Acts 6:6], and cured the sick [Mark. 16:18]; as the Apostle writes to Timothy: “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” [1 Tim. 5:22]. Why have they not also made a “confirmation” out of the sacrament of the bread? For it is written in Acts 9[:19]: “And he took food and was strengthened,”¹⁶⁰ and in Ps. 104[:15]: “And bread to strengthen man’s heart.” Confirmation would thus include three sacraments—the bread, ordination, and confirmation itself. But if everything the apostles did is a sacrament, why have they not rather made preaching a sacrament?

I do not say this because I condemn the seven sacraments, but because I deny that they can be proved from the Scriptures. Would that there were in the church

¹⁵⁹ Cf. pp. 18 and 109.

¹⁶⁰ Luther correctly quotes *confortatus*, but thinks *confirmatus*.

such a laying on of hands as there was in apostolic times, whether we chose to call it confirmation or healing! But there is nothing left of it now but what we ourselves have invented to adorn the office of bishops, that they may not be entirely without work in the church. For after they relinquished to their inferiors those arduous sacraments together with the Word as being beneath their attention (since whatever the divine majesty has instituted must needs be despised of men!) it was no more than right that we should discover something easy and not too burden-some for such delicate and great heroes to do, and should by no means entrust it to the lower clergy as something common, for whatever human wisdom has decreed must be held in honor among men! Therefore, as the priests are, so let their ministry and duty be. For a bishop who does not preach the gospel or practice the cure of souls—what is he but an idol in the world [1 Cor. 8:4], who has nothing but the name and appearance of a bishop?

But *instead of this we seek sacraments that have been divinely instituted, and among these we see no reason for numbering confirmation.* For to constitute a sacrament there must be above all things else a word of divine promise, by which faith may be exercised. But we read nowhere that Christ ever gave a promise concerning confirmation, although he laid hands on many and included the laying on of hands among the signs in the last chapter of Mark [16:18]: “They will lay their hands on the sick; and they will recover.” Yet no one has applied this to a sacrament, for that is not possible.

For this reason it is sufficient to regard confirmation as a certain churchly rite or sacramental ceremony, similar to other ceremonies, such as the blessing of water and the like. For if every other creature is sanctified by the Word and by prayer [1 Tim. 4:4–5], why should not man much rather be sanctified by the same means? Still, these things cannot be called sacraments of faith, because they have no divine promise connected with them, neither do they save; but the sacraments do save those who believe the divine promise.

Marriage

[Marriage is Not a Sacrament]

Not only is marriage regarded as a sacrament without the least warrant of Scripture, but the very ordinances which extol it as a sacrament have turned it into a farce. Let us look into this a little.

We have said that in every sacrament there is a word of divine promise, to be believed by whoever receives the sign, and that the sign alone cannot be a sacrament. Nowhere do we read that the man who marries a wife receives any grace of God. There is not even a divinely instituted sign in marriage, nor do we read anywhere that marriage was instituted by God to be a sign of anything. To be sure, whatever takes place in a visible manner can be understood as a figure or allegory of something invisible. But figures or allegories are not sacraments, in the sense in which we use the term.

Furthermore, since marriage has existed from the beginning of the world and is still found among unbelievers, there is no reason why it should be called a sacrament of the New Law and of the church alone. The marriages of the ancients were no less sacred than are ours, nor are those of unbelievers less true marriages than those of believers, and yet they are not regarded as sacraments. Besides, even among believers there are married folk who are wicked and worse than any heathen; why should marriage be called a sacrament in their case and not among the heathen? Or are we going to talk the same sort of nonsense about baptism and the church and say that marriage is a sacrament only in the church, just as some make the mad claim that temporal power exists only in the church? That is childish and foolish talk, by which we expose our ignorance and foolhardiness to the ridicule of unbelievers.

But they will say, “The Apostle says in Eph. 5[:31–32], ‘The two shall become one. This is a great sacrament.’¹⁶¹ Surely you are not going to contradict so plain a statement of the Apostle!” I reply: This argument like the others betrays great shallowness and a careless and thoughtless reading of Scripture. Nowhere in all of the Holy Scriptures is this word *sacramentum* employed in the sense in which we use the term; it has an entirely different meaning. For wherever it occurs it denotes not the sign of a sacred thing, but the sacred, secret, hidden thing itself. Thus Paul writes in 1 Cor. 4[:1]: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the ‘mysteries’ of God,” that is, the sacraments. For where we have [in the Vulgate] the word *sacramentum* the Greek original has *mysterion*, which the translator sometimes translates and sometimes retains in its Greek form. Thus our verse in the Greek reads: “They two shall become one. This is a great mystery.” This explains how they came to understand a sacrament of the New Law here, a

¹⁶¹ The quotation is from the Vulgate. Luther points to its divergence from the Greek original, which the English versions have more literally rendered with the word “mystery.”

thing they would never have done if they had read *mysterium*, as it is in the Greek.¹⁶²

Thus Christ himself is called a “sacrament” in 1 Tim. 3[:16]: “Great indeed, is the sacrament (that is the mystery): He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” Why have they not drawn out of this passage an eighth sacrament¹⁶³ of the New Law, since they have the clear authority of Paul? But if they restrained themselves here, where they had a most excellent opportunity to invent new sacraments, why are they so unrestrained in the other passage? Plainly, it was their ignorance of both words and things that betrayed them. They clung to the mere sound of the words, indeed, to their own fancies. For, having once arbitrarily taken the word *sacramentum* to mean a sign, they immediately, without thought or scruple, made a “sign” of it every time they came upon it in the Holy Scriptures. Such new meanings of words, human customs, and other things they have dragged into the Holy Scriptures. They have transformed the Scriptures according to their own dreams, making anything out of any passage whatsoever. Thus they continually chatter nonsense about the terms: good work, evil work, sin, grace, righteousness, virtue, and almost all the fundamental words and things. For they employ them all after their own arbitrary judgment, learned from the writings of men, to the detriment of both the truth of God and of our salvation.

Therefore, sacrament, or mystery, in Paul is that wisdom of the Spirit, hidden in a mystery, as he says in 1 Cor. 2[:7–8], which is Christ, who for this very reason is not known to the rulers of this world, wherefore they also crucified him, and for them he remains to this day folly [1 Cor. 1:23], an offense, a stumbling stone [Rom. 9:32–33], and a sign that is spoken against [Luke 2:34]. The preachers he calls stewards [1 Cor. 4:1] of these mysteries because they preach Christ, the power and the wisdom of God [1 Cor. 1:24], yet in such a way that, unless you believe, you cannot understand it. Therefore, a sacrament is a mystery, or secret thing, which is set forth in words, but received by the faith of the heart. Such a sacrament is spoken of in the passage before us: “The two shall become one. This is a great sacrament” [Eph. 5:31–32], which they understand as spoken of marriage, whereas Paul himself wrote these words as applying to Christ and the church, and clearly explained them

¹⁶² Erasmus edited the first published Greek New Testament in March, 1516. Luther used Erasmus’ work as soon as it came out, as may be seen in his lectures on Romans, 1515–16. In an interesting letter to Luther of February 14, 1519, Froben announces the second edition of Erasmus’ New Testament, which Luther used in making his translation, 1521–22. *PE* 2, 258 n. 2.

¹⁶³ Cf. pp. 18 and 109.

himself by saying: “I take it to mean Christ and the church” [Eph. 5:32]. See how well Paul and these men agree! Paul says he is proclaiming a great sacrament in Christ and the church, but they proclaim it in terms of man and a woman! If such liberty in the interpretation of the sacred Scriptures is permitted, it is small wonder that one finds here anything he pleases, even a hundred sacraments.

Christ and the church are, therefore, a mystery, that is, a great and secret thing which can and ought to be represented in terms of marriage as a kind of outward allegory. But marriage ought not for that reason to be called a sacrament. The heavens are a type of the apostles, as Ps. 19 declares; the sun is a type of Christ; the waters, of the peoples; but that does not make those things sacraments, for in every case there are lacking both the divine institution and the divine promise, which constitute a sacrament. Hence Paul, in Eph. 5[:29–32], following his own mind, applies to Christ these words of Gen. 2[:24] about marriage; or else, following the general view,¹⁶⁴ he teaches that the spiritual marriage of Christ is also contained therein, when he says: “As Christ cherishes the church, because we are members of his body, of his flesh and his bones. ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.’ This is a great sacrament, and I take it to mean Christ and the church.” You see, he would have the whole passage apply to Christ, and is at pains to admonish the reader to understand that the sacrament is in Christ and the church, not in marriage.¹⁶⁵

Granted that marriage is a figure of Christ and the church; yet it is not a divinely instituted sacrament, but invented by men in the church who are carried away by their ignorance of both the word and the thing. This ignorance, when it does not conflict with the faith, is to be borne in charity, just as many other human practices due to weakness and ignorance are borne in the church, so long as they do not

¹⁶⁴ The precise meaning is not clear.

