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The Deserving Poor: The Reimagining of Poverty in Reformation Theology and Poor Relief

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The Deserving Poor:
The Reimagining of Poverty in Reformation Theology and Poor Relief

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An Honors Thesis
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department of religion from Hamline University

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Introduction

“What was it that fired the reformers? What was it that encouraged hundreds of thousands to follow them, abandoning the wealth of experience, piety. . .of the Medieval church?”¹ These questions have been at the heart of Reformation scholarship for as long as the period has been an avenue of research. They have also, in many ways, caused the study of the Reformation to go paradoxically stale. The growth of interest in the Reformation in the last half-century has left us with a rich, creative historiography. However, argues Peter Matheson, “our current tendency towards a doctrinal approach on the one hand and to social reductionism on the other has led us into a blind alley.”² A new approach to the Reformation is needed if we are to again recover meaning from its history—a history of doctrinal changes that has been beautifully reconstructed for us by historians: John Bossy, Robert Scribner and Bernd Moeller, the founding fathers of the current state of reformation scholarship. In his pioneering work *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*, Matheson breaks from this traditional Reformation scholarship, shifting focus away from doctrinal and liturgical changes. This new tactic calls us to move our focus from doctrine and ritual to the enchanting realm of human imagination. In his book, Matheson eloquently explores the imaginative images (woodcuts, pamphlets, songs, etc.) of sixteenth-century Germany to argue that the underlying shift in the Reformation was in the very perception of reality, with a new, imaginative world replacing the enchanted world of the Catholic Church. Like Matheson, I, too, believe that there is something yet to be recovered from this period and, as a result, this study relies heavily on his work. My contention is that the

¹ Peter Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

² Matheson, 1.

imaginative world Matheson describes can be seen clearly in the shift in attitudes towards the poor and the changing definition of poverty itself that manifested in Lutheran theology.

Such a revision of society was made possible by Luther's theological breakthrough of *sola fide*. As Matheson accurately observes, this was not just a change of doctrine or liturgy. Instead, it fundamentally transformed Christians' worldview, opening the door to a new, imaginative way of practicing one's faith. A new way of caring for the poor – the common chest – was the product of such faith. As I will argue in chapter five, Luther's theological understandings of the priesthood of all believers and of Christian freedom helped redefine poverty, toppling it from its pedestal of theological virtue. The theological redefining of poverty, accompanied by a widespread contempt of begging, created a reinvigorated need to discern those "deserving" of relief from those who were "undeserving." This shift is demonstrated in the common chest ordinances of sixteenth-century German-speaking Protestant cities. The common chest was Luther's alternative to the Catholic system of poor relief, a system that relied on indiscriminate dispersal of alms by the wealthy. Instead, Luther proposed that each city establish a common chest, operated largely by secular administrators. Parishioners would give to the chest as they were able and the funds would be dispersed at the discretion of council officials. The common chest ordinances of the cities I am investigating – Wittenberg, Augsburg, Leisnig, Ypres, and Erfurt – were all modeled off of Luther's initial proposal.

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, historians and theologians – nineteenth-century historians Gerhard Uhlhorn and Fösser were at the forefront of these conversations – attributed the success of poor relief reform to the individual reformers and their subsequent

movements. More recent scholarship by historians like Robert Jütte, and B. Geremek, conducted in the mid-1990s, has looked to the underlying socio-economic conditions, arguing that the reformers had a minimal role in shaping new efforts of poor relief.³ Both of these approaches have merit, though are themselves incomplete; however, if used in tandem, they might lead us to a clearer picture of how the poor were understood and treated in Reformation Germany. It is certain that Luther's imaginative theology was born from a specific context, though we should not simply view him as the culmination of Medieval and early-modern trends. Due to the common frustrations with the Church that Luther shared with a great number of Germans, and the effective use of the printing press, his writings were able to capture the imaginations of the people in a way that other reformers failed to do. His writings stimulated people's sentiment for change in a way he never intended or expected. By examining Luther's views on poverty in relation to his contemporaries, we can better understand the currents of change and Luther's role in this period.

This study contributes to two vital conversations. First, on Luther's significance to the German Reformation, whether he should be viewed as the sole player, an inconsequential player, or perhaps somewhere in between. The second body of research is on the nature of poverty, its effects on societies, and what people do in the face of such a grim reality. By examining early-modern German society in its historical context and that society's efforts to

³ Bronislaw Geremek, *Poverty: A history*, (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell), 1994; Robert Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press), 1994.

cope – successfully or not – with the realities of poverty, we might gain new insights about the impact of the Reformation on our present condition.

Historiography

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, historians and theologians alike were bent on reinforcing their own religious worldview. Nineteenth-century Protestant historians looked to show that the Protestant system of poor relief had been more effective than that of the Catholics. They felt as if they were combating the systematic preservation of poverty by the Church. In 1859, one of the leading Protestant historians, Uhlhorn, wrote:

The Medieval Church preached that begging or work shyness was a sin, but it also gave begging its halo; on the one hand, the Church provoked rich charity by promoting almsgiving as good works, but on the other hand, it disregarded the proper distribution of the alms because the primary intent behind almsgiving was to gain God's grace, rather than to relieve poverty.⁴

Uhlhorn was keen to argue that the Catholic Church failed to address the situation of the poor who were deemed undeserving, leaving armies of wandering beggars, which after being neglected, turned into a "*Betterplage*" (beggars plague). Catholic historians were just as vehemently opposed to the Protestant policy of "policing" the undeserving poor. In response to the Protestant relief efforts, Catholic historian, Fösser wrote in 1889:

The State may well introduce compulsory institutions, but with regard to the duty of benevolence, it is less the political and more the religious aspect that matters. The

⁴ Uhlhorn qtd in Sigrun Kahl, "The Religious Roots of Modern Poverty Policy: Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Protestant Traditions Compared," *European Journal of Sociology*, 46 (2005): 91-126.

