

DON'T TELL ME THAT!

*For the Faculty of the
Lutherischen Theologischen Hochschule
Oberursel, Germany*

DON'T TELL ME THAT!

FROM MARTIN LUTHER'S
ANTINOMIAN THESES

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Lutheran Press, Minneapolis 55449
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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 0-9748529-2-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2004109328

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Book design by Scott Krieger.
Cover art and design by Joseph Baumgarn.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>FOREWORD</i>	7
1	<i>WHAT IS REPENTANCE?</i>	19
2	<i>DO CHRISTIANS REALLY NEED THE LAW?</i>	23
3	<i>NOT TO MAKE US RIGHT BEFORE GOD!</i>	27
4	<i>BUT TO EXPOSE SIN, WRATH AND DEATH</i>	31
5	<i>CHRISTIAN REPENTANCE IS CONTINUAL</i>	37
6	<i>THE LORD'S PRAYER IS A PRAYER OF REPENTANCE</i>	41
	7 <i>THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN IS CERTAIN</i>	45
	8 <i>REPENTANCE, HOWEVER, IS VITAL!</i>	49
9	<i>THE LAW RULES OVER MAN AS LONG AS HE LIVES</i>	55
10	<i>THE LAW RULES OVER NON-CHRISTIANS AS WELL</i>	59
11	<i>IN CHRISTIANS THE LAW REMAINS UNFULFILLED</i>	63
	12 <i>THE LAW MUST CONDEMN</i>	67
	<i>AFTERWORD</i>	71
	<i>BIBLICAL REFERENCES</i>	77

FOREWORD

“Don’t tell me that!”

–A Small Strawn Child

I do not remember which one of our children spoke the words above. It was probably one of the boys.

I do not remember the situation exactly. Let’s just say, a particular boy, probably around the age of three at the time, had purposely broken one of his toys, and then hidden it under his bed.

I do remember finding something destroyed that should not have been, and asking him if knew anything about its mangled state. From the look on his face, I knew he did. I also knew he had done the mangling!

Just to be sure, however, I stated simply and clearly: “You broke the toy.” That did it.

Tears flowed. His hands went up to ears. His mouth opened and out came the words I have never forgotten: “DON’T TELL ME THAT!”

This was fascinating. Viewing the mangled toy had troubled him. But what really hurt was having to hear with his own ears that he was the one who had mangled the toy! His three-year-old solution? Cover his ears!

Why the difference between seeing and hearing? Why the revulsion at hearing stated what he had, in fact, done? What had happened?

The Law of God had done its work. Yes, even upon one so small! “*Yet if it had not been for the law,*” the Apostle Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans, “*I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead*” (7:7-8).

According to Jesus Christ, this exposing of sin by the Law is actually a work of the Holy Spirit. “*And when He comes,*” Jesus told His disciples concerning the Holy Spirit, “*He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment*” (John 16:8).

What this means is that just by stating what was true, that my son had done something he should not have done (in this case, broken the Seventh Commandment by not maintaining and preserving that which was entrusted to him), the Holy Spirit convicted Him of his sin as surely as the words of the prophet Nathan convicted David of his sins with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:7). Being so confronted, David repented, and repented heartily.

Without such a confrontation, David’s sins would have remained dead.

That is, David’s adultery with Bathsheba, and his murder of her husband Uriah, would not have caused David to repent. In fact, without Nathan stating the

obvious, David would have kept on living his life—probably in much the same way as my son would have continued to live his life with that mangled toy safely hidden underneath his bed!

Reflecting upon my son's reaction to the declaration of his role in its destruction, I realize that his reaction to the Law of God is not unique. In fact, it just may be that the Church at large itself is currently in the process of lifting up its hands collectively to stop its ears and scream out to its pastors, priests, ministers, professors, teachers, worship leaders and authors: "DON'T TELL ME THAT!"

What do I mean? Well, it could just be that there is a general uprising in the Church nowadays against any preaching, teaching, ministering and music which would involve the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, convicting hearts of sin (cf. Romans 3:20), and consequently, causing guilt. Now I may be wrong here, but what modern Christian ears seem to want to hear, what Christian minds want to contemplate, what Christian emotions want to feel is not guilt, but joy!

