

**CONCORDIA
THEOLOGICAL
QUARTERLY**

CTQ

Volume 55: Numbers 2-3

APRIL-JULY 1991

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Ritschl's Appropriation of Luther: A Reappraisal

Terrence Reynolds

In his massive, three-volume work on the *Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* Albrecht Ritschl sought to restore the proper biblical and historical meaning to these central concepts of the Christian faith.¹ His dual purpose in doing so was to overcome the prevalent errors of his age and to offer an apologetic to it. It was his contention that the experiential and practical truth of these doctrines had been brilliantly re-grasped by the young Luther, but compromised in the ensuing Reformation controversy. Roman Catholic pressure, he maintained, forced Luther to define excessively the process of justification and thereby rob it of its essential vitality. Philip Melancthon, his closest associate, exacerbated Luther's faulty tendencies and directed orthodoxy into a rationalistic sterility, marked by unwarranted metaphysical conceptions of God, over-estimations of natural theology, and a scholastic aridity which rivaled that of Roman Catholic adversaries. These tendencies, in both Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxy, invited attacks from a variety of quarters. Enlightenment thinkers drew the logical conclusions from the orthodox premises and undermined the rational foundations of the church. In reaction to the objectifying elements in orthodoxy, pietism sought to restore the subjectivity of faith and to re-emphasize the personal moral life of the believer. This reaction led pietism, however, into a number of crucial misinterpretations of the Christian life and church which Ritschl felt conscience-bound to expose. From the Roman Catholic side came condemnations of the Protestant Church which accused its founders and contemporary adherents of distortions of the Christian faith and life. Ritschl felt the need to reply to these voices as well, concurring with the legitimate attacks upon orthodoxy, refuting the errors of pietism, and offering a defense of what he regarded as the seminal thought of the Reformation. In attempting to recapture the spirit and essence of the Reformation Ritschl found a champion in the young Martin Luther and believed that, by basing his work upon Luther's early insights, he could bring about a restoration of the Protestant faith and offer a formidable historical-theological apologetic to its opponents. It will be the purpose of this essay to examine Ritschl's distinction between the young and mature Luther, his attacks upon orthodoxy, and

then his reconstruction of the doctrines of justification and reconciliation, including therein his views of man, the Christian life, and the all-embracing Kingdom of God. His appropriation of Luther will be critically discussed, and a rationale for his selective interpretation will be offered.

Ritschl's respect for the young Luther bordered on reverence,² and he deliberately constructed his system on the basis of what he understood to be Luther's central motifs.³ It was his conviction that, by recovering Luther's emphasis upon the subjective religious experience of the believer within the church, he could reinstate the guiding principle of the Reformation and recall Protestantism to its truth. He felt that Luther's call for a new religious self-consciousness found its best and clearest expression in the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, *On Christian Liberty*, and selected sermons and tracts written before the indulgence controversy (1515-1517).⁴ According to Ritschl, Luther's first theological principle was "the thought of the abiding revelation of love as the essence of God in Christ," not the doctrine of justification itself.⁵ What this principle meant was that justification was "a practical experience of the living member of the Church of Christ," in which he became subjectively aware of divine forgiveness.⁶ Luther was not concerned with the details of conversion, but with the existential self-consciousness which answered the profoundly personal question of religious certitude. It was in this certitude of love and trust in God that man was able to live out his total religious and moral life in the world, in and through the community of believers.

Thus, for Luther, there was no "disinterested" knowledge of God.⁷ One could not apprehend the nature of God through metaphysical speculation, nor through rational methodology of any sort. Religious knowledge of God could only be attained in the personal experience of trust, wrought through the believer's relationship to God in Christ. Talk of God's love and forgiveness was always to be in the context of *pro me* or *pro nobis*, for it was only in the subjective relation of the believer to his Creator that God was genuinely known. Luther withdrew faith from the sphere of understanding altogether, saying of various articles of faith: "the more we speculate about them the less intelligible do they become."⁸ Luther's purpose in this radical exclusion of God from the realm of

philosophy was to effect a break with the scholastic methodology of his age, an epistemological stance which Ritschl claimed to share.

Justification was not "an objective theological dictum in the church's system of doctrinal beliefs,"⁹ but was the experienced assurance of the removal of one's guilt which, as Luther said, "filled the present with the sense of security against death and hell."¹⁰ It was the recognition of a harmony with God and the world, based upon God's reconciling love. In this existential relationship with the Father, the believer lived with a self-understanding rooted in the principles of "grace alone" and "faith alone."

Thus justified and reconciled with God and the world, the believer lived out his Christian life in free and joyful response to both: "Luther defined the Christian life thus: that through the religious virtues of humility, confidence in God, and patience, the Christian is free lord over all things, subject to no man, and that through the moral exercise of his civil occupation he is obligated to every man."¹¹ One's Christian freedom was the manifestation of the unity of justification and renewal, a unity which was strictly maintained by the early Luther.¹² It was in this reciprocal assurance of the believer, through personal trust in God and through his participation in the life of the Christian community, that the certainty of salvation was to be found.