Church preaches in a divine mission the highest divine poor law – the postulate of charity – through its servants with words and good examples.⁵

Catholics saw the Protestant system as far too disconnected from the poor themselves and lacked the most important component of Christian poor relief: love. There was sharp criticism against relief money coming from taxes, as opposed to out of Christian spirit, as is shown in the Catholic *Staatslexicon* of 1859:

The commonplace of the adversary [the Protestants] that Medieval poor relief existed because of the [effects of] good works rather than because of helping the poor is rather meaningless. If it proves anything, it is that the feelings of voluntarily giving of Medieval Catholics were different from the feelings of today's Protestants who must be forced to pay their taxes.⁶

Catholics felt that if the care of the poor relied on taxes, then Protestants could easily ignore the impoverished. Charity, for Catholics, needed to be personal—something that was unlikely to happen if poor relief did not come directly from the individual.

By the time historians refocused interest on the early-modern poor in the latter half of the twentieth century, religion had been all but beaten out of the discussion. Instead, almost in reaction to the heated religious debates of the previous centuries, historians like Brian Tierney significantly downplay the religious influences of poor relief in early-modern Europe. Scholars returned to the archives, and from 1960-1980, a slew of studies were carried out on urban

⁵ Fösser qtd in Kahl, 104.

⁶ Ibid.

areas, such as Strasbourg, Lyon, Ypres, Köln, and others.⁷ These studies all focus on the bureaucratization and rationalization of poor relief, as well as humanist and economic influences on the revision of relief institutions and legislation. Based on this rich body of studies, recent attempts have been made by social historians Robert Jütte, B. Geremek, Steven Beaudoin, and others, to provide a general survey of the field.⁸ While fairly successful in mapping the current body of literature on poverty, they follow a similar trajectory as the studies they rely on, focusing little attention on the theological elements of the discussion. In his work, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, Jütte argues that “the actual social policy of European local and national governments cut across religious boundaries.” His argument grasps the dominant turn by historians away from attending to the religious dimensions of the debates about and systems of poor relief, which has remained the focus for the past 30 years.⁹

There is a new body of scholarship, however, that recognizes the recent lack of attention given to the reformers and their theological motivations, and works to highlight the significant role religion played in this period. In his book, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor*, church historian Carter Lindberg attempts to bridge the advancements made by historians in the last few decades with the conviction that reformers like Luther *did* matter. Lindberg argues: “The scholar who believes religion is an epiphenomenon to social and

⁷ See: Miriam Usher Chrisman, “URBAN POOR IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: THE CASE OF STRASBOURG.” *Studies in Medieval Culture*, 13, (1978): 59; and Natalie Z Davis, “Poor Relief, Humanism, and Heresy: The Case of Lyon.” In: *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 5, (1968) 217-275.

⁸ Steven M Beaudoin, *Poverty in World History*, (New York: Routledge), 2007.

⁹ Jutte, 1.

economic change will read the data differently than one who believes religious commitment may motivate and create social change. . . .I find some interpretations of social historians to be unnecessarily reductionist.”¹⁰ Bonnie Pattison, too, finds this to be true. While her book, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin*, is primarily concerned with poverty as a theological concept, her work is built on the premise that the world of the reformers was a time when religion saturated their views about all aspects of the world.¹¹ An example of this can be seen in the work Sigrun Kahl, as she traces the theological origins of the welfare state, where she connects the religious traditions of Lutherans, Reformed Protestants, and Catholics, to particular nations’ welfare systems. While Kahl’s study oversimplifies some theological positions in places, her work makes one thing certain: the reformers are more significant to the discussion than recent historians have acknowledged.

A Period of Change

Before we can adequately assess the significance of Luther, however, it is vital that we understand the significant religious contours of the period, which will allow us to talk about poor relief more holistically. It is for that reason that we begin with the context of the Medieval and Early-Modern periods.

When we think of the Middle Ages, we imagine castles, knights, and chivalry. However, this nostalgic vision does not adequately grasp the all-too-often grim realities of the Medieval

¹⁰ Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1993, 13.

¹¹ Bonnie L. Pattison, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin*, (Eugene: Pickwick Publications), 2006.

period. Plague or drought could impoverish entire countries; even if you were generally healthy and “able to work in ‘good times’, [you] would have been subjected to ongoing exploitation in the form of rent, taxes, labour services, and debt.”¹² Medieval European society was governed by the feudal system – a system where the population was divided into three estates: *bellatores* (those who fought), *oratores* (those who prayed), and *laboratores* (those who worked).¹³ From this system there developed a great chain of being, with the king on top, followed by nobility, higher clergy, aristocracy, lower clergy, tradesmen, and rounded off with the majority of the population: the peasantry. The King granted land to lords and clergy, who in turn offered the king their fealty and services. Lords were free to govern their lands as they pleased, and although the great chain of being required that each tier be responsible for the wellbeing of those below, the peasantry were often abused and exploited.

Until the Protestant Reformation began in 1517, western-European faith was dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. Christian theology influenced Europeans’ worldview significantly, in the same way that forces of democracy and secularization have influenced our own. There was no separation of church and state. Both were seen as political powers, although who was in charge of what increasingly became a matter of dispute. The Church, directed by the Pope, was a transnational entity that held enormous power. As the Church

¹² Larry Patriquin, *Agrarian capitalism and poor relief in england, 1500-1860: Rethinking the origins of the welfare state*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. 2007), 87.

¹³ Janet E. Burton, *Monastic and religious orders in britain, 1000-1300*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8.

encroached on what the rulers viewed as their territories, the temporal rulers of Europe felt threatened and needed to push back. And as the Medieval period progressed, that tension grew.

By the time Luther penned his famous 95 Theses in 1517, anti-clerical sentiment had reached a new height in the German lands of the Holy Roman Empire. The state of parish clergy seemed to deteriorate with each new generation.¹⁴ At the very best, clergy were ill educated and ill prepared for their responsibilities as spiritual fathers. There was widespread exploitation of parishioners, the tyrannical use of a spiritual ban was commonplace, and there existed an all-around negligence of clerical vows (i.e. celibacy). It is true that these descriptions make broad generalizations and do not speak to the efforts of many clerics who, unlike many of their brethren, tended to their flock with devotion. Indeed, there were many attempts by the Church to improve the quality of clergy and their standards of pastoral care; however, these generalizations about the negative sentiment – even if exaggerated in Protestant propaganda – do reflect the pervasive anti-clerical sentiment of sixteenth-century Germany.¹⁵ In many cases unrest led to violent outbursts towards clerics, like the one experienced by Jacob Megerich in 1524. Angry parishioners “beat [him] about the head and shoulders” and “pelted [him] with stones in the sacristy.”¹⁶ This incident reveals the turbulent nature of anti-clerical feeling during the beginning of the Reformation in Germany.