But what Christian could be against such a longing? After all, joy is a *fruit of the Spirit* as noted by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23)! Certainly if given the choice between guilt and joy, it would be a no-brainer: Joy would win out every time!

Come to think of it, even the great Reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) was pro-joy! Writing in his *Commentary on the Book of Jonah* back in 1525, for example, Luther noted that our heavenly Father wants

us to be joyful:

“...We should learn that God does not want people to be sad and that He hates sad thoughts and sayings, and doctrines which oppress us. He makes our hearts joyful. For He did not send His Son to make us sad, but to make us glad. That is why the prophets and apostles and the Lord Christ Himself admonishes us and even commands us at all times to be joyful and of good cheer (as in Zechariah 9:9), ‘Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem’, and many times in the Psalms, ‘Let us rejoice in the Lord’, and St. Paul in Philippians (4:4), ‘Rejoice in the Lord always’; and Christ (Luke 10:20), ‘Rejoice because your names are written in heaven’. Where there is this joy of the Spirit there is a dear joy in the heart through faith in Christ, and we know of a certainty that He is our Savior and High Priest, and this joy is seen in the things we say and do.”¹

But is the joy about which Luther writes here just *any* joy? Is the joy about which Paul writes in Galatians simply a surging emotion of expectancy and contentment –no matter what its cause or reason? More to the point: Is the joy which is a gift of the Holy Spirit the result of simply overlooking, denying, or ignoring sin? That is, of shoving sin under our beds, so to speak, and forgetting about it?

To go at this question in another way: Should I have, upon finding the mangled toy, simply ignored it and rejoiced that my son had so much energy? Should my son have, upon hearing that he had broken his toy, simply

ignored the fact that he had done it, and rejoiced? Should David have, upon hearing that he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband Uriah, simply rejoiced?

If not, why? Well, the joy of which Paul writes in Galatians and upon which Luther expounds in his *Jonah Commentary* is a bit more complex than that. The joy of the Christian is not simply some common type of joy like that experienced when we witness a home run in the bottom of the ninth, participate in a Super Bowl victory parade, or receive a promotion at work. It is a joy that flows from the relief of guilt experienced by my son, by David, and a whole host of Christians through the ages. It is the joy that can only follow the confession of sin and the conviction, by means of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God, that sin has been forgiven because of the atonement of Christ on the cross for that sin.

So David, after being confronted by Nathan, does not speak of simple joy, of common joy, but of the joy of salvation being returned to him in the firm confidence that his sins had been forgiven:

“Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit” (Psalm 51:10-12).

So if Christian joy is tied so closely to guilt, why the running away from guilt? Has the Church simply come to the point of wanting to skip the ‘guilt’ part of life and

go right to the joy? Has the Church discovered that it is easier, more peaceful, and more appealing, to shun guilt and promote joy?

At this point you may be thinking: “Well, is that not what the Christian Church—of all institutions in society—should do? Should not the Church promote joy? Should not the Church simply welcome, with open arms, anyone and everyone, regardless of how they live? After all, did not Jesus eat with tax collectors and prostitutes? Who are WE then to condemn anyone? Who are WE to make anyone feel guilt in any way shape or form? Should not the Christian life be a life of joy, a joy based upon not having to worry about who we are, and what we are doing?”

The only problem with this line of thinking, of course, is that Jesus Christ Himself, the ‘founder’ of Christianity, frequently spoke about guilt. In fact, Jesus’ first public sermon, according to the Gospel of Mark, was this: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”²

No one repents unless he is actually guilty of committing a sin, hears that he is guilty, and in admitting that he has committed the sin mentioned, feels that he is guilty. In other words, for someone to repent he must first admit that there is something for which he needs to repent! For someone to repent, he must first feel the guilt of sin.

Granted, the usage of guilt within the Christian Church has gotten out of hand in the past. For hundreds of years, for example, Christians all over the world lived

lives of guilt—a guilt that led to a fear of death.

Christians lived in fear of death for they were taught that upon dying, chances were, that they would not go to heaven. Instead, they would end up in purgatory.

Now purgatory was not hell. It was, instead, a place where Christians would be given as much time as they needed to make up for the sins that they committed on earth, but hadn't had the chance to make up for on earth before they died. In other words, *purgatory* was a place where Christians would be *purged* of sin and guilt.