¹⁶⁵ The following paragraph, because it clearly breaks into the context and belongs elsewhere, is here relegated to a footnote:

I admit, of course, that the sacrament of penance existed in the Old Law, and even from the beginning of the world. But the new promise of penance and the gift of the keys are peculiar to the New Law. Just as we now have baptism instead of circumcision, so we have the keys instead of sacrifices and other signs of penance. We said above that the same God at various times gave different promises and diverse signs for the remission of sins and the salvation of men; nevertheless, all received the same grace. Thus it is said in 2 Cor. 4[:13]: “Since we have the same spirit of faith, we too believe, and so we speak.” And in 1 Cor. 10[:1–4]: “Our fathers all ate the same supernatural food and drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” Thus also in Heb. 11[:13, 40]: “These all died, not having received what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” For Christ himself is, yesterday and today and forever [Heb. 13:8], the head of his church, from the beginning even to the end of the world. Therefore there are diverse signs, but the faith of all is the same. Indeed, without faith it is impossible to please God, yet by it Abel did please him (Heb. 11[:4]).

conflict with the faith and the Holy Scriptures. But we are now arguing for the certainty and purity of faith and the Scriptures. We expose our faith to ridicule if we affirm that a certain thing is contained in the sacred Scriptures and in the articles of our faith, only to be refuted and shown that it is not contained in them; being found ignorant of our own affairs, we become a stumbling block to our opponents and to the weak. But most of all we should guard against impairing the authority of the Holy Scriptures. For those things which have been delivered to us by God in the sacred Scriptures must be sharply distinguished from those that have been invented by men in the church, no matter how eminent they may be for saintliness and scholarship.

So far concerning marriage itself.

[Canonical Impediments to Marriage]

But what shall we say *concerning the wicked laws of men by which this divinely ordained way of life has been ensnared* and tossed to and fro? Good God! It is dreadful to contemplate the audacity of the Roman despots, who both dissolve and compel marriages as they please. I ask you, has mankind been handed over to the caprice of these men for them to mock them and in every way abuse them and make of them whatever they please, for the sake of filthy lucre?

There is circulating far and wide and enjoying a great reputation a book whose contents have been confusedly poured together out of all the dregs and filth of man-made ordinances. Its title is “The Angelic *Summa*,”¹⁶⁶ although it ought rather to be “The More than Devilish *Summa*.” Among endless other monstrosities, which are supposed to instruct the confessors, whereas they most mischievously confuse them, there are enumerated in this book eighteen impediments to marriage.¹⁶⁷ If you will examine these with the just and unprejudiced eye of faith, you will see that they belong to those things which the Apostle foretold: “There shall be those that give heed to the spirits of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, forbidding to marry” [1 Tim. 4:1–3]. What is “forbidding to marry” if it is not this—to invent all those hindrances and set those snares, in order to prevent people from marrying, or, if

¹⁶⁶ The *Summa de Casibus Conscientiae*, popularly named after its author, Angelo Garletti di Chivasso (1411–1495); a favorite handbook on casuistry treating alphabetically all possible cases of conscience, for the guidance of priests hearing confession. Under the heading of “Matrimony” it listed 18 impediments to marriage. The book went through 31 editions between 1476 and 1520, and was among the papal books burned by Luther, together with the bull, December 10, 1520. (Cf. Luther’s letter to Spalatin on the same day, WA, Br 2. 234 and 235 n. 2.)

¹⁶⁷ For fuller discussion of the impediments see Luther’s *Vom ehelichen Leben* (1522) in WA 10^{II}, 280–287; also the article on “Marriage” by E. Sehling, in Schaff-Herzog, *op. cit.*, VII, 200–203.

they are married to annul their marriage? Who gave this power to men? Granted that they were holy men and impelled by godly zeal, why should another's holiness disturb my liberty? Why should another's zeal take me captive? Let whoever will be a saint and a zealot, and to his heart's content, only let him not bring harm upon another, and let him not rob me of my liberty!

Yet I am glad that those shameful laws have at last reached their full measure of glory, which is this: that the Romanists of our day have through them become merchants. What is it that they sell? Vulvas and genitals—merchandise indeed most worthy of such merchants, grown altogether filthy and obscene through greed and godlessness. For there is no impediment nowadays that may not be legalized through the intercession of mammon. These laws of men seem to have sprung into existence for the sole purpose of serving those greedy men and rapacious Nimrods [Gen. 10:8–9]¹⁶⁸ as snares for taking money and as nets for catching souls, and in order that “abomination” might stand in “the holy place” [Matt. 24:15], the church of God, and openly sell to men the pudenda of both sexes, or (as the Scriptures say) “shame and nakedness” [Lev. 18:6–18], of which they had previously robbed them by means of their laws. O worthy trade for our pontiffs to ply, instead of the ministry of the gospel, which in their greed and pride they despise, being given up to a reprobate mind [Rom. 1:28] with utter shame and infamy.

But what shall I say or do? If I enter into details, the treatise will grow beyond all bounds. Everything is in such dire confusion that one does not know where to begin, how far to go, and where to leave off. This I do know, that no state is governed successfully by means of laws. If the ruler is wise, he will govern better by a natural sense of justice than by laws. If he is not wise, he will foster nothing but evil through legislation, since he will not know what use to make of the laws nor how to adapt them to the case at hand. Therefore, in civil affairs more stress should be laid on putting good and wise men in office than on making laws; for such men will themselves be the very best of laws, and will judge every variety of case with a lively sense of equity. And if there is knowledge of the divine law combined with natural wisdom, then written laws will be entirely superfluous and harmful. Above all, love needs no laws whatever.

Nevertheless, I will say and do what I can. I ask and urge all priests and friars¹⁶⁹ when they encounter any impediment to marriage from which the pope can grant

¹⁶⁸ Cf. p. 12.

¹⁶⁹ It is to be borne in mind that all that follows is in the nature of advice to confessors in dealing with difficult cases of conscience, and is parallel to the closing paragraphs of the section on the Sacrament of the Bread.

dispensation but which is not stated in the Scriptures, by all means to confirm¹⁷⁰ all marriages that may have been contracted¹⁷¹ in any way contrary to the ecclesiastical or pontifical laws. But let them arm themselves with the divine law which says: “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder” [Matt. 19:6]. For the joining together of a man and a woman is of divine law and is binding, however much it may conflict with the laws of men; the laws of men must give way before it without any hesitation. For if a man leaves father and mother and cleaves to his wife [Matt. 19:5], how much more will he tread underfoot the silly and wicked laws of men, in order to cleave to his wife! And if pope, bishop, or official¹⁷² should annul any marriage because it was contracted contrary to the laws of men, he is Antichrist, he does violence to nature, and is guilty of treason against the Divine Majesty, because this word stands: “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder” [Matt. 19:6].

Besides this, no man had the right to frame such laws, and Christ has granted to Christians a liberty which is above all the laws of men, especially where a law of God conflicts with them. Thus it is said in Mark 2[:28]: “The Son of man is lord even of the sabbath,” and “Man was not made for the sabbath, but the sabbath for man” [Mark 2:27]. Moreover, such laws were condemned beforehand by Paul when he foretold that there would be men forbidding to marry [1 Tim. 4:3]. Here, therefore, those inflexible impediments derived from affinity, by spiritual or legal relationship,¹⁷³ and from blood relationship must give way, so far as the Scriptures permit, in which the second degree of consanguinity alone is prohibited. Thus it is written in Lev. 18[:6–18], where there are twelve persons a man is prohibited from marrying: his mother, stepmother, full sister, half-sister by either parent, granddaughter, father’s or mother’s sister, daughter-in-law, brother’s wife, wife’s sister, stepdaughter, and his uncle’s wife. Here only the first degree of affinity and the second degree of consanguinity are forbidden; yet not without exception, as will appear on closer examination, for the brother’s or sister’s daughter—the niece—is not included in the prohibition, although she is in the second degree. Therefore, if a marriage has been contracted outside of these degrees, which are the only ones which have been prohibited by God’s appointment, it should by no means be annulled on account of the laws of men. For marriage itself, being a divine institution, is incomparably superior to any laws, so that marriage should not be

¹⁷⁰ Namely, by officiating at the marriage ceremony.

¹⁷¹ Namely, by betrothal.

¹⁷² Judge of the bishop’s court.

¹⁷³ Relationship arising from sponsorship at baptism or through legal adoption. Cf. *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, PE 2, 128–129.

annulled for the sake of the law, rather the laws should be broken for the sake of marriage.