¹⁴ Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession of the Eve of Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Robert Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular movements in Reformation Germany*. (London: Hambledon Press, 1987), 243-256.

¹⁵ Scribner, *Religion and Culture*, 192.

¹⁶ J. Miedel, quoted in Scribner, *Religion and Culture*, 150.

Based on the vehement distain directed towards the clergy, one might be inclined to suggest that the growing anti-clerical sentiment was indicative of a decline in lay piety – that is, in the reverence and devotion showed by common believers – during this period; however, as argued by Bernd Moeller in his chapter on *Pre-Reformation Germany*, this does not seem to be the case.¹⁷ Rather, there was hardly a period where piety increased with more intensity than the period just before the Reformation. Lay people “were not just passive participants in religion, but played an active role in shaping” it.¹⁸ Historian Karl Eder’s study of upper Austria showed an increase in mass endowments until 1518, the implementation of more feast days, and a “new spring of church building.”¹⁹ Popular movements focused on Christ’s suffering and humanity gained a significant following during this period.²⁰ Changes to the ritual of baptism, like naming the child during the ceremony as opposed to beforehand, were brought about by the laity rather than by the high clerics. These measures of transformation of religious life, however, did not resonate with the clergy. The religious fervor from below was met with little encouragement from priests. As a result, anti-clerical tendencies were amplified, as many parishioners began to search for new ways to interact with the sacred, independent of clerical mediation.²¹

These socio-political conflicts were only exacerbated by the changing economic landscape. By the early sixteenth century, the first traces of capitalism could be seen in Europe.

¹⁷ Bernd Moeller, “Religious Life in Germany on the Eve of Reformation,” in *Pre-Reformation Germany*, ed. Gerald Strauss (London: Macmillan, 1972), 13-30.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁹ Karl Eder, quoted in Moeller, 15.

²⁰ John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1-98.

²¹ Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, 1-15.

This is not our modern understanding of capitalism, however, which has 500 years of baggage, assumptions, and variations between it and the form of economy that was taking shape in the early 1500s. It is at this time that the infantile roots of waged labor, a market economy, and rapid urbanization take hold. As a result of these dramatic changes, the economy became more volatile, causing a great deal of financial insecurity. Unable to support their families, and in search of employment and relief, peasants started flocking to the cities in droves. Many artisans who were displaced from their towns and villages fled to the city in search of protection during the Peasants' War. These mass in-migrations not only led to an enormous increase in cities' populations, but also put enormous strain on the social relief institutions in place – systems which were often syphoned by corruption. Historian Miriam Chrisman estimates that Strasbourg's population increased by 25 percent in the sixteenth century, despite the death rate always being higher than the birthrate.²² It is signs like these, as argued by historians like Jütte, that are utilized to support the claims that theology was of little consequence. However, Jütte and others like him underestimate the complex theological nature of charity.

Charity

Charity as a concept has roots in Christianity that stretch deep into its Jewish past.²³ The English word itself derives from the word *caritas*, which is the Latin translation for love. Love

²² Chrisman, 60.

²³ This is largely based on the Jewish understanding of *Tzedakah*, a Hebrew word meaning righteous or justice. It requires followers of Judaism to do what is just and right, which is usually translated in practice to charity. This concept does differ from the Christian understanding of charity as an expression of goodwill, because in Judaism it is understood to be an obligation and not just a spontaneous act of goodwill.

was regarded as the greatest of the theological virtues and was (and still remains to be) extremely important in Christian theology. Renowned Medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, called it the “friendship of Man for God”; we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. Thus this type of love was understood to manifest itself in a Christian through an unlimited devoted bond with others. It was held to be the ultimate perfection of the human spirit, because the “habit of charity extends not only to the love of God, but also to the love of our neighbor.”²⁴ *Caritas* is the love that is divinely infused into the soul – this love, according to Catholic theology, is necessary for salvation.²⁵ So while to the modern ear charity might be reduced to the simple act of benevolent giving, Medieval Europe had, at least in theory, a more robust understanding of the word.

There existed two main forms of poor relief in the Medieval period: private and institutional charity. The first, private charity, closely resembles the way we think of charity today—a person with capital gives money to a person or organization in the form of a one-time donation, or as part of some form of bequest or trust. In our society, the relationship between donor and recipient typically ends when money changes hands. However, Medieval Catholic theology demanded a much more involved relationship—a friendship.

²⁴ Kevin Knight, “New Advent,” accessed 3/3/2015, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3025.htm>.

²⁵ Tom Hoopes, “Seven Passion Sins and Virtues.” National Catholic Register, accessed 3/3/2015, <http://www.ncregister.com/site/article/7-passion-sins-and-virtues>.

Figure 1

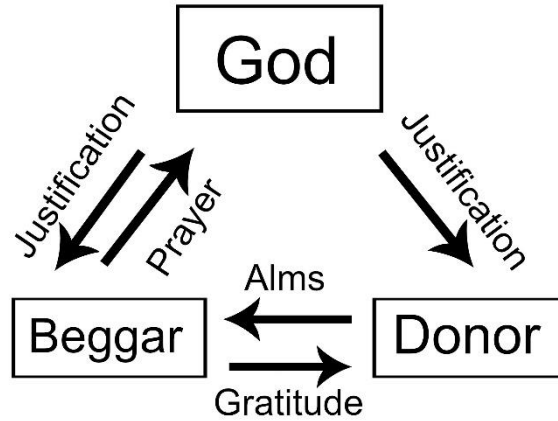


Figure 1 illustrates how this relationship worked. The wealthy Christian, out of love, gives alms – food, clothes, money, etc. – to the beggar who, either by his own choice or as the result of unfortunate circumstance, needs to rely on others for sustenance. As a sign of gratitude the beggar then prays for the wellbeing of the donor, as one would pray for a friend. This relationship between the beggar and the donor is considered a good work, thereby establishing a connection between both parties and God. Because good works were a vital component of salvation for Catholic Christians, by participating in this relationship, both donor and beggar were working towards their own justification. Also, owing to the fact that charity was seen as the most important of all virtues, the donor was then elevated in status as an exemplary Christian. This is captured clearly by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) who, expressing gratitude towards the King of Sicily for feeding and sheltering his monks, remarked:

“These are material things, but they can be traded with, in return for heavenly things. This is the way to heaven; by such sacrifices God is won. For to these men belongs the Kingdom of Heaven and, in return for your material gifts, they will be able to render you everlasting life and Glory.”²⁶ It is this elevation of spiritual status that Luther was keen to undermine.