Sure, it was somewhat comforting to think that upon dying, a person would not be sent to hell, but to this purgatory place. Yet, purgatory itself intimidated. Why? Popular wisdom taught that it could take hundreds of thousands of years in purgatory to make up for the sins committed during a few decades of life on earth.

What was even worse was that Christian guilt became a money-making tool for the Church. What better way to generate funds than to promise a reduction of time spent in purgatory if something was done by the Christian while living that would benefit the Church (participation in a crusade, a pilgrimage, a cash donation)?

Enter the obscure German monk, Martin Luther, mentioned above, who in the first of *95 Theses* which he posted in Wittenberg at the end of October, 1517, for academic discussion, began what has since been known as the Reformation of the Church. This is relatively well known.

What is not as well known is that the Reformation of

the Church began with a discussion of guilt and repentance. The very first of the *95 Theses* approached the subject head on, asserting that the Church needed to think about repentance, needed to think about guilt, in a different way than it was at the time: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent,’ he meant that the *whole life* of the believers should be one of repentance.”

Now what does that mean? How can the entire life of the Christian be one of repentance? Does that not mean that the entire life of the Christian should be one of guilt?

No, it does not. It does mean, however, that the Christian life should be *real*.

What do I mean? I mean that the Christian, of all people, should realize that since he is still confronted by death, he is still confronted by sin—the ultimate cause of death! Being confronted by sin, the Christian himself should not shy away from its existence, but admit, that yes, sin does exist and he, the Christian, is sinful. Repentance is therefore not a once-in-awhile type of situation, but a Christian’s state of being.

Yes, a Christian, through faith in Jesus Christ, has been redeemed by Christ and is now considered to be justified before the Father in Heaven. The Christian, through the Word of God and the Sacraments, has received and continues to receive the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit works within the Christian to produce His fruits, one of which is joy. The Christian’s sin, however, remains. It remains to bother, to haunt, to trouble, to perturb, and

ultimately to kill.

There is a tension then in Christian joy. A tension caused by the fact that the Christian is redeemed from sin, but remains in sin. A tension which has been captured by the pericopes read on “Joy Sunday” (Jubilate Sunday) within the Church for over 1000 years!

On the third Sunday after Easter, texts are read from Lamentations (3:22-33), 1 John (3:1-3), and the Gospel of John (16:16-22) all of which point to the fact that the final and complete rejoicing of the Christian will be when Christ returns again in glory. Until that time, a Christian’s rejoicing, a Christian’s joy, is always tempered by the ongoing reality of sin.

As long as the Christian realizes this, spiritually he is in a ‘good place’, as people say. In fact, he is very much like the Apostle Paul describes himself in Romans 7.

When a Christian ignores, or would run away from, the fact that sin is still a daily part of his life, trouble begins. He begins to ignore the sin that still plagues him, or even worse, begins to believe that his heavenly Father loves him for the good things he does.

Unfortunately, the Christian Church nowadays, in its attempt to appeal to the masses, seems to be encouraging, perhaps unwittingly, this type of Christian life. It is doing this by re-imagining itself, by making itself a guilt-free, non shame-based zone. The Church is doing such a thing by seeking to establish itself solely as a place of joy.

To accomplish this make-over, however, certain aspects of Christian life are in the process of being jettisoned. Sermons which would seek to establish the guilt of sin

within the Christian (or even simply mention it) have had to go. Hymns and songs which speak of such guilt have had to go. Music which would promote the contemplation of guilt is banned. Confession and absolution as part of a weekly service? Gone. The chief of all penitential prayers, the Lord's Prayer? No way. The Law of God...it must not be mentioned!

Well, that is not completely true. The Law of God certainly is mentioned in the Church nowadays, but only as a standard to live up to, not as a mirror of our lives which shows clearly that we are not, nor can we, live up to such a standard. Put in another way, the Law of God is not used to make anyone feel guilty, simply to give Christians a goal to attain.

"No, no, no!" you may be thinking at this point. "The Law is still necessary for someone to realize that they need Christ!"