As Ritschl understood the historical development of Lutheran orthodoxy, he was forced to acknowledge that its weaknesses were grounded in the faulty evolution of Luther's own thought. Ritschl's admiration for Luther did not prevent him from candidly stating his reservations about these later emphases. With the mounting pressure from his Roman opponents, Luther was compelled to elucidate and recast his thinking in terms that would be intelligible to his scholastic critics, with the result that he began to explicate matters of doctrine which he had previously, and for good reason, avoided.¹³ Briefly put, Ritschl objected that Luther's experiential view of justification became gradually delimited by scholastic thought-forms.¹⁴ Furthermore, he asserted that the later polemic Luther had regressed into a nominalist doctrine of God, a judicial and Anselmic concept of the atonement, and a prevailing intellectualistic distortion of the faith. His later

theologizing sacrificed the centrality of the believing community and severely weakened the practical-religious cohesion of his early view of justification.¹⁵ These are serious charges indeed, if correctly understood, so it will be useful to look more closely at what it was to which Ritschl was objecting.

When Ritschl accused Luther of defining God in nominalist terms, he had a number of things in mind, none of which was positive in character. The nominalists posited God as able to will whatever He chose,¹⁶ unbound by what men thought reasonable, appropriate, or just.¹⁷ What God did was good, not because it obeyed a particular philosophical conception of what the good was to be, and not because it contributed necessarily to a higher human good, but merely because God willed it. His purposes were often hidden, His nature could not be known, and man before God was a passive agent upon whom the Almighty will carried out His designs. These influences were thought to be evident in Luther's publication of *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), a book which Ritschl found particularly distasteful.¹⁸ In this work Luther stressed the complete passivity of man in regard to the salvation process and painted a picture of man's moral life which had (as Ritschl saw it) a decidedly deterministic and necessitarian color to it.¹⁹ Furthermore, Ritschl felt that, in his description of God, Luther separated His love and His justice, as though God were schizophrenic in His dealings with men. The powerful emphasis upon original sin, with its crushing, objective consequences for all mankind, was also disagreeable to Ritschl.

These distortions were said to be intensified in Luther's well-known law-gospel distinction, in which the process of salvation was explained in a manner which Ritschl thought to be thoroughly Romish in character.²⁰ The unbeliever was said to be in a state of total sinfulness, objectively guilty under the sentence of God's holy law.²¹ The proclamation of the law was the means whereby the sinner was convicted of his own shortcomings and became personally aware of his guilt before God. It was at this point that the faith-creating proclamation of the gospel, brought to bear upon the sinner by the power of the Holy Spirit, could move the unbeliever to genuine repentance and forgiveness under Christ. Once the conversion had taken place, the believer would begin his new life in Christ

under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the ever-regulative proclamation of law and gospel. The Christian's progress in sanctification was thereby (in Ritschl's eyes) separated from his justification and had no effect upon it.

As Luther further defined the operation of justification, he relied heavily upon Anselmic categories.²² In short, he argued that the penalty of man's sin required payment to satisfy God's judgment, and that God sent His own Son to work the justification of men according to His grace and love. The essential point of concern to Ritschl was that the atonement was now described in penal terms, as a legal transaction. Such failed to do justice to the believer's experience of God's gracious, undeserved love. This movement in Luther, thought Ritschl, rendered the notion of justification unintelligible and experientially inaccurate.

Philip Melancthon, Luther's closest associate, and other Lutheran schoolmen of succeeding generations concretized the aberrations of Luther's thought. Ritschl conceded that the second generation of any powerful movement is obligated to erect certain rigidities of thought and practice in order to preserve the truth of the movement,²³ but he remained a severe critic of the lengths to which Lutheran orthodoxy had gone in this regard. Objectivism and metaphysicalism, two tendencies which were anathema to Ritschl, came to dominate the theology of orthodoxy.²⁴ Metaphysical concepts of God, which posited God as a "limitless," "indeterminate being,"²⁵ became the starting point for a flood of natural theology within Lutheran circles. Melancthon and others proposed that theology should begin, not in one's religious self-consciousness of forgiveness, but with a natural or rational knowledge of God which all men possessed.²⁶ It was held that special revelation could be proven by its agreement with philosophical and juridical views of the world, a premise which Ritschl labeled as absolutely "incompetent."²⁷ Theoretical and philosophical constructs began to drive out the personal, religious emphases of Luther, and faith came to be understood as abstract knowledge to be communicated through the rational presentation of correct doctrinal propositions. The deeply subjective experience of God's love in Christ, as mediated through the church, was replaced by a doctrinal detachment which portrayed the notion of justification by faith in an "increasingly unintelligible" fashion.²⁸

According to Ritschl, Melanchthon and others followed Luther's later thought and espoused a purely forensic doctrine of justification. They, too, began with the concept of guilt as an objective impersonal liability based on the ravages of original sin.²⁹ Thus, the sinner owed a debt to the holiness of God, the payment of which was required by divine justice. In what Ritschl described as an irrational and unscriptural step,³⁰ God was said to have acted out of His grace in the sending of His Son, through whose innocent death the satisfaction was made, and man was once more just in the eyes of God. Ritschl compared this notion to the condemned view of Socinus, who held that sin was an offense to be wiped away by an appropriate fine,³¹ and found them strikingly similar. This wholesale juristic bias and the stress upon individual acceptance of "pure" doctrinal truths placed orthodoxy in a number of untenable positions.