The second, more consistent form of poor relief came from the Church. It is because of the intrinsic connection between charity and religion, that it fell largely to religious institutions—monasteries especially—to advocate for and participate in poor relief. The reason that monks became the primary dispensaries of poor relief was due to their theological role in society. Monks were understood by society to stand between average religious folks and God, as mediators of faith – the figureheads of Christianity. By the time monastic orders became a fixture in Medieval society, the New Testament had long been established. Monks, who made up a majority of the literate population in the middle ages, were well versed in the Gospels. They were instructed to emulate Jesus in all ways. Before becoming monks, they were required to give up their material wealth and spend the remainder of their life cut off from the world in the monastery. However, Jesus did not retire to a sanctuary in the mountains – he lived among the poor and lowest of lows, caring for them in their need. In order to live as Christ did, monks understood that they could not completely remove themselves from the society. They bore the heavy responsibility for alleviating the ever-present suffering of a world in need. By modeling Christ, they were more in harmony with the will of God and were seen as embodying the

²⁶ Pattison, 46.

virtues of Christian faith. By renouncing the world they were able to establish a closer relationship with God, which guided them to live a life of virtue. Charity was held as the greatest of the virtues and because of the theologically righteous nature of monastics, they were the most qualified to be providers of charity and alms.

Figure II

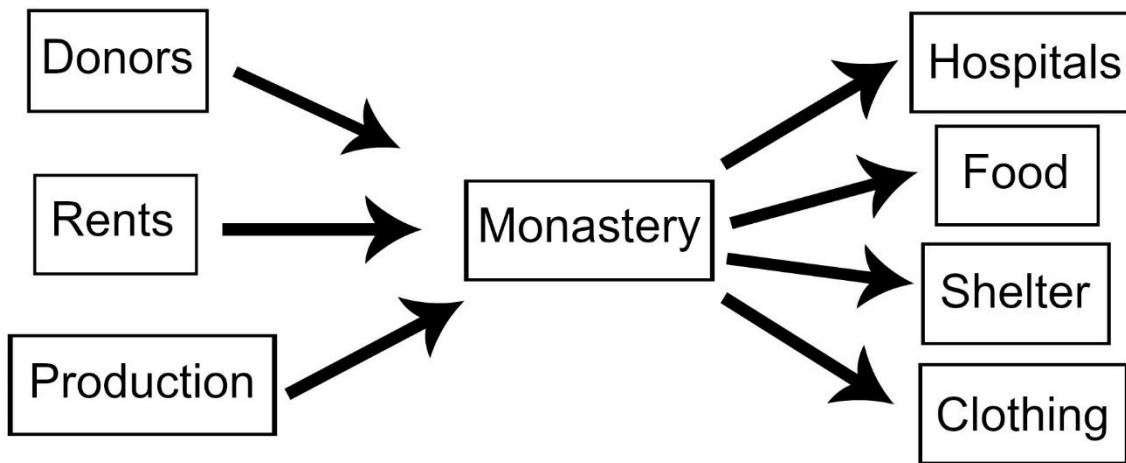


Figure II illustrates how this form of relief worked – or was supposed to work – in practice. Wealthy tradesmen, lords, and even the occasional king would give money to the monastery. The monastery would take that money, in tandem with income generated from rents or things the monastery produced (beer, crops, candles, etc.), and use it to pay for the upkeep of the abbey and its monks. After the monks were provided sustenance, it then became their responsibility to pass on what was left to the poor. To that end, monasteries would provide meals for the hungry, clothing for the naked, and shelter for the infirm. Luther’s critique was that far too much of the money which came into the monastery did not make its way to those

in need. The Pope, according to Luther, “seize[s] the treasures of the earth, as it is prophesized. It works like this: they skim the cream off the bishoprics, monasteries, and benefices,” thereby diminishing the funds available to distribute to the destitute.²⁷ Though rash, this critique accurately identified the corruption that held many religious institutions in its grotesque grip.

Theology for the Imagination

Sola Fide – Justification through faith alone

The Medieval Catholic orthodoxy, or the ‘right’ belief, was dominated by scholastic thought. Scholastics believed that it is in human nature to sin and the sinful nature of Adam is inherited by all. Because human beings are not able to bridge the gap between themselves and God, God sent his son, Jesus, to be crucified at the hands of the Romans. This sacrifice of love and grace formed the foundation for human justification. However, if Christians were to be truly absolved of their sins, they had to cooperate with grace given by God, becoming an active participant in their salvation. The means of interacting with that grace was through the sacraments – baptism, confirmation, communion, confession, marriage, holy orders, and last rites – all of which required the presence of a mediator: a priest.²⁸ In doing so, they could re-align their will with the will of God—a connection that was severed when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God in the Garden of Eden.²⁹ The road to righteousness, or being right with God, began with baptism, which cleansed a person’s sins, preparing them for a life as a Christian. This belief stems from the Gospel of Mark where it states “the one who believes and is baptized

²⁷ Martin Luther, *Three treatises*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 23.

²⁸ Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, 243-256.

²⁹ Scott Dixon, *The German Reformation: Essential Readings*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 60-65.

will be saved...by using my name they will cast out demons.”³⁰ And the following passage from the book of Acts: “Peter said unto them: ‘repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”³¹ The rest of the sacraments helped a Christian fight sin throughout their life and helped guide them to perform good works. When Jesus returns to earth for the second time, as is prophesized in the book of Revelation, that individual’s works will be evaluated, thus determining whether or not they are indeed righteous. This judgment stood at the forefront of many sixteenth-century Christians’ minds, as they believed the ‘second coming’ was to happen in their lifetime; their concerns with salvation were far more primary to their everyday life than the modern reader may be able to imagine.