In the same way that nonsense about compaternities, commaternities, confraternities, consororities, and confilieties must be completely abolished in the contracting of marriage. What was it but the superstition of men that invented this “spiritual affinity”? If one who baptized is not permitted to marry her whom he has baptized or stood sponsor for, what right has any Christian man to marry a Christian woman? Is the relationship that grows out of the external rite or sign of the sacrament more intimate than that which grows out of the blessing of the sacrament¹⁷⁴ itself? Is not a Christian man the brother of a Christian woman, and is she not his sister? Is not a baptized man the spiritual brother of a baptized woman? How foolish we are! If a man instructs his wife in the gospel and in faith in Christ, does he not truly become her father in Christ? And is it not lawful for her to remain his wife? Would not Paul have had the right to marry a girl from among the Corinthians, of whom he boasts that he became their father in Christ? [1 Cor. 4:15]. See then, how Christian liberty has been suppressed through the blindness of human superstition.

There is even less in the “legal affinity,” and yet they have set it above the divine right of marriage. Nor would I agree to that impediment which they call “disparity of religion,” which forbids one to marry an unbaptized person, either simply, or on condition that she be converted to the faith. Who made this prohibition? God or man? Who gave to men the power to prohibit such a marriage? Indeed, the spirits that speak lies in hypocrisy, as Paul says [1 Tim. 4:2]. Of them it must be said: “Godless men have told me fables which do not conform to thy law” [Ps. 119:85].¹⁷⁵ The heathen Patricius married the Christian Monica, mother of St. Augustine; why should that not be permitted today? The same stupid, or rather, wicked severity is seen in the “impediment of crime,” as when a man has married a woman with whom he previously had committed adultery, or when he plotted to bring about the death of a woman’s husband in order to be able to wed the widow. I ask you, whence comes this cruelty of man toward man, which even God never demanded? Do they pretend not to know that Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, was wed by David, a most saintly man, after the double crime of adultery and murder? [2 Sam. 11:1–27]. If the divine law did this, what are these despotic men doing to their fellow servants?

¹⁷⁴ *res sacramenti*, cf. p. 23 n. 45, above.

¹⁷⁵ Vulgate version.

They also recognize what they call “the impediment of a tie,” that is, when a man is bound to another woman by betrothal. Here they conclude that, if he has had sexual relations with a second woman, his engagement to the first becomes null and void. This I do not understand at all. I hold that he who has betrothed himself to one woman no longer belongs to himself. Because of this fact, by the prohibition of the divine law, he belongs to the first with whom he has not had intercourse, even though he has had intercourse with the second. For it was not in his power to give the latter what was no longer his own; he has deceived her and actually committed adultery. But they regard the matter differently because they pay more heed to the carnal union than to the divine command, according to which the man, having plighted his troth to the first, is bound to keep it forever. For whoever would give anything must give of that which is his own. And God forbids a man to transgress and wrong his brother in any matter [1 Thess. 4:6]. This must be observed over and above all the ordinances of all men. Therefore I believe that such a man cannot with a good conscience live in marriage with a second woman, and this impediment should be completely reversed. For if a monastic vow makes a man no longer his own, why does not a pledge of mutual faithfulness¹⁷⁶ do the same? After all, faithfulness is one of the precepts and fruits of the Spirit, in Gal. 5: [22], while a monastic vow is of human invention. And if a wife may claim her husband back, despite the fact that he has taken a monastic vow, why may not an engaged woman claim back her betrothed, even though he has intercourse with another? But we have said above¹⁷⁷ that he who has plighted his troth to a girl may not take a monastic vow, but is in duty bound to marry her because he is in duty bound to keep faith with her; and this faith he may not break for any ordinance of men, because it is commanded by God. Much more should the man here keep faith with his first betrothed, since he could not plight his troth to a second except with a lying heart; and therefore did not really plight it, but deceived her, his neighbor, against God’s command. Therefore, the “impediment of error”¹⁷⁸ enters in here, by which his marriage to the second woman is rendered null and void.

The “impediment of ordination” is also the mere invention of men, especially since they prate that it annuls even a marriage already contracted. They constantly exalt their own ordinances above the commands of God. I do not indeed sit in judgment on the present state of the priestly order, but I observe that Paul charges a

¹⁷⁶ *fides data et accepta*. Luther here regards the *fides* of Gal. 5:22 as *Treue* or “faithfulness.” In his New Testament he later translates it as *Glaube* or “faith.”

¹⁷⁷ Cf. p. 79.

¹⁷⁸ With fine sarcasm Luther here plays off one impediment against another. “Error” generally meant cases of mistaken identity or false information concerning prior marital status. Cf. WA 10^{II}, 285.

bishop to be the husband of one wife [1 Tim. 3:2]. Hence, no marriage of deacon, priest, bishop or any other order can be annulled, although it is true that Paul knew nothing of this species of priests and of the orders we have today. Perish then those cursed man-made ordinances which have crept into the church only to multiply perils, sins, and evils! There exists, therefore, between a priest and his wife a true and indissoluble marriage, approved by the divine commandment. But what if wicked men in sheer despotism prohibit or annul it? So be it! Let it be wrong among men; it is nevertheless right before God, whose command must take precedence if it conflicts with the commands of men [Acts 5:29].

An equally lying invention is that “impediment of public decency,” by which contracted marriages are annulled. I am incensed at that barefaced wickedness which is so ready to put asunder what God has joined together that one may well recognize Antichrist in it, for it opposes all that Christ has done and taught. What earthly reason is there for holding that no relative of a deceased fiancé, even to the fourth degree of consanguinity, may marry his fiancée? That is not a judgment of public decency, but ignorance¹⁷⁹ of public decency. Why was not this judgment of public decency found among the people of Israel, who were endowed with the best laws, the laws of God? On the contrary, the next of kin was even compelled by the law of God to marry the widow of his relative [Deut. 25:5]. Must the people of Christian liberty be burdened with more severe laws than the people of legal bondage?

But, to make an end of these—figments rather than impediments—I will say that so far there seem to me to be no impediments that may justly annul a contracted marriage except these: sexual impotence, ignorance of a previously contracted marriage, and a vow of chastity. Still, concerning this latter vow, I am to this day so far from certain that I do not know at what age such a vow is to be regarded as binding, as I also said above in discussing the sacrament of baptism.¹⁸⁰ Thus you may learn, from this one question of marriage, how wretchedly and desperately all the activities of the church have been confused, hindered, ensnared and subjected to danger through the pestilent, ignorant, and wicked ordinances of men, so that there is no hope of betterment unless we abolish at one stroke all the laws of all men, and having restored the gospel of liberty we follow it in judging and regulating all things. Amen.

¹⁷⁹ An untranslatable pun: *non iustitia sed inscitia*.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. pp. 80–81.

[Impotence]

We must therefore speak of sexual impotence, in order that we may the more readily advise the souls that are laboring in peril.¹⁸¹ But first I wish to state that what I have said about impediments is intended to apply after a marriage has been contracted. I mean to say that no marriage should be annulled by any such impediment. But as to marriages which are yet to be contracted, I would briefly repeat what I have said above.¹⁸² If there is the stress of youthful passion or some other necessity for which the pope grants dispensation, then any brother may also grant a dispensation to another or even to himself, and following that counsel snatch his wife out of the power of tyrannical laws as best he can. For with what right am I deprived of my liberty by somebody else's superstition and ignorance? If the pope grants a dispensation for money, why should not I, for my soul's salvation, grant a dispensation to myself or to my brother? Does the pope set up laws? Let him set them up for himself, and keep hands off my liberty, or I will take it by stealth!

Now let us discuss the matter of *impotence*.

Consider the following case: A woman, wed to an impotent man, is unable to prove her husband's impotence in court, or perhaps she is unwilling to do so with the mass of evidence and all the notoriety which the law demands; yet she is desirous of having children or is unable to remain continent. Now suppose I had counseled her to procure a divorce from her husband in order to marry another, satisfied that her own and her husband's conscience and their experience were ample testimony of his impotence; but the husband refused his consent to this. Then I would further counsel her, with the consent of the man (who is not really her husband, but only a dweller under the same roof with her), to have intercourse with another, say her husband's brother, but to keep this marriage secret and to ascribe the children to the so-called putative father. The question is: Is such a woman saved and in a saved state? I answer: Certainly, because in this case an error,¹⁸³ ignorance of the man's impotence, impedes the marriage; and the tyranny of the laws permits no divorce. But the woman is free through the divine law, and cannot be compelled to remain continent. Therefore the man ought to concede her right, and give up to somebody else the wife who is his only in outward appearance.

Moreover, if the man will not give his consent, or agree to this separation—rather than allow the woman to burn [1 Cor. 7:9] or to commit adultery—I would

¹⁸¹ Cf. p. 98 n. 169.

¹⁸² Cf. pp. 96–98.