For one thing, orthodoxy separated redemption from morality and could make no convincing demonstration of how or why faith was to be active in love.³² It separated Christ from the Holy Spirit because it could show no genuine inner connection between past satisfaction and present sanctification.³³ Since the confession of certain central dogmas had become the condition and the chief guarantee of Christian perfection,³⁴ some later orthodox thinkers had altogether omitted discussion of the crucial concept of Christian freedom before God and in the world.³⁵ The forgiveness of sins and newness of life were separated so thoroughly by the mature Luther and Melanchthon that there is no mention at all of the practical aim of justification in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession.³⁶ Ritschl called this failure to include the believer's relation to the world "shocking."³⁷

The result of this objectifying of an intensely personal experience was the weakening of the idea of the church. By promoting individual assent to rational propositions, orthodoxy reduced the church to a theological school and, by forfeiting the identity of justification and reconciliation, the orthodox underplayed the moral development of the individual within the community of the faithful. No longer was the religious self-consciousness of the gracious presence of Christ, with its religious and ethical implications, a matter of central concern. The individual was now instructed, logically and

rationally, in those propositions to which his assent was required if he was to be saved.³⁸

This steady drift away from active participation in the world by the community of believers gave rise to the movement known as pietism.³⁹ Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), a leading German pietist, epitomized the movement's dissatisfaction with the pedantic theology and religious formalism of the day, and sought a return to a faith based upon simple trust and firmly anchored in the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ Ritschl commended Spener for these worthy intentions, but he was hard pressed to find value in the movement itself. He compared it to Anabaptism and Roman Catholicism in its emphasis upon works and the law, and he scored the pietists for their restoration of asceticism.⁴¹ The denial of the significance of secular vocation and the correlative renunciation of the world were called by Ritschl the very antithesis of genuine Protestantism, which exhorted the believer to penetrate the world.⁴²

This severely distorted version of the Christian life arose from a faulty conception of justification and reconciliation, which became characteristically, though not universally, accepted by those with pietist leanings.⁴³ Oetinger, Stier, Steudel, Klaiber and Rothe are a few of those Ritschl charged with making justification dependent upon the degree of one's sanctification. This erroneous notion conceived of justification as a judgment based upon the moral value of one's faith, such that the resulting perfectionism depreciated the worth of the means of grace and lessened the significance of the true nature of justification and sanctification.⁴⁴ In short, this reinterpretation of orthodoxy perverted true religious self-understanding by affirming a revivalist form of legalism which pushed the church toward sectarianism. It was also said to be thoroughly Roman in character in its promotion of uncertainty of salvation, ascetic living, and the depreciation of one's worldly vocation.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the movement possessed considerable popular appeal and posed a serious threat to both established orthodoxy and the reconstructed faith to be laid out by Ritschl.

The separation of justification from the Christian life was not, however, the only level at which orthodoxy was vulnerable. The assertion by the orthodox schoolmen that the Christian faith was inherently reasonable also began to

backfire, to the detriment of genuine Protestantism.⁴⁶ Theological naturalism, which took up this orthodox premise and explored it thoroughly, began to flourish.⁴⁷ Movements in England, France, and Germany relentlessly applied reason to the notion of revelation and its so-called “embodiment” in the New Testament, and they argued against the orthodox claim that the contents of the Bible were sufficient to convince any reasonable person of their accuracy. Herbert of Cherbury in England, Voltaire and the *philosophes* in France, Semler, Kant, and Lessing in Germany, and many others were leaders in undermining the philosophical framework upon which orthodoxy had taken its stand. Lessing, for example, denied to theology the right to any claims which were not rationally warranted and defensible. In dismissing numerous central doctrines of the Christian faith, Lessing spoke for many of his contemporaries when he derisively referred to the supposedly rationalistic orthodox theologians as *Halophilosophen*.⁴⁸ With its philosophical foundation under attack and its de-emphasis of the ethical life of the believer exposed by Enlightenment moral theologies, Lutheran orthodoxy was subjected to contemptuous rebuttals from its Roman Catholic critics as well.

It was in this setting that Ritschl determined to reconstruct Protestantism, restoring to its rightful primacy the gospel as it had been proclaimed by the early church and by the Luther of 1516. To proceed systematically, beginning with Ritschl’s view of natural knowledge of God and continuing with a discussion of the nature of man and his spiritual status subsequent to the fall, would not only have met with Ritschl’s strong disapproval, but also would not do justice to the body of his theology. The core of his theology is the united doctrine of justification and reconciliation, which is the wellspring from which flows his understanding of the nature of man, the community of the redeemed, and the uniquely Ritschlian idea of the Kingdom of God.⁴⁹ Thus, it is with the quintessential area of justification and reconciliation that we must begin, for it is here that all knowledge of God finds its source: “The truth is that we know the nature of God and Christ only in their worth for us.”⁵⁰

Justification and reconciliation, which are respectively the forgiveness of sins⁵¹ and the active entrance into a harmonious

relationship with God,⁵² offer the solution to the universal dilemma of man to which all religions seek to address themselves. Man lives in a world of contradiction, in which he finds himself a part of nature, subject to forces of cause and effect, yet bearing also, as a spiritual being, an inherent claim to dominate his surroundings.⁵³ In addition to his sense of discord with the world, man also feels a deep sense of alienation from God, and it is this feeling which constitutes the fundamental ground of his predicament. Man is conscious of his inability to fear and trust in God and suffers thereby from an inner self-dissatisfaction. This vague sense of spiritual impropriety is manifested in the oppressive weight of guilt which is described as a permanent contradiction involving "the objective factor of the moral will which is produced by the abuse of freedom in non-fulfillment of the law, and the unworthiness which is expressed for the moral subject in his consciousness of guilt." Ritschl adds that among "the relations that make up the separation of sinners from God, the consciousness of guilt is foremost."⁵⁴ Man's predicament, then, is that he exists in a condition of separation and alienation with respect to his world, himself, and his God.