While this view of justification dominated orthodox Catholicism, Luther believed this understanding of justification to be incomplete. Salvation, to Luther, was not something that could be earned or worked for; it was a gift of grace from God. Luther found support in the book of Romans, which claimed: “one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.”³² Furthermore, the book of Genesis made clear that “[Abraham] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”³³ Belief in the justifying power of works, then, represented a lack of faith and trust in God. This also affected Luther personally as he found difficulty coming to terms with Catholic understanding that humans have to work, in part, for their salvation. He felt himself unable to adequately fulfill

³⁰ Mark 16:16.

³¹ Acts 2:38.

³² Romans 4:4.

³³ Genesis 15:6.

that obligation. No matter how hard he tried, he felt as if he could never confess all of his sins or work enough towards his own justification. Luther's anxiety was fueled by his view of God as angry and Christ as judgmental. In reading the apostle Paul, Luther discovered an alternative view – a view that accepted that “although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins” and that salvation comes from God alone.³⁴ This freed Luther from the constant cycle of hard work, inadequacy, opening the door to a new, imaginative way to practice faith.

Luther wrote about what he believed to be the misguided practices of the Catholic Church and called the Church to account for their abuses of power. After his trip to Rome in 1511, he realized that the Church was leading people astray, selling indulgences that were advertised as tickets to salvation. Luther warned against this false interpretation in his 95 theses: “Papal indulgences should only be preached with caution, lest people gain a wrong understanding, and think that they are preferable to other good works: those of love.”³⁵ It appeared to Luther that Christians were so concerned with their own salvation – a view promoted by the Catholic Church – they were completely abandoning those in need. Belief in justification by faith alone, according to Luther, allowed the Christian to look outside of him or herself and devote their time to the ones who needed it most: the poor. Shifting one's gaze from the personal salvation to wellbeing of humanity was the first step in living this new theology for the imagination.

³⁴ “Heidelberg disputation,” *Book of Concord*, accessed on 3/2/2015, <http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php#3>.

³⁵ Martin Luther, “95 Theses,” *Spurgeon*, accessed on 1/12/2015, <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/history/95theses.htm>.

Priesthood of All Believers – Leveling of spiritual hierarchy

In his formative treatise, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” Luther builds upon the foundation of *sola fide* with one of his most imaginative concepts: equality of all in the eyes of God. He writes: “That the pope or bishop anoints, makes tonsures, ordains, consecrates, or dresses differently from the laity, may make a hypocrite or an idolatrous oil-painted icon, but it in no way makes a Christian or spiritual human being. In fact, we are all consecrated priests through Baptism....”³⁶ His rationale comes from the following verse in Peter’s epistle: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”³⁷ For Luther, there is nothing that separates the priest from the common believer in the eyes of God, for all have (or should have) access to the Gospel, exclaiming that the laity “ought to become bold and free on the authority of these texts, and many more.”³⁸ This bold claim also removed the beggar and donor from their pedestals, for their works of charity did not set them apart from the average layperson. *All* Christians were equal in the eyes of God, because everyone had access to the Word. This did not, however, correspond to an egalitarian view of Church hierarchy. Instead, pastors remained to be valued as spiritual leaders; “they should [continue to] rule the people entrusted to them in temporal and spiritual matters.”³⁹ By completely upsetting the cosmic hierarchy, Luther opens the door for a fresh, visionary way to understand humanity’s relationship to God. This revolutionary equality,

³⁶ Luther, *Three Treatises*, 20.

³⁷ Peter 9:2.

³⁸ Luther, *Three Treatises*, 21.

³⁹ Luther, *Three Treatises*, 30.

though never realized temporally, gave Christians newfound freedoms to shape their lives and, subsequently, the lives of the poor.

Freedom of a Christian – Poverty loses its halo

Luther's "On the Freedom of a Christian" builds upon these two previous theological concepts. In this treatise, Luther further contests the Catholic doctrine of salvation through faith and works. While it is true that poverty and poor relief were not Luther's primary concerns when penning this treatise, he has a great deal to say about servitude and duty to others – a central theme of poor relief. Luther sees the world as two separate kingdoms: the heavenly and the temporal. This view manifests itself in how he understands what it means to be human, for we all also have two parts: the flesh (temporal) and the soul (heavenly). As salvation is only a matter of what Luther calls the "inner self," anything that the body or "outer self" does has no bearing on one's redemption. The soul "receives no help from any work connected with the body."⁴⁰ Christian freedom, according to Luther, then, pertains primarily to Christian identity in the heavenly kingdom, though its implications are far-reaching in the temporal world. Belief in *Sola Fide* liberates a Christian from concern with his or her own salvation, thereby allowing him to act as a "servant, completely attentive to the needs of all."⁴¹

Believers are all justified by God through Christ, therefore charity is no longer an act motivated by one's interest in being justified in the eyes of God, according to Luther. Instead of

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, ed. Mark D. Tranvik, *The freedom of a Christian*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 29.

⁴¹ Luther and Tranvik, 52.

purchasing indulgences to ensure the forgiveness of one's own sins, that money could instead be given to the needy: "Christians should be taught that one who gives to the poor, or lends to the needy, does a better action than if he purchases indulgences."⁴² It seems that Luther also saw the Church as the cause of poverty, in some capacity: "again: since the pope's income today is larger than that of the wealthiest of wealthy men, why does he not build this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of indigent believers?"⁴³ It is here that Luther hammers home what becomes the main Protestant critique on the Catholic system. By giving poverty its "halo," Protestants argued that the Church was systematically preserving poverty. The Catholic understanding of charity being a "friendship of God for man" simply masked the donor's implicit privilege. Temporally, they were superior in class, as the coin in their pocket and clothing would remind the beggar. By performing charitable acts, the donor was then elevated in status spiritually as well. Furthermore, if poverty no longer existed, the good work of charity, the highest of virtues, would cease to exist.

Luther's belief in the freedom of a Christian significantly influenced his revolutionary perspective on work, which is at the heart of the distinction about the deserving and undeserving poor. His view of work is grounded in the passage from Genesis, where "the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till and keep it."⁴⁴ As Adam was already righteous and without sin, there was no need for him to work for his salvation. Instead, Adam worked to cultivate and protect the garden because it was pleasing to God. The works of

⁴² Martin Luther, "95 Theses."