Okay, but then what is next for the new Christian? "Well, I'm not too sure here, but it would seem that now that I am a Christian, I really don't need to worry about the 10 Commandments anymore. I mean, does the Law of God still apply to Christians who have been redeemed by Christ? Have not Christians been freed from the Law? Cannot Christians simply live the way they want to live, free from the fear of doing something that our heavenly Father would not like? Can't Christians live lives of joy, regardless of how they live from day to day?"

These questions were posed to Martin Luther toward the end of his life. What follows is his thinking on these questions.

¹As quoted in *Day by Day We Magnify Thee: Daily Readings for the Church Year Selected from the Writings of Martin Luther*, compiled and translated by Margarete Steiner and Percy Scott (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 193.

²Mark 1:15.

1

WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

Repentance is the *sadness* we experience after committing a specific sin as well as the *resolution* we then make not to sin in such a way again. Such sadness is the feeling or awareness in our heart or conscience that we have disobeyed the Law of God (the 10 Commandments: Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 6). Many people hear the Law, but because they do not feel the effect or power of the Law in their hearts, experience no sadness, and so are not truly repentant.

The first part of repentance (sadness) is caused solely by the Law of God. The second part of repentance (the

good resolve not to sin in such a way again) cannot be caused by the Law. The person who becomes terrified when he considers his sin cannot by his own strength alone resolve to do better.

In fact, the exact opposite occurs. When a person is overpowered by his sin and is ashamed of what he has done, he begins to mistrust God and actually to hate Him. Such mistrust and hate of God the Bible calls literally a descent into hell (Psalm 88).

In order to change this situation, the promise of Christ (the Gospel) must be added to the Law. It is the Gospel which lays the terrified conscience to rest and rights it once again so that a person can resolve to do better.

Repentance which is a result of the Law alone is only partial repentance, the beginning of repentance, or a repentance which is not complete. Such a repentance is not complete repentance for it does not include a resolve to do better. Such a repentance is just like the repentance

***Repentance which is a
result of the Law alone is
only partial repentance***

of Cain (Genesis 4:13), Saul (1 Samuel 26:21; 31:4), Judas (Matthew 27:4-5) and all those who doubt and despair of the mercy of God.

Such a definition of repentance (*regret* for sin along with the resolution to do better) has been taught for centuries but with little understanding. Since the individual parts of the definition (sin, regret, and the resolve to do better) were not understood, repentance itself could not be taught.

What was taught instead was that such regret was really a product of a free will which possessed the ability to hate sin or not to hate sin whenever it wanted. In reality, regret is the sorrow or torment experienced by the conscience (whether it wants to or not!) when properly addressed or confronted by the Law.

***Regret is the torment
experienced by the
conscience when
confronted by the Law***

In the past it was also taught that sin was simply an improper action against man-made institutions. Seldom were sins addressed that were committed against the moral law (the 10 Commandments). As far as original sin is concerned, it was taught that after baptism there should be no sin—especially a sin against any of the first three commandments.

The Law itself, described by Jeremiah (23:29) as God's rock-smashing hammer, crushes such an inaccurate teaching of repentance by enclosing all people in sin. According to such a faulty teaching, a good resolve not to sin is a thought self-chosen by human strength to avoid sin from a given point forward. But according to the Gospel, such good resolve is a movement of the heart awakened by the Holy Spirit.

A good resolve not to sin in a certain way again is the determination to hate sin from that time onward out of love for God—even though sin in the flesh still fights hard against such a determination. Being versed only in the rules and theories of men, and not in the Word of God, those in the past who taught otherwise understood

neither the Law nor the Gospel—and so could not teach rightly about repentance.

In contrast to such a futile teaching of desperation the Gospel teaches that repentance is not despair alone, but hope as well. Such hope is a hate of sin which flows from a love of God. This is truly a good resolve not to sin.



1. Which are the two parts of repentance?
2. What causes the first part, the sorrow, of repentance?
3. What causes the second part of repentance?
4. What happens when a person resolves to do better, solely on the basis of the Law?
5. Who, in the Bible, repented of their sins, but not completely?
6. Why is it a problem to think that repentance is a result of a free human will?
7. What or who moves a Christian to resolve to do better?
8. According to Luther, how does Christian hope relate to sin?