Justification and reconciliation, which receive a full and rich treatment from Ritschl, are defined more completely as follows:

Nothing further can objectively be taught about justification and regeneration than that it takes place within the community of believers as a result of the propagation of the Gospel and the specific continuous action of Christ's personal character in His community, through the awakening in the individual of faith in Christ as trust in God as Father and of the sense of union rooted in the Holy Spirit, by which are dominated our whole view of the world and estimate of self, despite the continuance of the sense of guilt. How this state is brought about eludes all observation, like the development of the individual spiritual life in general.⁵⁵

Man's estrangement is removed in the moment of pardon, in God's answer to the sinner's question, "How can I stand before God in my imperfection?"⁵⁶ The answer is the free resolve on God's part to pardon sin without regard for the sinner's moral rectitude.⁵⁷ This gracious act of God, mediated through the

community of the faithful, places man in a new self-conscious relationship with God in which he can properly apprehend himself, his world, and his redemption:

Complete knowledge of Jesus' religious significance depends. . . on one's reckoning oneself part of the community which He founded, and this precisely in so far as it believes itself to have received the forgiveness of sins as His peculiar gift. . . One understands forgiveness, justification and reconciliation as far as we consciously reckon ourselves part of the Christian community.⁵⁸

Lest he relapse into the scholastic niceties which he deplors, Ritschl specifically refuses to attempt an explanation of the process of justification itself, for he insists that the matter is beyond human comprehension.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, on the basis of the biblical revelation and the historical self-consciousness and God-consciousness of the Christian community, there are a number of related issues to which Ritschl addresses himself at length.

In the experience of his acceptance by God, the believer is made aware that his prior conceptions of the Almighty were unfounded. He now knows God as Father, not as a God of wrath, and he knows himself to be an adopted child in the holy family.⁶⁰ His experience of God in Christ informs him that the Father is both good and infinitely loving.⁶¹ "Theology," states Ritschl, "in delineating the moral order of the world, must conceive of God in His relation to His Son, which is extended likewise to His community."⁶² In the community, this relation is revealed, without fail, as "loving will." In fact, Ritschl goes on to assert that God is either conceived of as love, or He is not conceived of at all.⁶³ Because He is eternally loving, justification cannot be conceived of as a penal or judicial act, for man is not indebted to a wrathful judge, but loved by a gracious Father: "Penal or retributive notions, common as they may be in men's consciousness, must be tested against the declarations of Christ, and here they do not fit."⁶⁴

Faith, which Ritschl defines as trust in God and Christ, characterized by peace of mind, inner satisfaction, and comfort,⁶⁵ is the emotional conviction on the part of the believer that God's purposes are, indeed, in man's best interests as well.⁶⁶ Obviously, it is by faith that man becomes self-consciously aware of this justification and reconciliation

and takes his place in the Christian community. As Ritschl explains it, faith is essentially a value judgment.⁶⁷ The mind is said to appropriate sensations in one of two ways. One way involves action by the Ego on the basis of feelings of pleasure and pain; the Ego judges if a sensation heightens or depresses it. A sensation may also be judged with respect to its cause or connection with other causes. Such an appropriation of sensations provides us with scientific knowledge. Value judgments, which are formed by the working of the former appropriation upon the latter, are always a part of knowledge. According to Ritschl, there are two kinds of value judgments, concomitant and independent. Concomitant value judgments are operative and necessary in theoretical cognition, but independent value judgments involve one's perception of moral ends. In the independent value judgment one perceives moral ends or moral hindrances in so far as they excite moral pleasure or pain. "Disinterested" knowledge has no relation to such judgments, but religious knowledge, which is always practical and moral, is entirely made up of them.⁶⁸ It would seem that, in the act of faith, man's will is confronted by God with the pleasurable relief of guilt, the overwhelming relationship of love, and the unity of divine and human purpose in the Kingdom of God, all profoundly attractive options. The value judgment is readily made, in freedom, that the new relationship is to the moral and religious advantage of man, and therefore the will seizes upon the offered justification and reconciliation.⁶⁹

The person of Jesus Christ is understood by the believer as the founder and revealer of this profoundly significant value judgment:

To believe in Christ implies that we accept the value of divine love, which is manifest in His work, for our reconciliation with God, with that trust which, directed to Him, subordinates itself to God as His and our Father, whereby we are assured of eternal life and blessedness.⁷⁰

Although Ritschl is unwilling to subscribe to any creedal or doctrinal formulations about the nature of the person of Christ, considering the subject to be beyond the scope of theological inquiry,⁷¹ he does speak about Jesus as making the aim of His life the aim of the world.⁷² Inasmuch as God's aim is specifically the aim of the world also, in and through the