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Genesis 2:15.

humans, according to Luther, function in a similar manner. We do work because it is pleasing to God, and not to achieve our own righteousness. These works, instead, are meant to discipline the body and to care for this world, as well as the people in it. Luther placed emphasis on working to earn a living and care for one's own body first, for "if we are healthy and fit, we are able to work and save money that can be used to help those in need."⁴⁵ This does not mean that work eliminates poverty in Luther's eyes, as Sigrun Kahl suggests in her essay, "The Religious Roots of Modern Poverty Policy: Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Protestant Traditions Compared."⁴⁶ Instead, each man and woman was to be content with their place in the social order. Indeed, everyone is seen as equal in the eyes of God, of that Luther was most adamant; however, humans are still left to live in this temporal kingdom, and are bound by the divinely mandated temporal structures. Not only did Luther see these temporal structures as a necessary evil, but as a tool that could be used for good. Instead of allowing the church free reign in worldly and spiritual matters, as the Catholic Church had done, Luther called for something new and imaginative: the empowerment of temporal leaders. With this power in worldly affairs, Luther imagined that leaders would take their role as caretakers of their people more seriously.

However, Luther was not in control of how people interpreted his message, and during the Peasants' Revolt of 1525, the peasants took up arms against their lords, using Luther's message of Christian freedom and equality in the eyes of God as justification for their stance. In

⁴⁵ Luther and Tranvik, 80.

⁴⁶ Kahl, 91-126.

1523, sensing the tension between the peasants and the princes, Luther wrote “Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed.” This document, which chided the princes for their abuse of power and laid out to what extent it was to be obeyed, was the first of three treaties by Luther that aimed to ease the tension before it boiled over into an all-out revolt. In March of 1525, the peasants of the Swabia region compiled a list of grievances called “The Twelve Articles of the Christian Union of Upper Swabia,” which served as an ultimatum directed towards the princes. The article called for social reform, access to hunting grounds, and cheaper lease fees. The ultimate goal of the document, and the ensuing revolt, was to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth – a place where the imagination of the people stretched farther than Luther was willing to go. Luther responded to this document with one last attempt to prevent violence, with his treatise, “Admonition to Peace.” In this treatise Luther sympathizes with the peasants’ requests, agreeing that their requests are certainly fair. He takes significant issue, however, with the use of Gospel-justified force to achieve their goals. Moreover, Luther is unyielding in his criticism of the peasants’ naïveté in believing that the kingdom of heaven could be created in this earth. While his tone is stern with the peasants, Luther reserves most of his resentment for the princes, stating that “we have no one on earth to thank for this disastrous rebellion except you princes and lords... as temporal rulers you do nothing but cheat and rob the people so that you may lead a life of luxury and extravagance. The poor common people cannot bear it any longer.”⁴⁷ He cautions the nobility “not to take

⁴⁷ Admonition to Peace

light of this rebellion,” and urges them to consider the demands of the peasants.⁴⁸ We see that even on the brink of war Luther shows a great deal of support for the peasants.

Despite many attempts by Luther to resolve the conflict peacefully, brutal fighting ensued, ravaging the Empire. Upon witnessing the carnage in the *Landgraf*, Thuringia, Luther penned “Against the Murdering, Thieving Hordes of Peasants”—a treatise that significantly tarnished his reputation with the peasants, and earned him the title, ‘Hammer of the Poor’.⁴⁹

Angered by the fact that no one listened to his warnings, he says of the peasants:

They have sworn to be true and faithful, submissive and obedient, to their rulers... now deliberately and violently breaking this oath... they are starting a rebellion, and are violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs... they have doubly deserved death in body and soul as highwaymen and murderers... they cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the gospel... thus they become the worst blasphemers of God and slanderers of his holy name.⁵⁰

He is unforgiving in his condemnation, going as far as to sanction the ruthless repression (in which 100,000 – 300,000 peasants were killed) of the revolt, claiming that peasants had “become faithless, perjured, disobedient, rebellious, murderers, robbers, and blasphemers, whom even a heathen ruler has the right and authority to punish” without trial.⁵¹ In Luther’s view, they completely disregarded the rule of temporal law and deserved to be punished. This case illustrates how complicated these issues are. It demonstrates how Luther’s ideas were not always interpreted in the way that he wanted, leading to action he did not condone. It is his ruthlessness with peasants of Swabia that earns him the title, ‘Hammer of the Poor’. So while in

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Originally published as “Against the Rioting Peasants,” the title was modified by printers to carry a harsher tone.

⁵⁰ Against the Murdering, Thieving Hordes of Peasants.

⁵¹ Ibid.

many cases, as this paper looks to highlight, Luther was attentive to the needs and desires of the poor, conflicts like the peasants' revolt show that this wasn't always the case.

The case of the peasants' revolt illustrates for us the disconnect between Luther's theological vision and the application of this theology by the peasants. It shows, too, the limitations of Luther's capacity for imagination. While Luther opened the door to the possibility of a new worldview, where all were equal in the eyes of God and were free from being condemned for their inadequacies as humans, he failed to share the peasants dream for more just, lenient treatment from their lords. He could not make the imaginative leap that the peasants did. However, what he failed to do personally, he made possible for many who came after him. The best example of this, where these bodies of imaginative thought – theology and concrete, real-world changes – were more perfectly aligned is the care of the poor. Luther and the peasants both realized that the Church was doing more to fill its own coffers than to provide for its flock. It is here where this new theology for the imagination had reality-changing significance.

The Community Chest: Theology in Practice

These elements of *sola fide*, priesthood of all believers, and freedom of a Christian made their way into poor relief legislation, drastically changing the way the poor were defined and cared for. From the content of the documents themselves we can see clearly threads of Luther's vision for social welfare. It is for that reason that we now turn our attention to those documents.