¹⁸³ Cf. p. 101 n. 178.

counsel her to contract a marriage with another and flee to a distant unknown place. What other counsel can be given to one constantly struggling with the dangers of natural emotions? Now I know that some are troubled by the fact that the children of this secret marriage are not the rightful heirs of their putative father. But if it was done with the consent of the husband, then the children will be the rightful heirs. If, however, it was done without his knowledge or against his will, then let unbiased Christian reason, or better, charity, decide which one of the two has done the greater injury to the other. The wife alienates the inheritance, but the husband has deceived his wife and is defrauding her completely of her body and her life. Is not the sin of a man who wastes his wife's body and life a greater sin than that of the woman who merely alienates the temporal goods of her husband? Let him, therefore, agree to a divorce, or else be satisfied with heirs not his own, for by his own fault he deceived an innocent girl and defrauded her both of life and of the full use of her body, besides giving her an almost irresistible cause for committing adultery. Let both be weighed in the same scales. Certainly, by every right, fraud should recoil on the fraudulent, and whoever has done an injury must make it good. What is the difference between such a husband and the man who holds another man's wife captive together with her husband? Is not such a tyrant compelled to support wife and children and husband, or else to set them free? Why should not the same hold true here? Therefore I maintain that the man should be compelled either to submit to a divorce or to support the other man's child as his heir. Doubtless this would be the judgment of charity. In that case, the impotent man, who is not really the husband, should support the heir of his wife in the same spirit in which he would at great expense wait on his wife if she fell sick or suffered some other ill; for it is by his fault and not by his wife's that she suffers this ill. This I have set forth to the best of my ability, for the strengthening of anxious consciences, because my desire is to bring my afflicted brethren in this captivity what little comfort I can.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Several factors ought to be considered in evaluating the two preceding paragraphs, a much criticized section which Wace and Buchheim have omitted altogether from their translation: (1) Couched in the language of the scholars only, this Latin treatise was not intended for popular consumption but rather as a guide for bewildered and confused priests, who were called upon in the confessional to give practical advice and spiritual comfort to troubled souls (cf. p. 98 n. 169). (2) The impediment of impotency was, even according to Roman church law, sufficient ground for declaring a marriage null and void. (3) But the legal process of securing an annulment demanded such an involved procedure for establishing proof that it was equally unpleasant for both parties. (4) Then, as now, divorce under any circumstances was absolutely forbidden by Roman church law. (5) As an alternate to an impossible legal solution, Luther's suggestion of a secret marriage was not without precedent; common law in parts of Westphalia and Lower Saxony, for example, prescribed that a man who could not perform his conjugal duty was required to seek satisfaction for his wife through a neighbor (Jacob Grimm, *Weisthümer* [Göttingen, 1842], III, 42, 48, 70, 311). (6) That Luther's position did not involve any unconditional license for frustrated wives to engage in extra-marital liaisons, as his malicious interpreters

[Divorce]

As to divorce, it is still a question for debate whether it is allowable. For my part I so greatly detest divorce that I should prefer bigamy to it¹⁸⁵; but whether it is allowable, I do not venture to decide. Christ himself, the Chief Shepherd, says in Matt. 5[:32]: “Every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Christ, then, permits divorce, but only on the ground of unchastity. The pope must, therefore, be in error whenever he grants a divorce for any other cause; and no one should feel safe who has obtained a dispensation by this temerity (not authority) of the pope. Yet it is still a greater wonder to me, why they compel a man to remain unmarried after being separated from his wife by divorce, and why they will not permit him to remarry. For if Christ permits divorce on the ground of unchastity and compels no one to remain unmarried, and if Paul would rather have us marry than burn [1 Cor. 7:9], then he certainly seems to permit a man to marry another woman in the place of the one who has been put away. I wish that this subject were fully discussed and made clear and decided, so that counsel might be given in the infinite perils of those who, without any fault of their own, are nowadays compelled to remain unmarried; that is, those whose wives or husbands have run away and deserted them, to come back perhaps after ten years, perhaps never! This matter troubles and distresses me, for there are daily cases, whether by the special malice of Satan or because of our neglect of the Word of God.

I, indeed, who alone against all cannot establish any rule in this matter, would yet greatly desire at least the passage in 1 Cor. 7[:15] to be applied here: “But if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound.” Here the Apostle gives permission to put away the unbeliever who departs and to set the believing spouse free to marry again. Why should not the same hold true when a believer—that is, a believer in name, but in truth as much an unbeliever as the one Paul speaks of—deserts his wife, especially if he intends never to return. I certainly can see no difference between the two. But I believe that if in the Apostle’s day an unbelieving deserter had returned and had become a believer or had promised to live again with his believing wife, it would not have been permitted, but he too would have been given the right to marry again.

promptly inferred, is underscored in his *Sermon vom ehelichen Leben* of 1522, where he scores the offending husband even more severely than he does now (“when I was still shy”). WA 10^{II}, 278–279. Cf. Buchwald. *op. cit.*, II, 482 n. 4, and Woolf, *op. cit.*, p. 303 n. 2.

¹⁸⁵ As he actually did later in the case of Henry VIII and Philip of Hesse, considering it to be the lesser of two evils insofar as it was not without divinely sanctioned precedent in the Old Testament

Nevertheless, in these matters I decide nothing (as I have said), although there is nothing that I would rather see decided, since nothing at present more grievously perplexes me, and many others with me. I would have nothing decided here on the mere authority of the pope and the bishops; but if two learned and good men agreed [Matt. 18:19–20] in the name of Christ and published their opinion in the spirit of Christ, I should prefer their judgment even to such councils as are assembled nowadays, famous only for numbers and authority, not for scholarship and saintliness. Therefore I hang up my lyre¹⁸⁶ on this matter until a better man confers with me about it.

Ordination

Of this sacrament the church of Christ knows nothing; it is an invention of the church of the pope. Not only is there nowhere any promise of grace attached to it, but there is not a single word said about it in the whole New Testament. Now it is ridiculous to put forth as a sacrament of God something that cannot be proved to have been instituted by God. I do not hold that this rite, which has been observed for so many centuries, should be condemned; but in sacred things I am opposed to the invention of human fictions. And it is not right to give out as divinely instituted what was not divinely instituted, lest we become a laughingstock to our opponents. We ought to see that every article of faith of which we boast is certain, pure, and based on clear passages of Scripture. But we are utterly unable to do that in the case of the sacrament under consideration.

The church has no power to make new divine promises of grace, as some prate, who hold that what is decreed by the church is of no less authority than what is decreed by God, since the church is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For the church was born by the word of promise through faith, and by this same word is nourished and preserved. That is to say, it is the promises of God that make the church, and not the church that makes the promise of God. For the Word of God is incomparably superior to the church, and in this Word the church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but only to be decreed, ordained, and made. For who begets his own parent? Who first brings forth his own maker?

This one thing indeed the church can do: It can distinguish the Word of God from the words of men; as Augustine confesses that he believed the gospel because he was moved by the authority of the church which proclaimed that this is the

¹⁸⁶ This is an allusion to the fact that he is writing a “prelude.” Cf. Ps. 137:2.

gospel.¹⁸⁷ Not that the church is therefore above the gospel; if that were true, she would also be above God, in whom we believe because the church proclaims that he is God. But, as Augustine says elsewhere,¹⁸⁸ the truth itself lays hold on the soul and thus renders it able to judge most certainly of all things; however, the soul is not able to judge the truth, but is compelled to say with unerring certainty that this is the truth. For example, our mind declares with unerring certainty that three and seven are ten; and yet it cannot give a reason why this is true, although it cannot deny that it is true. It is clearly taken captive by the truth; and, rather than judging the truth, it is itself judged by it. There is such a mind also in the church, when under the enlightenment of the Spirit she judges and approves doctrines; she is unable to prove it, and yet is most certain of having it. For as among philosophers no one judges the general concepts, but all are judged by them, so it is among us with the mind of the Spirit, Who judges all things and is judged by no one, as the Apostle says [1 Cor. 2:16]. But of this another time.

Let this then stand fast: The church can give no promises of grace; that is the work of God alone. Therefore she cannot institute a sacrament. But even if she could, it still would not necessarily follow that ordination is a sacrament. For who knows which is the church that has the Spirit? For when such decisions are made there are usually only a few bishops or scholars present; and it is possible that these may not be really of the church. All may err, as councils have repeatedly erred, particularly the Council of Constance,¹⁸⁹ which erred most wickedly of all. Only that which has the approval of the church universal, and not of the Roman church alone, rests on a trustworthy foundation. I therefore admit that ordination is a certain churchly rite, on a par with many others introduced by the church fathers, such as the consecration of vessels, houses, vestments, water, salt,¹⁹⁰ candles,¹⁹¹ herbs,¹⁹² wine,¹⁹³ and the like. No one calls any of these a sacrament, nor is there in them any promise. In the same manner, to anoint a man's hands with oil, or to shave

¹⁸⁷ "Against the Epistle of Manichaeus Called Fundamental" in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, 1887), Series I, IV, 131. Migne 42, 176. Luther gives a fuller interpretation of the meaning of Augustine's statement in *A Reply to the Texts Quoted in Defense of the Doctrines of Men* (1522). PE 2, 451–453.