Kingdom of God, it would appear that Ritschl is at least proposing a unity of their wills. Jesus regarded Himself as the "complete self-revelation of God,"⁷³ and He understood the name "Christ" to denote His unique vocation. The business of His vocation was the establishment of the universal ethical fellowship of mankind, or the Kingdom of God, which is also the supreme end of God in the world.⁷⁴ In carrying out His vocation flawlessly, in perfect patience, humility, prayer, and trust, Jesus became the "living head of the community of God's kingdom" and authored a moral code insofar as He directed all men to one another in the Kingdom of God.⁷⁵ Only in this apprehension of His mission, then, can one appropriately speak of His godhead:

. . .the eternally beloved Son of God, on the ground of the like content of His personal will, and of the uniqueness He holds to the community of the Kingdom of God and to the world, is to be conceived under the attribute of Godhead.⁷⁶

As a part of the Christian community, actively participating in the Kingdom of God through faith, one becomes conscious, in a dramatically new fashion, of the nature and effect of sin. In the eyes of God, says Ritschl, sin is simply ignorance, which serves as a negative precondition to reconciliation.⁷⁷ As one would expect, sin, like faith, possesses both a religious and a moral dimension. On the one hand, it exhibits a perverted religious attitude toward God, manifested in failure to trust and revere the Almighty, while, on the other hand, it promotes harmful actions, destructive of the moral development of man. Ritschl suitably describes the universal prevalence of sin as the Kingdom of Sin,⁷⁸ for it directly impedes the moral end of the world, or the perfection of man in the Kingdom of God.⁷⁹ This is all that Ritschl wishes to say about sin, considering himself to have spoken sufficiently on the matter by ascribing to it universal prevalence. He sees no need for a theological explanation of death,⁸⁰ rejects even the Zwinglian notion of man's sinful propensity as "unintelligible,"⁸¹ and tosses out original sin as the recrudescence of a gross, historically conditioned over-reaction:⁸² "To use original sin to combat merits is just as appropriate as it would be to use a boulder to kill a gnat."⁸³

In spite of his reconciliation the Christian continues to sin, failing in his relationships with both God and man, and guilt continues to be a factor in his consciousness. But the guilt is now of an entirely different nature. Ritschl makes what appear to be contradictory statements on the question, but their resolution indicates his principal concern and break with Luther's law-gospel dialectic. As previously shown, Ritschl openly affirmed that justification, or the removal of the separation of sinners from God, should be understood as "the removal of the consciousness of guilt,"⁸⁴ or setting a man free from guilt before God.⁸⁵ He also asserts, in conjunction with his delineation of faith as a value judgment, that the feeling of guilt is painful and that the removal of guilt in justification is pleasurable.⁸⁶ Yet elsewhere he insists that forgiveness, as an attribute of the Christian community, "implies that in that community men may enjoy fellowship with God in spite of their sins and in spite of the intensifying of their guilt."⁸⁷ Again, he states that the assurance of forgiveness is confirmed by the fact that it intensifies the sense of guilt for sins we commit and awakens a sensitive dread of transgression.⁸⁸ What Ritschl is endeavoring to differentiate is that the consciousness of one's guilt after justification is directly conditioned by his gospel-oriented perspective. Where the sinner had previously felt an undefined sense of moral accountability to a divine judge, the believer's guilt consists of his shame at failing to follow the personal will of his loving Father, a will he both understands and wishes to uphold. The believer remains absolutely certain of his forgiveness and is ever conscious of his adoption as a child of God, yet it is precisely in the light of this new relationship that he perceives the harm done by his religious and moral shortcomings.⁸⁹ Thus, Ritschl took issue with Luther's contention that the preaching of the law was necessary to sting the consciences of the regenerate before assuring them of their pardon as guaranteed in the gospel. Ritschl felt that such preaching treated Christians as if they were regularly in need of conversion, and he insisted instead that it was only through the gospel and the awareness of grace that men knew of their justification and genuine guilt. He also feared that such separation of law and gospel would lead to confused revivalistic preaching or renewed forms of nomistic piety.⁹⁰

As an immediate practical result of justification and reconciliation, the Christian comes to his religious understanding of the world, joyfully and confidently acknowledging his relationship with the Father as a cherished gift and as an appointed task to be carried out in his life. The believer's relation to the world is characterized by freedom in and over the world, attachment to Christ, love for fellow-men, and the conscious effort to realize the joint aim of God and man in the Kingdom of God. Freedom, as independence of natural causes, is felt when "the believer stops and deprives of their power those impulses to action which arise from the correspondence between individual propensities and the goods of the world."⁹¹ One is detached from the lower desires of the world and thereby rises above them, concerned, in as undefiled a manner as possible, only with the religious and moral goals of life:

The higher experience of freedom is the ordering of our impulses so that they serve only as a means to the final end we have in our mind. . . The highest stage of freedom is that at which the supremely universal end of the association of mankind is made one's personal end.⁹²

This freedom also involves uncoerced attachment to Christ, and the willing acceptance of any worldly losses attendant thereto. The highest proof of the Christian life, says Ritschl, is the joyful acceptance of such consequences as suffering and the sacrifice of vital elements of the natural life.