In 1521, Luther penned the *Beutelordnung* (Order of the Common Purse), which outlined his vision for the reform of poor relief.⁵² Much of this document was adopted by the Wittenberg city council and, with the help of Luther, was modified into the first example of social welfare legislation: the Wittenberg Order of 1522. The document made the following provisions:

1. Income from churches, brotherhoods, and guilds were to be collected and brought into a community chest.
2. Beggars were not to be tolerated in the city; all were encouraged to work or leave the city. The infirm, elderly, orphaned, widowed, or otherwise impoverished would be provided for, leaving no need for begging.
3. Monks were not allowed to beg. Instead, they were expected to live off the income of their hands.
4. Loans were to be given to poor artisans without interest. If the artisan was unable to repay his loan, the debt would be forgiven for God's sake.
5. If the initial incomes were not enough to sustain the common chest, priests and citizens alike were encouraged to give a portion of their incomes to the chest.
6. Particular regard was given to the children of the poor to learn.⁵³

This community chest, for Luther, was a viable alternative to the current system of poor relief that relied heavily on begging. It is here we see an imaginative world free of begging, where sustenance is provided for all who truly need it.

In addition to the above provisions, two men from the city council, two from the community, and a secretary were to be appointed to manage the funds of the community chest. They were responsible for going to everyone in the community and assessing their level of need, even before they were left penniless. Instead of trusting in individuals to seek out and

⁵² It has been argued that Karlsadt, not Luther, actually authored this document; however Carter Lindberg confirms that it was indeed Luther who was responsible for this article.

⁵³ Lindberg, 200-2.

give to the needy, the community chest allowed a group of councilors to collect and distribute funds based on a set criteria. A similar structure is maintained in all subsequent Common Chest legislation. There are three major themes in this document – discriminate charity, begging, and the centralization of poor relief – all of which have numerous theological and contextual implications. It is to those implications we now turn.

It is certain that Luther’s emphasis on discriminate charity came from a particular context. By 1140, Canon Law – the collection of ecclesiastical rules and law – established guidelines to be followed when giving alms: “we should know that these four following aspects require our attention when we are giving hospitality: the quality of the beggar, the capacity of the donor. . . the reason for the demand, . . .[and] the quantity being requested.”⁵⁴ Here the moral character and the need of the beggar are called into question. One should not give to “harlots and hunters of alms,” because “the righteous should be preferred to the unrighteous, the good to the bad....”⁵⁵ This distinction between the “worthy” and “unworthy” became exacerbated in the late fifteenth century as municipal systems of poor relief were stretched extraordinarily thin by the mounting numbers of impoverished citizens flocking to the cities. Furthermore, the wealthy were not giving to the “real poor,” as Luther articulates in his preface to *Liber Vagatorum*, but instead they gave to mendicant monks and churches who often abused the funds. This is why we see explicit remarks in the Wittenberg Order and subsequent Common Chest legislation limiting the amount given to men of the Church.

⁵⁴ Lindberg, 173-4.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

The idea of consolidating responsibility for the distribution of alms is also not unique to the Wittenberg Order. By the end of fifteenth century, preachers like Johann Geiler of Kayserberg called for significant reform of municipal poor relief. As the dedicated preacher in the cathedral of Strasbourg, Geiler recognized that the problem that most plagued his city, and many more, was the distribution of alms: “It would be necessary for this purpose that a few be chosen to take on the business of administration [of alms]. And an ordinance would be necessary according to which the able-bodied beggars...would be urged to work, and only those unable to work would be provided alms.”⁵⁶ For Geiler, the widespread nature of poverty could not be dealt with if left to the whims of peoples’ good graces. Instead a few men of good standing were to gather charitable donations and ensure the relief was received by those who needed it most. This desire for the centralization of poor relief is a theme found in all of the common chest initiatives, which shows how far-reaching this imaginative reframing was. In the common chest order of Leinsig, for example, the councilors declared the city would provide “food, sustenance, and support through [their] ten elected directors.”⁵⁷ From this we can see that Christians lost faith in the current collectors of alms: monks, priests, and other clerics, and chose to rely instead on elected secular officials. It is clear that anti-clerical sentiment seeped into conversations about poor relief, too. This is captured best by reformer Jan Hus writing on charity trusts in 1413:

⁵⁶ Lindberg, 179.

⁵⁷ Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 104.

As for the alms which were left in trust to be distributed among the poor, patrons sin gravely when they so not distribute them . . . This sin is particularly common among monks, priests, and burghers: for monks, collecting bequests enjoining them to distribute money, cloth or food among the poor, do not do so; the priests, that they might feed the poor in lean days or times do not feed them; and likewise the burghers⁵⁸

Widespread begging was not virtuous, but “the blasphemous result of a greedy Church.”⁵⁹ The responsibility then fell to temporal authorities to care for the poor. This change mirrors the larger shifting of power from the Church to secular authorities in this period.

A third major theme that is evident in the Wittenberg Order is the intolerance of begging. In his forward to *Liber Vagatorum*, a booklet on the trickery of beggars, Luther makes clear his opinion of begging. He urges Christians everywhere to read the pamphlet “so that one can understand how the devil rules so powerfully in the world.”⁶⁰ For Luther, the undeserving poor – mendicants, panhandlers, vagabonds, etc. – were indeed the vessels for the devil’s evil.⁶¹ Princes, lords, and common folk alike, according to Luther, were “giv[ing] ten times too much to such depraved and unscrupulous tricksters...all while forsaking the true poor.”⁶² However, Luther was not the first to implement restrictions on the practice of begging. In the Nuremberg

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Pattison, 92.

⁶⁰ *Liber Vagatorum*

⁶¹ Luther’s disdain for beggars is heavily influenced by his frustrations with monks and travelling clerics who, according to Luther, were robbing the “true poor.” It is also reasonable to assume that Luther’s contempt was also the result of the poor becoming nameless. As the number of beggars increased at a drastic pace, many from other towns and villages, the poor were no longer known to townspeople, leading to a mistrust of these wandering beggars.

⁶² Ibid.