¹⁸⁸ "The Trinity," 9, 6, 10, ed. John Baillie, et al., *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia, 1955), VIII, 64. Migne 42, 966.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. p. 27 n. 55, and p. 28 n. 58.

¹⁹⁰ Used in connection with baptism.

¹⁹¹ Used on Candlemas, Feast of the Purification of Mary, February 2.

¹⁹² Used on the Feasts of the Assumption of Mary, August 15; and of St. Peter's Chains, August 1.

¹⁹³ Not the sacramental element, but the wine consecrated on the Feast of St. John, December 27, and drunk as a remembrance of John at the time of weddings, dying, and departing on a journey. Cf. Buchwald, *op. cit.*, II, 489 n. 2.

his head and the like is not to administer a sacrament, since no promise is attached to them; they are simply being prepared for a certain office, like a vessel or an instrument.

But you will say: “What do you do with Dionysius,¹⁹⁴ who in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* enumerates six sacraments, among which he also includes ordination?” I answer: I am well aware that this is the one writer of antiquity who is cited in support of the seven sacraments, although he omits marriage and so has only six.¹⁹⁵ But we read nothing at all about these “sacraments” in the rest of the fathers; nor do they ever regard them as sacraments when they speak of these things. For the invention of sacraments is of recent date.¹⁹⁶ Indeed, to speak more boldly, it greatly displeases me to assign such importance to this Dionysius, whoever he may have been, for he shows hardly any signs of solid learning. I would ask, by what authority and with what arguments does he prove his hodge-podge about the angels in his *Celestial Hierarchy*—a book over which many curious and superstitious spirits have cudged their brains? If one were to read and judge without prejudice, is not everything in it his own fancy and very much like a dream? But in his *Theology*, which is rightly called *Mystical*, of which certain very ignorant theologians make so much, he is downright dangerous, for he is more of a Platonist than a Christian. So if I had my way, no believing soul would give the least attention to these books. So far, indeed, from learning Christ in them, you will lose even what you already know of him. I speak from experience Let us rather hear Paul, that we may learn Jesus Christ and him crucified [1 Cor. 2:2]. He is the way, the life, and the truth; he is the ladder [Gen 28:12] by which we come to the Father, as he says: “No one comes to the Father, but by me” [John 14:6].

Similarly, in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, what does this Dionysius do but describe certain churchly rites, and amuse himself with allegories without proving anything? Just as has been done in our time by the author of the book entitled

¹⁹⁴ Dionysius, the Areopagite, was the pseudonym of the unknown author (*circa* 500. in Syria?) of the neoplatonic writings, *Of the Celestial Hierarchy*, *Of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and *of Mystical Theology*. J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae, Series Graeca*, vol. 3. Luther was among the first to question the high repute and ancient origin which tradition had assigned to these writings when it identified their author with Paul's convert of Acts 17:34.

¹⁹⁵ Omitting marriage, confirmation, and penance, Dionysius mentions six sacraments: baptism, eucharist, unction, ordination of priests, ordination of monks, and burial rites. Schaff-Herzog, *op. cit.*, X, 142.

¹⁹⁶ The system of seven sacraments was first generally accepted on the authority of Peter Lombard, and was first made official doctrine by the Council of Florence, 1439. Buchwald, *op. cit.*, II, 490 n. 2.

Rationale divinorum.¹⁹⁷ Such allegorical studies are for idle men. Do you think I should find it difficult to amuse myself with allegories about anything in creation? Did not Bonaventura by allegory draw the liberal arts into theology?¹⁹⁸ And Gerson even converted the smaller Donatus into a mystical theologian.¹⁹⁹ It would not be difficult for me to compose a better hierarchy than that of Dionysius; for he knew nothing of pope, cardinals and archbishops, and put the bishop at the top. Who has so weak a mind as not to be able to launch into allegories? I would not have a theologian devote himself to allegories until he has exhausted the legitimate and simple meaning of the Scripture; otherwise his theology will bring him into danger, as Origen²⁰⁰ discovered.

Therefore a thing does not need to be a sacrament simply because Dionysius so describes it. Otherwise, why not also make a sacrament of the [funeral] processions, which he describes in his book, and which continue to this day? There will then be as many sacraments as there have been rites and ceremonies multiplied in the church. Standing on so unsteady a foundation, they have nevertheless invented “characters”²⁰¹ which they attribute to this sacrament of theirs and which are indelibly impressed on those who are ordained. Whence do such ideas come, I ask? By what authority, with what arguments, are they established? We do not object to their being free to invent, say, and assert whatever they please; but we also insist on our liberty, that they shall not arrogate to themselves the right to turn their opinions into articles of faith, as they have hitherto presumed to do. It is enough that we

¹⁹⁷ William Durandus (1237–96), bishop of Mende. His book, written in 1296, is the standard authority for the laws, ceremonies, customs, and symbolism of thirteenth-century Roman rites and vestments. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, *op. cit.*, V, 207.

¹⁹⁸ In his *De reductione artium ad theologiam*, the Franciscan Bonaventura (1221–1274) sought to relate all human knowledge to theology. All the arts and sciences were found to have points of contact in Scripture; and their several activities were regarded as parables of heavenly processes. Buchwald, *op. cit.*, II, 491 n. 4.

¹⁹⁹ Donatus (*circa* 350 A.D.), famous Latin grammarian, whose *Ars Minor* was the favorite medieval textbook. The chancellor of the University of Paris, John Gerson (1363–1429), published a *Donatus moralisatus seu per allegoriam traductus*, a mystical grammar, in which the noun was compared to man, the pronoun to man’s sinful state, the verb to the divine command to love, the adverb to the fulfilment of the divine law, etc.

²⁰⁰ Cf. p. 30 n. 65. Woolf regards Luther’s anti-allegorical insistence on the plain sense of Scripture as his greatest single contribution to modern biblical scholarship, and sees a most excellent example of his exegetical method on pp. 117–123 in this volume where he is discussing extreme unction. Cf. Woolf, *op. cit.*, 312 n. 1.

²⁰¹ The so-called *character indelibilis*, peculiar gift of ordination, meant that “once a priest, always a priest.” This “indelible mark” received authoritative statement in the bull *Exultate Deo* (1439). Eugene IV, summing up the decrees of the Council of Florence, says: “Among these sacraments there are three—baptism, confirmation, and orders—which indelibly impress upon the soul a character, i.e., a certain spiritual mark which distinguishes them from the rest.” The Council of Trent (1563) further defined the correct Roman teachings as follows: “The Holy Synod justly condemns the opinion of those who assert that the priests of the New Testament have only temporary power, and that those once rightly ordained can again be made laymen, if they do not exercise the ministry of the Word of God.” *PE* 2, 68 n. 5.

accommodate ourselves to their rites and ceremonies for the sake of peace; but we refuse to be bound by such things as if they were necessary to salvation, which they are not. Let them lay aside their despotic demand, and we shall yield free obedience to their wishes, in order that we may live in peace with one another. It is a shameful and wicked slavery for a Christian man, who is free, to be subject to any but heavenly and divine ordinances,

We come now to their strongest argument. It is this: Christ said at the Last Supper: “Do this in remembrance of me” [Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24–25]. “Look,” they say, “here Christ ordained the apostles to the priesthood.” From this passage they also concluded, among other things, that both kinds are to be administered to the priest alone.²⁰² In fact, they have drawn out of this passage whatever they pleased, as men who would arrogate to themselves the liberty to prove anything whatever from any words of Christ. But is that interpreting the words of God? I ask you: is it? Christ gives us no promise here, but only commands that this be done in remembrance of him. Why do they not conclude that he also ordained priests when he laid upon them the office of the Word and baptism, and said: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation, baptizing them in the name, etc.” [Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19]. For it is the proper duty of priests to preach and to baptize. Or, since it is nowadays the chief, and (as they say) indispensable duty of priests to read the canonical hours,²⁰³ why have they not discovered the sacrament of ordination in those passages in which Christ commanded them to pray, as he did in many places—particularly in the garden, that they might not enter into temptation? [Matt. 26:41]. But perhaps they will evade this argument by saying that it is not commanded to pray; it is enough to read the canonical hours. Then it follows that this priestly work can be proved nowhere in the Scriptures, and thus their praying priesthood is not of God; as, indeed, it is not.

But which of the ancient Fathers claimed that in this passage priests were ordained? Where does this new interpretation come from? I will tell you. They have sought by this means to set up a seed bed of implacable discord, by which clergy and laymen should be separated from each other farther than heaven from earth, to the incredible injury of the grace of baptism and to the confusion of our fellowship in the gospel. Here, indeed, are the roots of that detestable tyranny of the clergy over the laity. Trusting in the external anointing by which their hands are consecrated, in the tonsure and in vestments, they not only exalt themselves above

²⁰² Cf. pp. 20–28.