The pervading impulse in all Christian action is love, and the "universal ground of all moral conduct towards our fellow-men is that the Christian religion has for its end the Kingdom of God."⁹³ This Kingdom of God, a distinctly Ritschlian concept, is defined as follows:

The Kingdom of God is the divinely ordained highest good of the community founded through God's revelation in Christ; but it is the highest good only in the sense that it forms at the same time the ethical ideal for whose attainment the members of the community bind themselves to each other through a definite type of reciprocal action.⁹⁴

The Kingdom of God is said to be supernatural, for it surpasses all ethical forms in society which are conducted by man's endowments or offer occasions for what Ritschl terms "self-

seeking." These forms include marriage, family, vocation, and the state, for all of these are conditioned, at least to some extent, by considerations of sex, birth, class, nationality, and the like.⁹⁵ The Kingdom of God transcends such limitations. It is also said to be supramundane, for it enables man, in the only way possible, genuinely to achieve dominion over the world. It is a movement by the Christian community which defies empirical observation, yet it proceeds nevertheless among those who consciously seek to fulfill God's purposes.⁹⁶ Jesus, who perfectly understood the will of the Father, saw the Kingdom of God as the moral end of the community which He founded, and it is, as He correctly perceived it, the *summum bonum* realized by God in man.⁹⁷

It remains the task of Christians, through the rendering of loving obedience, to assist God in the fulfilment of their common final end. In this life of moral and religious activity, or *Lebensideal*, the Christian lives in a Christ-like fashion, not in imitation of His life as such, but in accord with His steadfast adherence to His vocation. For as Christ, perfectly and without succumbing to worldly temptation, served as the revealer of the Father's grace and founded the community of faith, so too the believer serves the furtherance of the Kingdom of God through his consistent, loving participation in his ethical vocation. Every ethical vocation "falls within the scope of the moral law." Each man, in exercising his ethical vocation, at once attains his own self-end and renders his rightful contribution to the eternal end of society as a whole.⁹⁸

In all spheres of life the believer is to demonstrate the spirit of patience, humility, prayer, and thanksgiving. By "patience" Ritschl means the feeling which enables the believer to view the evils in life in the light of divine providence and accept them accordingly. Humility begins with the deliberate submission to God which makes tolerable even the most profound moments of suffering. It is more complete humiliation when this feeling coincides with man's desire to fulfill his ethical vocation. Ritschl contends that remaining patient in the absence of success and maintaining proper humility in its abundance are clear marks of Christian piety. Prayer, which stands closest in connection with reconciliation, since it reflects in its intimate dialogue the destruction of enmity between God and man and the restoration of the relationship

of Father and child, is to be a regular part of the Christian life. One must pray with the recognition that the will of God is always best and must be done, even if our desires are not always fulfilled as a result. Above all, one must pray and engage in all of life in a spirit of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving, which is the grateful acknowledgment of God's loving presence and grace, underlies the other three virtues, and must predominate in the church.⁹⁹

The question of Ritschl's appropriation of Luther, even on this brief and limited scale, is a highly complex matter. David Lotz has dealt with the issue in a commendably thorough and fair-minded work.¹⁰⁰ In what follows I shall indicate clear elements of Luther's thought in Ritschl, refer to difficulties which Lotz has uncovered in Ritschl's use of Luther as well as raising several of my own, and offer a rationale for these misinterpretations.

There can be little argument that Ritschl successfully restored a number of Luther's central motifs. The diatribe against "disinterested" metaphysical speculation about God, together with the worthlessness of the resultant knowledge, is a prime example. For Luther, like Ritschl, Christian theology found its proper starting point in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. There is also a strong existential, experiential element in Luther which Ritschl recaptures, but perhaps overplays at the expense of Luther's equally consistent God-ward or objective dimensions. Certainly the unity of justification and reconciliation, severed by Melancthon and the Lutheran schoolmen, was at the heart of Luther's thought and is assertively replaced by Ritschl back into the context of Lutheran theology. While his unique articulation of the Kingdom of God was not appropriated from the early Luther, his rendition of the Christian community and the virtue displayed by its members was a direct repudiation of an ascetic negation of life and a grateful acceptance of the "priesthood of all believers." Ritschl's conscious use of Luther was more than a mere recitation of early Reformation themes; his desire to capture the essential Luther was decidedly genuine, and, in several significant cases, he was conspicuously successful.

This assertion is not to suggest, however, that Ritschl was not guilty of key distortions and misinterpretations as well. In fact, the degree of his misrepresentation is such that one would

assume that it would have displeased Luther himself. On the nature of sin, for example, Ritschl refuses to go along with the Luther of *The Bondage of the Will*, for whom sin was a crushing spiritual reality, permeating all of man's existence. More seriously, Ritschl believed that such a view signaled Luther's departure from his original articulation of justification and gave to sin an erroneous pervading influence on the lives of unregenerate and regenerate alike. Ritschl posited man in a state of moral imperfection, in search of *rapprochement* with his God. What Ritschl heard Luther ask was this: "How can I, in spite of my moral failings, be certain of God's favor?" What Luther had actually asked was this: "How can I, radical sinner that I am, stand in God's presence?"¹⁰¹ Where Ritschl speaks of the believer's "relative imperfection" and "dissatisfaction," Luther stressed his "root sinfulness," self-accusation, self-condemnation, and self-hatred. By this minimizing of sin, first in the unregenerate and then in the regenerate, Ritschl missed Luther's point that justification makes a new creature out of the redeemed. The transformation from sinner to saint is not adequately appropriated by Ritschl, nor does he demonstrate a complete understanding of Luther's *simul justus et peccator* emphasis.¹⁰²

Furthermore, Ritschl's conclusion that man sees in Christ his own moral ideal and finds, within himself, proper grounds for contrition and repentance, is jarringly discordant with Luther's view of regenerate man. It was precisely because Luther rejected any notion of the *homo religiosus* that he insisted upon the Christian's harsh confrontation with God's holy law. For it is only in the penetrating light of God's perfect standard that one can see the darkness of his own miserable piety. Ritschl's argument that the law-gospel distinction would lead to nomistic piety further reveals his misunderstanding of Luther. While the convicting "spiritual" use of the law belongs, technically, to the realm of the law, it is precisely nomistic piety which its use is designed to negate. Ritschl's more optimistic view of man, therefore, seems to have forced him to part ways with these central themes in Luther.