Begging Order of 1478, the city's councilors aimed to quell the influx of beggars who "come here to Nuremberg for alms, demanding and taking them, even though they are not needy."⁶³

These beggars, according to the city council, were taking funds away from those who truly needed it. The expulsion of begging is found in nearly all of the common chest legislation passed after the Wittenberg Order. This emphasis on expulsion was a gigantic departure from the Medieval system of regulation. Uhlhorn comments:

None of [the Medieval] ordinances pursued the goal to do away with begging by an ordered poor relief program providing for the needy. . . . These orders were thus able to provide little help for they had the effect of, so to speak, legalizing and organizing begging, thereby strengthening it more than combating it. The complaint became universal that begging was increasing in spite of these ordinances.⁶⁴

These declarations reflect a much wider popular shift in the view of begging and demonstrate the ineffectiveness of attempting to regulate it.

Once enacted, the Wittenberg Order attracted a great deal of attention from many German cities, both Protestant and Catholic, imperial and free. In September of 1522, Luther traveled to Leisnig, a small town to the south of Wittenberg, to advise them on the implementation of their own common chest. Passed in 1523, the "Fraternal Agreement on the Common Chest of the Entire Assembly at Leisnig" offered many of the same services that the Wittenberg Order proposed as well as including a provision for taxation to maintain funding for the common chest. Luther hoped that the ordinance would "present a good example of

⁶³ Lindberg, 105.

⁶⁴ Uhlhorn, *Christliche Liebesthatigkeit*, 543.

Christian faith and love to many people.”⁶⁵ By 1523, Nuremberg, too, began drafting a new welfare order. Modeled after the Wittenberg Order, historians have called this the “fundamental overthrow of the Medieval exercise of charity as a means for achieving one’s own salvation.”⁶⁶ This extremely effective system attracted widespread attention, as it was the first German imperial city to outlaw begging and establish a compulsory, temporal system of social welfare. Due to Nuremberg’s close relationship with Strasbourg, it seems that Strasbourg used Nuremberg’s Order as a model for its own welfare legislation that was passed in late 1523. Augsburg, Hamburg, Erfurt, and numerous others followed suit in the following few years. Luther’s hope was greeted by enormous interest from cities – both German and otherwise – in implementing his ideas of social welfare into legislation. As Carter Lindberg argues, this is exceptional evidence which makes clear “Luther’s profound impact upon his society.”⁶⁷ It should be noted that social welfare legislation did not occur in a linear progression from Wittenberg onward; rather, Wittenberg and Leisnig served as models for other cities to follow. Common chest initiatives were carried out simultaneously with other cities cross-pollinating ideas.

If we consider that all three of these themes’ origins predate Luther, it may appear, then, that Luther was the culmination of a continuum of changing opinions of the poor and ways to treat them. It is certain that these influences on Luther certainly cannot be overlooked,

⁶⁵ Lindberg, 128.

⁶⁶ Lawrence Buck & Jonathon Zophy, eds., *The Social History of the Reformation* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1972), 20-22.

⁶⁷ Lindberg, 128.

as historians like Robert Jütte are right to assert. A number of compelling arguments have been made that Europe was moving in the direction of secular welfare legislation anyway, painting Luther as a stepping stone on that path. However, if we were to adopt such a position, we run the risk of usurping Luther's agency and significantly downplaying the effect of his theological breakthroughs on the German people. When pooled together in one formative document (the Wittenberg Order), these ideas took flight rapidly, finding their way into municipal legislation all over the German territories. It is more than coincidence that this rapid expansion of common chest poor relief initiatives occurs shortly after Luther finished penning his own version of such legislation. In this way, the Church orders of the Reformation really did "constitute a touchstone for the reality-changing elements of Luther's theology," as historian Klaus Scharffenorth argues.⁶⁸ Though they were far from perfect, the common chest initiatives were largely effective in providing sustenance for the truly needy—they changed the way that people cared for the poor. It is through these documents that we see a glimpse of the possibilities for a new world—a world shaped by a new theological imagination that stressed the equality of all before God and the affirmation that salvation comes wholly from God rather than from anything humans can do.

Conclusion

These imaginative elements not only had reality-changing significance in the sixteenth century, but also have significant implications on the present. As mentioned before, Luther's

⁶⁸ Scharffenorth, qtd. in Lindberg 128.

feeling of inadequacy in the eyes of God played a defining role in his theological development of *Sola Fide*. There was no way that he, a lowly human, could ever have a say in his own salvation—God, and God alone, had that authority. Luther was relieved to find that it could liberate his thoughts and energy from the shackles of anxiety. Time that was spent confessing his sins and worrying about his own salvation could instead be dedicated to the needs of the world, as a servant of all. This call to serve led Luther to establish an imaginative way of thinking about, and caring for, the poor. While we are far removed from Luther’s context, with nearly half a millennium between us, his diagnosis of the human condition still offers deep insight, even for a society no longer dominated as it once was by religion; where society replaces God as judge. Like Luther, we, too, are faced with anxiety in the face of seemingly unattainable expectations. Standards of beauty, behavior, and performance prey on our self-esteem like vultures. Even the strongest in spirit find themselves susceptible to the crippling effects of such pressures. These anxieties are only compounded because we feel that we are completely responsible for these perceived inadequacies; we feel we have—or should have-- complete control of our destiny. We prescribe diets, training plans, and rigid regimens to take charge of our condition.

What might it look like, then, if we relinquish complete responsibility for our situation, as Luther did? What might our world look like if we were no longer burdened by weight of our anxiety and insufficiency? While the answer is far from clear and while I claim no prophetic ability, Luther’s imaginative theological proposals may provide some guidance as we proceed into an undecided future. If we are liberated from our self-centered concerns about perfection and control, we open up so much space in our lives for something different—something

imaginative. We give ourselves the opportunity to open our eyes to a world that needs us, perhaps now more than ever.

While I, as so many others before me, have attempted to analyze the changes in doctrine and societal structures that occurred during the Reformation, we must be careful not to understand this dynamic period solely on those terms. Instead, as Peter Matheson suggests, we must appreciate the shift that underlies these changing structures: the perception of reality. The Reformation was a period where theologians like Martin Luther imagined a world that was much different from the one in which they lived—a vision made possible in the case of Luther through an understanding of *sola fide*. Powered by the currents of widespread distaste for the status quo, these reformers' theologies took hold in the hearts, minds, and imaginations of their followers. These messages, though not always interpreted as the reformers would have liked, helped incubate the changing of consciousness that occurs in this period: a change which is best illuminated when examining the infant structures of social welfare.

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