²⁰³ The stated daily prayers, fixed by canon, and contained in the breviary. The seven hours are respectively: matins (including nocturns and lauds), prime, tierce, sext, nones, vespers, and compline.

the rest of the lay Christians, who are only anointed with the Holy Spirit, but regard them almost as dogs and unworthy to be included with themselves in the church. Hence they are bold to demand, to exact, to threaten, to urge, to oppress, as much as they please. In short, the sacrament of ordination has been and still is an admirable device for establishing all the horrible things that have been done hitherto in the church, and are yet to be done. Here Christian brotherhood has perished, here shepherds have been turned into wolves, servants into tyrants, churchmen into worse than worldlings.

If they were forced to grant that all of us that have been baptized are equally priests, as indeed we are, and that only the ministry was committed to them, yet with our common consent, they would then know that they have no right to rule over us except insofar as we freely concede it. For thus it is written in 1 Pet. 2[:9]: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a priestly royalty.” Therefore we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians.²⁰⁴ But the priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us. All that they do is done in our name; the priesthood is nothing but a ministry. This we learn from 1 Cor. 4[:1]: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

From this it follows that whoever does not preach the Word, though he was called by the church to do this very thing, is no priest at all, and that the sacrament of ordination can be nothing else than a certain rite by which the church chooses its preachers. For this is the way a priest is defined in Mal. 2[:7]: “The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.” You may be certain, then, that whoever is not a messenger of the Lord of hosts, or whoever is called to do anything else than such messenger service—if I may so term it—is in no sense a priest; as Hos. 4[:6] says: “Because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me.” They are also called pastors because they are to pasture, that is, to teach. Therefore, those who are ordained only to read the canonical hours and to offer masses are indeed papal priests, but not Christian priests, because they not only do not preach, but they are not even called to preach. Indeed, it comes to this, that a priesthood of that sort is a different estate altogether from the office of preaching. Thus they are hour-reading and mass-saying priests—sort of living idols called priests—really

²⁰⁴ Cf. *An Open, Letter to the Christian Nobility*. PE 2, 69. The fullest development of Luther’s doctrine of the spiritual priesthood of believers is to be found in his writings against Emser (cf. p. 12 n. 4), especially his *Answer to the Superchristian, Superspiritual, and Superlearned Book of Goat Emser of Leipzig* (1521). PE 3, 310–401. Cf. also *The Misuse of the Mass* in this volume, pp. 127–230.

such priests as Jeroboam ordained, in Beth-aven,²⁰⁵ taken from the lowest dregs of the people, and not of Levi's tribe [1 Kings 12:31].

See how far the glory of the church has departed! The whole earth is filled with priests, bishops, cardinals, and clergy; yet not one of them preaches so far as his official duty is concerned, unless he is called to do so by a different call over and above his sacramental ordination. Every one thinks he is doing full justice to his ordination by mumbling the vain repetitions of his prescribed prayers and by celebrating masses. Moreover, he never really prays when he repeats those hours; or if he does pray, he prays them for himself. And he offers his mass as if it were a sacrifice, which is the height of perversity because the mass consists in the use made of the sacrament. It is clear, therefore, that the ordination, which, as a sacrament, makes clergymen of this sort of men, is in truth nothing but a mere fiction, devised by men who understand nothing about the church, the priesthood, the ministry of the Word, or the sacraments. Thus, as the "sacrament" is, so are the priests it makes. To such errors and such blindness has been added a still worse captivity: in order to separate themselves still farther from other Christians, whom they deem profane, they have unmanned themselves, like the Galli, who were the priests of Cybele,²⁰⁶ and they have taken upon themselves the burden of a spurious celibacy.

To satisfy this hypocrisy and the working of this error it was not enough that bigamy should be prohibited, that is, the having of two wives at one time, as it was forbidden in the law (and as is the accepted meaning of the term); but they have called it bigamy if a man marries two virgins, one after the other, or if he marries one widow. Indeed, so holy is the holiness of this most holy sacrament that no man can become a priest if he has married a virgin and his wife is still living. And—here we reach the very summit of sanctity—a man is even prevented from entering the priesthood if he has married a woman who was not a virgin, though he did so in ignorance or by unfortunate mischance. But if one has defiled six hundred harlots, or violated countless matrons and virgins, or even kept many Ganymedes, that would be no impediment to his becoming bishop or cardinal or pope. Moreover, the Apostle's word "husband of one wife" [1 Tim. 3:2] must now be interpreted to mean "the prelate of one church," and this has given rise to the "incompatible

²⁰⁵ Cf. p. 88 n. 153.

²⁰⁶ The eunuch priests of Cybele, "the Great Mother," ancient Phrygian nature goddess, were known as Galli. They ran about with dreadful cries, beating cymbals and cutting their flesh with knives.

benefices.”²⁰⁷ At the same time the pope, that munificent dispenser, may join to one man three, twenty or a hundred wives, that is, churches, if he is bribed with money or power, that is, “moved by godly charity and constrained by the care of the churches” [2 Cor. 11:28].

O pontiffs worthy of this venerable sacrament of ordination! O princes, not of the catholic churches, but of the synagogues of Satan [Rev. 2:9] and of darkness itself! I would cry out with Isaiah [Isa. 28:14], “You scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem”; and with Amos 6[:1], “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations, that go in with state into the house of Israel, etc.!” O the disgrace that these monstrous priests bring upon the church of God! Where are there any bishops or priests who even know the gospel, not to speak of preaching it? Why then do they boast of being priests? Why do they desire to be regarded as holier and better and mightier than other Christians, who are merely laymen? To read the hours—what unlearned men, or (as the Apostle says) men speaking with tongues [1 Cor. 14:23] cannot do that? But to pray the hours—that belongs to monks, hermits, and men in private life, even though they are laymen. The duty of a priest is to preach, and if he does not preach he is as much a priest as a picture of a man is a man. Does ordaining such babbling priests make one a bishop? Or blessing churches and bells? Or confirming children? Certainly not. Any deacon or layman could do as much. It is the ministry of the Word that makes the priest and the bishop.

Therefore my advice is: Begone, all of you that would live in safety; flee, young men, and do not enter upon this holy estate, unless you are determined to preach the gospel, and can believe that you are made not one whit better than the laity through this “sacrament” of ordination! For to read the hours is nothing, and to offer mass is to receive the sacrament. What then is there left to you that every layman does not have? Tonsure and vestments? A sorry priest, indeed, who consists of tonsure and vestments! Or the oil poured on your fingers? But every Christian is anointed and sanctified both in body and soul with the oil of the Holy Spirit. In ancient times every Christian handled the sacrament with his hands as often as the priests do now.²⁰⁸ But today our superstition counts it a great crime if the laity touch either the bare chalice or the corporal; not even a nun who is a pure virgin would be permitted

²⁰⁷ The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 had decreed that no one could simultaneously hold two offices involving pastoral care. The clever and lucrative ways in which the popes legally circumvented this statute Luther describes in *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*. PE 2, 91–96.

²⁰⁸ Cf. 25–26.

to wash the palls²⁰⁹ and the sacred linens of the altar. O God! See how far the sacrosanct sanctity of this “sacrament” of ordination has gone! I expect the time will come when the laity will not be permitted to touch the altar—except when they offer their money. I almost burst with indignation when I contemplate the wicked tyrannies of these brazen men, who with their farcical and childish fancies mock and overthrow the liberty and glory of the Christian religion.

Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian, be assured of this, that we are all equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and the sacraments. However, no one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. (For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called.) And therefore this “sacrament” of ordination, if it is anything at all, is nothing else than a certain rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the church. Furthermore, the priesthood is properly nothing but the ministry of the Word—the Word, I say; not the law, but the gospel. And the diaconate is the ministry, not of reading the Gospel or the Epistle, as is the present practice, but of distributing the church’s aid to the poor, so that the priests may be relieved of the burden of temporal matters and may give themselves more freely to prayer and the Word. For this was the purpose of the institution of the diaconate, as we read in Acts 5 [6:1–6]. Whoever, therefore, does not know or preach the gospel is not only no priest or bishop, but he is a kind of pest to the church, who under the false title of priest or bishop, or dressed in sheep’s clothing, actually does violence to the gospel and plays the wolf [Matt. 7:15] in the church.

Therefore, unless these priests and bishops, with whom the church abounds today, work out their salvation [Phil. 2:12] in some other way; unless they realize that they are not priests or bishops, and bemoan the fact that they bear the name of an office whose duties they either do not know or cannot fulfil, and thus with prayers and tears lament their wretched hypocritical life—unless they do this, they are truly the people of eternal perdition, and the words of Isa. 5[:13f.] are fulfilled in them: “Therefore my people go into exile for want of knowledge; their honored men are dying of hunger, and their multitude is parched with thirst. Therefore Hell has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure, and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down, her throng and he who exults in her.” What a dreadful word for our age, in which Christians are swallowed up in so deep an abyss!