Despite Ritschl's disclaimer to the contrary, the question of how grace was bestowed remained a crucial matter to Luther throughout his career, and it was his revolutionary solution to the issue which constituted his attack on medieval tradition.

As Lotz explains it, in Luther the consciousness of one's justification cannot be appropriately spoken of "apart from specifying the way this consciousness is continually regulated by the word of preaching."¹⁰³ For Luther, the justification of sinners took place according to the strict judgment and tender mercy of God, and it was on the basis of that understanding that the law-gospel distinction was founded. In discarding that distinction, Ritschl dispenses with Luther's entire biblical theology of which it was the cornerstone; thereby Ritschl cripples Luther's radical views of conversion, sanctification, and the awesome power of God's ever-creative word. On the basis of his various observations Lotz concludes that Ritschl's interpretation of the young Luther on justification is "not only dubious, but patently defective."¹⁰⁴

If we place Ritschl in the perspective of his time and his objectives, perhaps we can understand the shortcomings of his appropriation of Luther.¹⁰⁵ Lotz charitably observes that Ritschl did not have complete, or even very adequate, sources when he conducted his work; but while this fact excuses Ritschl's failure to grasp the complete picture of Luther, it does not serve to excuse his "defective" interpretations of the works in his possession. Certainly there are other explanations. It would seem apparent that Ritschl was guided by strong polemical and apologetic considerations which demanded a return to the giant of the German Reformation and which required that he find in Luther answers to the errors and problems of his day. In addition, Ritschl himself, in proposing to write a "scientific" treatment of the doctrines of justification and reconciliation, was not willing to recite motifs of Luther which he and his age would find intellectually unacceptable and offensive. Ritschl was a proud man, possessing considerable personal and theological integrity, and his return to Luther could only be on critical grounds of his own choosing. Thus, one has to suppose that Ritschl's "misinterpretations" of Luther were, for the most part, conscious attempts to refute the faulty tendencies of orthodoxy and pietism or to defend Protestantism from its critics, be they Enlightenment thinkers or Roman Catholic polemicists. Furthermore, Ritschl had his own theological system to construct. In selecting what he took to be the best of Luther as the basis for his own theology, Ritschl must be judged a poor interpreter of Luther, but he must

never be evaluated as less than a major contributor to the history of Christian thought.

ENDNOTES

1. This voluminous three-volume work surveyed in a critical fashion the history of the development of doctrine (volume 1) and the biblical basis for doctrine (volume 2). In volume 3 Ritschl presented his own theological reconstruction on the issue. It was and remains a major historical-theological work.
2. David Lotz, *Ritschl and Luther* (New York, 1974), p. 31.
3. A variety of scholars and theologians have understood Ritschl in precisely these terms. Horst Stephan, Otto Wolff, and Walther von Loewenich all affirmed that Ritschl made Luther's thought the foundation of his system. Wilhelm Herrmann, perhaps the greatest of Ritschl's disciples, had this to say about his teacher: "Ritschl had the power to preserve Luther's work from that ruin into which it had fallen, even among those who comported themselves as the most loyal of Luther's heirs. For he once more brought the Christian faith into plain view as that life set free for earnest men through the person of Jesus. . ." (see Lotz, p. 25).
4. Lotz, p. 30. Ritschl's methodology places quite a severe limitation on Luther's vast corpus, which would seem to open it to intense criticism, but Ritschl knew precisely what he was doing and had systematic and polemic considerations in view in doing so.
5. Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (Clifton, New Jersey, 1966), p. 166. Henceforth this work will be referred to as Ritschl, III.
6. Albrecht Ritschl, *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (Edinburgh, 1874), p. 140. Henceforth this work will be referred to as Ritschl, I.
7. Ritschl, III, p. 6. What Ritschl gleans from Luther, and correctly so, is that any supposed knowledge of God not mediated through Christ is no knowledge at all and is, in fact, idolatrous.
8. Ritschl, III, p. 395. As Ritschl evaluated Luther's development, Luther's later errors were due to his failure to heed his own warning.
9. Ritschl, I, p. 120.