²⁰⁹ Covers for the chalice.

According to what the Scriptures teach us, what we call the priesthood is a ministry. So I cannot understand at all why one who has once been made a priest cannot again become a layman; for the sole difference between him and a layman is his ministry. But to depose a man from the priesthood is by no means impossible, because even now it is the usual penalty imposed upon guilty priests. They are either suspended temporarily, or permanently deprived of their office. For that fiction of an “indelible character”²¹⁰ has long since become a laughingstock. I admit that the pope imparts this “character,” but Christ knows nothing of it; and a priest who is consecrated with it becomes the life-long servant and captive, not of Christ, but of the pope, as is the case nowadays. Moreover, unless I am greatly mistaken, if this sacrament and this fiction ever fall to the ground, the papacy with its “characters” will scarcely survive. Then our joyous liberty will be restored to us; we shall realize that we are all equal by every right. Having cast off the yoke of tyranny, we shall know that he who is a Christian has Christ; and that he who has Christ has all things that are Christ’s, and can do all things [Phil. 4:13]. Of this I will write more,²¹¹ and more vigorously, as soon as I perceive that the above has displeased my friends the papists.

The Sacrament of Extreme Unction

To this rite of anointing the sick the theologians of our day have made two additions which are worthy of them: first, they call it a sacrament, and second, they make it the last sacrament. So it is now the sacrament of extreme unction, which is to be administered only to those who are at the point of death. Since they are such subtle dialecticians, perhaps they have done this in order to relate it to the first unction of baptism²¹² and the two subsequent ones of confirmation and ordination. But here they are able to cast in my teeth that, in the case of this sacrament, there are on the authority of the apostle James both promise and sign, which, as I have maintained all along, do constitute a sacrament. For the apostle says [Jas. 5:14–15]: “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins,

²¹⁰ Cf. p. 111 n. 201.

²¹¹ These basic ideas received expanded treatment about six weeks later in *The Freedom of a Christian*. LW 31, 329–377.

²¹² In the order for baptism, just after the Creed, the child was anointed with oil on chest and shoulders. Buchwald, *op. cit.*, II, 501 n. 1.

he will be forgiven.” There, they say, you have the promise of the forgiveness of sins and the sign of the oil.

But I say: If ever folly has been uttered, it has been uttered especially on this subject: I will say nothing of the fact that many²¹³ assert with much probability that this epistle is not by James the apostle, and that it is not worthy of an apostolic spirit; although, whoever was its author, it has come to be regarded as authoritative. But even if the apostle James did write it, I still would say, that no apostle has the right on his own authority to institute a sacrament, that is, to give a divine promise with a sign attached. For this belongs to Christ alone. Thus Paul says that he received from the Lord [1 Cor. 11:23] the sacrament of the Eucharist, and that he was not sent to baptize, but to preach the gospel [1 Cor. 1:17]. And nowhere do we read in the gospel of the sacrament of extreme unction. But let us also pass over the point. Let us examine the words of the apostle, or whoever was the author of the epistle, and we shall see at once how little heed these multipliers of sacraments have given to them.

In the first place, if they believe the apostle’s words to be true and binding, by what right do they change and contradict them? Why do they make an extreme and a special kind of unction out of that which the apostle wished to be general? For the apostle did not desire it to be an extreme unction or administered only to the dying, but he says expressly: “Is any one sick?” He does not say: “Is any one dying?” I do not care what learned discussions Dionysius has on this point in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.²¹⁴ The apostle’s words are clear enough, on which he as well as they rely; but they do not follow them. It is evident, therefore, that they have arbitrarily and without any authority made a sacrament and an extreme unction out of the words of the apostle which they have wrongly interpreted. And this works to the detriment of all other sick persons, whom they have deprived on their own authority of the benefit of the unction which the apostle enjoined.

But this is even a finer point: The apostle’s promise expressly declares: “The prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up, etc.” [Jas. 5:15]. See, the apostle in this passage commands us to anoint and to pray, in order that the sick man may be healed and raised up; that is, that he may not die, and that it may not be an extreme unction. This is proved also by the prayers which are used even to this day during the anointing, because the prayers are for the recovery of the

²¹³ Eusebius (*circa* 275–340) classed it among the *antilegomena* or contested writings. Jerome (*circa* 340–420) says it was regarded as pseudonymous in the Latin church. Luther’s contemporaries, the humanist Erasmus and the Catholic Cajetan, both contested its authenticity. See LW 35, 395 n. 47.

²¹⁴ Cf. p. 109 n. 194.

sick man. But they say, on the contrary, that the unction must be administered to none but the dying;²¹⁵ that is, that they may not be healed and raised up. If it were not so serious a matter, who could help laughing at this beautiful, apt, and sensible exposition of the apostle's words? Is not the folly of the sophists here shown in its true colors? Because here, as in so many other places, it affirms what the Scriptures deny, and denies what the Scriptures affirm. Why should we not give thanks to these excellent masters of ours?²¹⁶ Surely I spoke the truth when I said that they never uttered greater folly than on this subject.

Furthermore, if this unction is a sacrament, it must necessarily be (as they say) an "effective sign"²¹⁷ of that which it signifies and promises. Now it promises health and recovery to the sick, as the words plainly say: "The prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up" [Jas. 5:15]. But who does not see that this promise is seldom, if ever, fulfilled? Scarcely one in a thousand is restored to health, and when one is restored nobody believes that it came about through the sacrament, but through the working of nature or of medicine. Indeed to the sacrament they ascribe the opposite effect. What shall we say then? Either the apostle lies in making this promise or else this unction is no sacrament. For the sacramental promise is certain; but this promise fails in the majority of cases. Indeed—and here again we recognize the shrewdness and foresight of these theologians—for this very reason they would have it to be extreme unction, that the promise should not stand; in other words, that the sacrament should be no sacrament. For if it is extreme unction, it does not heal, but gives way to the disease; but if it heals, it cannot be extreme unction. Thus, by the interpretation of these masters, James is shown to have contradicted himself, and to have instituted a sacrament in order not to institute one; for they must have an extreme unction just to make untrue what the apostle intends, namely, the healing of the sick by it. If this is not madness, I ask you what is?

The word of the apostle in 1 Tim. 1[:7] describes these people: "Desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions." Thus they read and follow everything uncritically. With the same carelessness they have also found auricular confession in the apostle's words: "Confess your sins to one another" [Jas. 5:16]. But they do not observe the command of the apostle, that the elders of the church be called, and prayer be made for the sick [Jas. 5:14]. Scarcely one insignificant priest is sent

²¹⁵ All editions have *discessuris*, "departing," but WA 6, 568 n. 35, suggests *decessuris*, "dying."

²¹⁶ Cf. pp. 11–12.

²¹⁷ Cf. pp. 64–65.

nowadays, although the apostle would have many present, not because of the unction, but because of the prayer. That is why he says: “The prayer of faith will save the sick man, etc.” [Jas. 5:15]. I have my doubts, however, whether he would have us understand “priests” when he says “presbyters,” that is, “elders.” For one who is an elder is not necessarily a priest or a minister. We may suspect that the apostle desired the older, graver men in the church to visit the sick, to perform a work of mercy, and pray in faith and thus heal him. Yet, it cannot be denied that the churches were once ruled by older persons, chosen for this purpose without these ordinations and consecrations, solely on account of their age and long experience.

Therefore I take it that this unction is the same as that practiced by the apostles, of whom it is written in Mark 6[:13]: “They anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.” It was a rite of the early church, by which they worked miracles on the sick, and which has long since ceased. In the same way Christ, in the last chapter of Mark [16:18], gave to believers the power to pick up serpents, lay hands on the sick, etc. It is a wonder that they have not made sacraments of those words also, for they have the same power and promise as these words of James. Therefore this extreme—which is to say fictitious—unction is not a sacrament, but a counsel of James, which anyone who will may follow; and it is derived from Mark 6[:13], as I have said. I do not believe that it was a counsel given to all sick persons, for the church’s infirmity is her glory and death is gain [Phil. 1:21]; but it was given only to such as might bear their sickness impatiently and with little faith, those whom the Lord allowed to remain in order that miracles and the power of faith might be manifest in them.

James made careful and diligent provision in this case by attaching the promise of healing and the forgiveness of sins not to the unction, but to the prayer of faith. For he says: “And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” [Jas. 5:15]. A sacrament does not demand prayer and faith on the part of the minister, since even a wicked person may baptize and consecrate without prayer; a sacrament depends solely on the promise and institution of God, and requires faith on the part of the recipient. But where is the prayer of faith in our present use of extreme unction? Who prays over the sick one in such faith as not to doubt that he will recover? Such a prayer of faith James here describes, of which he said at the beginning of his epistle: “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting” [Jas. 1:6]. And Christ says of it: “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will” [Mark 11:24].

There is no doubt at all that, even if today such a prayer were made over a sick man, that is, made in full faith by older, graver, and saintly men, as many as we wished would be healed. For what could not faith do? But we neglect this faith which the authority of the apostle demands above all else. Further, by “presbyters”—that is, men pre-eminent by reason of their age and faith—we understand the common herd of priests. Moreover, we turn the daily or temporally unrestricted unction into an extreme unction. And finally, we do not obtain the result promised by the apostle, namely, the healing of the sick, but we render the promise ineffective by doing the very opposite. And yet we boast that our sacrament, or rather figment, is established and proved by this saying of the apostle, which is diametrically opposed²¹⁸ to it. O what theologians!

Now I do not condemn this our “sacrament” of extreme unction, but I firmly deny that it is what the apostle James prescribes; for his unction agrees with ours neither in form, use, power, nor purpose. Nevertheless, we shall number it among those “sacraments” which we have instituted, such as the blessing and sprinkling of salt²¹⁹ and water. For we cannot deny that any creature whatsoever may be consecrated by the Word and by prayer, as the apostle Paul teaches us [1 Tim. 4:4–5]. We do not deny, therefore, that forgiveness and peace are granted through extreme unction; not because it is a sacrament divinely instituted, but because he who receives it believes that these blessings are granted to him. For the faith of the recipient does not err, however much the minister may err. For one who baptizes or absolves in jest,²²⁰ that is, one who does not absolve so far as the minister is concerned, nevertheless does truly baptize and absolve if the person to be baptized or absolved believes. How much more will one who administers extreme unction confer peace, even though he does not really confer peace so far as his ministry is concerned, since there is no sacrament there! The faith of the one anointed receives even that which the minister either could not give or did not intend to give. It is sufficient for the one anointed to hear and believe the Word. For whatever we believe we shall receive, that we really do receive, no matter what the minister may or may not do, or whether he dissembles or jests. The saying of Christ holds good: “All things are possible to him who believes” [Mark 9:23], and again: “Be it done for you as you have believed” [Matt. 8:13]. But in treating the sacraments our sophists say nothing at all of this faith, but only babble with all their might about

²¹⁸ *bis diapason*. In his *Adagia*, Erasmus explains the intense degree of separation and conflict connoted by this originally Greek phrase. It describes the relationship between two things that are worlds apart, unalterably opposed, and most sharply to be distinguished. *CL* 1, 509 n. 1.

²¹⁹ Cf. p. 108 n. 190.

²²⁰ Cf. p. 64 n. 122.

the virtues of the sacraments themselves. They will “listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth” [2 Tim. 3:7].

Still it was a good thing that this unction was made the extreme or “last” unction, for thanks to that, it has been abused and distorted least of all the sacraments by tyranny and greed. This one last mercy, to be sure, has been left to the dying—they may be anointed without charge, even without confession and communion. If it had remained a practice of daily occurrence, especially if it had cured the sick, even without taking away sins, how many worlds, do you think, would not the pontiffs have under their control today? For through the one sacrament of penance and the power of the keys, as well as through the sacrament of ordination, they have become such mighty emperors and princes. But now it is a fortunate thing that they despise the prayer of faith, and therefore do not heal any sick, and that they have made for themselves, out of an ancient ceremony, a brand-new sacrament.

Let this now suffice for these four sacraments. I know how it will displease those who believe that the number and use of the sacraments are to be learned not from the sacred Scriptures, but from the Roman See. As if the Roman See had given these “sacraments” and had not rather received them from the lecture halls of the universities, to which it is unquestionably indebted for whatever it has. The papal despotism would not have attained its present position, had it not taken over so many things from the universities. For there was scarcely another of the celebrated bishoprics that had so few learned pontiffs as Rome. Only by violence, intrigue, and superstition has she till now prevailed over the rest. For the men who occupied the See a thousand years ago differed so vastly from those who have since come into power, that one is compelled to refuse the name of Roman pontiff to one group or the other.

There are still a few other things which it might seem possible to regard as sacraments; namely, all those things to which a divine promise has been given, such as prayer, the Word, and the cross. For Christ has promised, in many places, that those who pray should be heard; especially in Luke 11[:5–13], where by many parables he invites us to pray. Of the Word he says: “Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it” [Luke 11:28]. And who can count all the times he promises aid and glory to those who are afflicted, suffer, and are cast down? Indeed, who can recount all the promises of God? Why, the whole Scripture is concerned with provoking us to faith; now driving us with commands and threats, now drawing us with promises and consolations. In fact, everything in Scripture is either

a command or a promise. The commands humble the proud with their demands, the promises exalt the humble with their forgiveness.

Nevertheless, it has seemed proper to restrict the name of sacrament to those promises which have signs attached to them. The remainder, not being bound to signs, are bare promises. *Hence there are, strictly speaking, but two sacraments in the church of God—baptism and the bread.* For only in these two do we find both the divinely instituted sign and the promise of forgiveness of sins. The sacrament of penance, which I added to these two,²²¹ lacks the divinely instituted visible sign, and is, as I have said,²²² nothing but a way and a return to baptism. Nor can the scholastics say that their definition fits penance, for they too ascribe to the true sacrament a visible sign, which is to impress upon the senses the form of that which it effects invisibly. But penance or absolution has no such sign. Therefore they are compelled by their own definition either to admit that penance is not a sacrament and thus to reduce their number, or else to bring forth another definition of a sacrament.

Baptism, however, which we have applied to the whole of life, will truly be a sufficient substitute for all the sacraments which we might need as long as we live. And the bread is truly the sacrament of the dying and departing; for in it we commemorate the passing of Christ out of this world, that we may imitate him. Thus we may apportion these two sacraments as follows: baptism may be allotted to the beginning and the entire course of life, while the bread belongs to the end and to death. And the Christian should use them both as long as he is in this mortal frame, until, fully baptized and strengthened, he passes out of this world, and is born into the new eternal life, to eat with Christ in the kingdom of his Father, as he promised at the Last Supper, when he said: “Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” [Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18]. Thus he clearly seems to have instituted the sacrament of the bread with a view to our entrance into the life to come. For then, when the purpose²²³ of both sacraments is fulfilled, baptism and bread will cease.

[Conclusion]

Herewith I conclude this prelude, and freely and gladly offer it to all pious souls who desire to know the genuine sense of the Scriptures and the proper use of the sacraments. For it is a gift of no mean importance, to know the gifts that are given

²²¹ Cf. p. 18.

²²² Cf. p. 59.

²²³ *res sacramenti*, cf. p. 23 n. 45, above.

to us, as it is said in 1 Cor. 2[:12], and what use we ought to make of them. For if we are instructed with this judgment of the spirit, we shall not mistakenly rely on those things which are wrong. These two things our theologians never taught us; indeed, they seem to have taken pains to hide them from us. If I have not taught them, I certainly managed not to conceal them, and have given occasion to others to think out something better. It has at least been my endeavor to set them both forth. Nevertheless, “not all can do all things.”²²⁴ To the godless, on the other hand, and those who in obstinate tyranny force on us their own teachings instead of God’s, I confidently and freely oppose these pages. I shall be completely indifferent to their senseless fury. Yet I wish even them a right understanding. And I do not despise their efforts; I only distinguish them from what is sound and truly Christian.

I hear a rumor that new bulls and papal maledictions are being prepared against me, in which I am urged to recant or be declared a heretic. If that is true, I desire this little book to be part of the recantation that I shall make; so that the arrogant despots might not complain of having acted in vain. The remainder I will publish very soon; please Christ, it will be such as the Roman See has never seen or heard before. I shall give ample proof of my obedience.²²⁵ In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Why doth that impious Herod fear
 When told that Christ the King is near?
 He takes not earthly realms away,
 Who gives the realms that ne’er decay.”²²⁶

²²⁴ Virgil *Eclogues* viii, 63.

²²⁵ The remainder of Luther’s “recantation” was The Freedom of a Christian. In An Open Letter to Pope Leo X, which accompanied it, he gave ample proof of his obedience. LW 31, 327–377.

²²⁶ The eighth stanza of Coelius Sedulius’ *Hymnus acrostichis totam vitam Christi continens* (beginning *A solis ortus cardine*), of the fifth century. Stanzas 8, 9, 11, and 13 were used as an Epiphany hymn, which Luther translated on December 12, 1541—“*Was fürchtst du, Feind Herodes, sehr.*” The above translation is taken from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, No. 60. Woolf, *op. cit.*, 329, has this translation from *The English Hymnary*:

Why, impious Herod shouldst thou fear
 Because the Christ is come so near?
 He who doth heavenly kingdoms grant
 Thine earthly realm can never want.