10. Ritschl, III, p. 498. Ritschl explained that it was this assurance that enabled Protestant Christians to live out their faith on the basis of a childlike trust in God, while their Roman Catholic counterparts, in doctrine and in practice, functioned with a childlike fear.
11. Albrecht Ritschl, *Three Essays*, translated with an introduction by Philip Hefner (New York, 1972), p. 71. In his essay, "Prolegomena to the History of Pietism," Ritschl demonstrates the faulty understanding of the Christian life exhibited by the anabaptist and pietist movements and uses Luther as an example of a proper understanding.
12. Lotz, p. 134.
13. Ritschl objected to Luther's explanation of "how" one was justified, of the precise nature of the person and work of Christ, and of the objective nature of sin. He believed that such inquiries were useless, because they moved into areas which surpassed human understanding, and were often harmful because they misdirected the religious and moral energies of Christians.
14. Lotz, p. 32. Ritschl stated that Luther, who was never an outstanding systematician, slowly regressed from religious genius to doctrinal theologian.
15. Lotz, p. 52.
16. William of Occam and Gabriel Biel were two of the leading figures of the nominalist school. There were, however, many others, and the movement was not noted for its theological unanimity. In what follows only the barest generalities are offered, for there seems to have been general consensus on these matters.
17. God was said to be bound only by the law of non-contradiction.
18. Interestingly enough, Ritschl's displeasure with the work was in direct contrast to Luther's evaluation. Luther felt that it was his finest book.
19. For example, Luther wrote: "For if a man has lost his freedom and is forced to serve sin and cannot will good, what conclusion can more justly be drawn concerning him than that he sins and wills evil necessarily?" (*Bondage of the Will*, part IV, section III).
20. Ritschl, I, p. 171.
21. Ritschl, I, p. 344. Ritschl vehemently rejected the objectifying of guilt as an impersonal liability based on original sin. Each man, he said, was personally responsible and guilty for his own sin.

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22. Ritschl, III, pp. 26ff. Anselm's theory of atonement, according to Ritschl, involved a legal propitiation of God. Ritschl contrasted this idea to Abelard's ethical notion, which he generally preferred.
 23. Ritschl, III, p. 25.
 24. Ritschl, *Three Essays*, p. 21. One can find a discussion in greater length by Hefner in his introduction to this volume.
 25. Ritschl, *Three Essays*. One can find a discussion by Ritschl in his essay, "Theology and Metaphysics."
 26. Ritschl, III, p. 5. Some of the orthodox thinkers to whom Ritschl is referring are Gerhard, Calov, and Hollaz. Gerhard is singled out for special attack by Ritschl, for it was Gerhard who assigned faith in God's providence to the realm of natural theology, an almost unforgivable error in Ritschl's system.
 27. Ritschl, III, p. 24. See also in this regard I, pp. 625ff., and III, p. 181. In this final section Ritschl sarcastically denounces the inconsistency of the orthodox as exemplified by Melancthon and Gerhard. Melancthon, in the Apology, had listed ignorance of God as an effect of original sin. Later he offered rational demonstrations of God's existence, the immortality of the soul, the congruence between philosophical morality and the divine law, and the like. Gerhard followed with his assignment of faith in God's providence to natural theology. Ritschl dryly commented: "The fidelity of this orthodox divine to the Augsburg Confession is such that he declares possible to the natural, that is, sinful man, the very trust in God which the chief standard of the church expressly denies to him!"
 28. Ritschl, I, p. 123.
 29. Ritschl, I, p. 365.
 30. Ritschl, I, p. 320. One of Ritschl's complaints about orthodoxy, and one which struck a nerve, was that its theology was marked by "slovenly and thoughtless use of the Bible."
 31. Ritschl, III, p. 262.
 32. Ritschl, III, p. 14.
 33. Lotz, p. 155.
 34. Ritschl, III, p. 659.
 35. Ritschl, III, p. 114.
 36. Ritschl, I, p. 171.
 37. Ritschl, *Three Essays*, p. 128. Ritschl's comment occurs in the "Prolegomena to the History of Pietism."

38. Ritschl, III, p. 5. In Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* (1535 edition) and in subsequent orthodox dogmatics, systematics proceeded from the study of natural theology to original sin and on to the work of Christ, presenting each as objective, almost abstract, propositions. Instruction in the faith, to a large degree, followed suit.
39. In what follows the characteristic features of a highly varied movement will be discussed as they are criticized by Ritschl.
40. Ritschl, III, pp. 7-11. While Ritschl has a number of carefully qualified, yet discernibly favorable, comments to make about Spener and the intentions of pietism, his attitude toward the movement remained decidedly negative. He was so conscious of its potentially harmful impact upon the Christian faith and of his possible categorization as a part of the movement that he devoted a full ten years of his life to the production of a remarkably thorough work on the subject, *The History of Pietism*. In this work, he meticulously dissects the erroneous tendencies of the movement.
41. Ritschl, *Three Essays*, p. 72.
42. Ritschl, *Three Essays*, p. 87. Ritschl's comments occur in the "Prolegomena to the History of Pietism."
43. It must be stated again that pietism was a highly diverse movement, and Ritschl was careful to discriminate among its proponents when leveling his criticisms.
44. Ritschl, III, p. 83; I, p. 537.
45. Lotz, p. 82.
46. In what follows an admittedly brief account of intellectual developments affecting orthodoxy in England and on the continent is offered. It is not meant in the least to serve as a thorough account of these movements, but is merely intended to operate as a setting in which Ritschl figures. For a lengthier and much more useful account of these developments, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard*, pp. 49-96.
47. Ritschl, I, pp. 324-325.
48. Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (St. Louis, 1950), pp. 89ff.
49. The unity of justification and reconciliation is a distinct theme in Luther which is gradually lost in Melanchthon and later orthodox thinkers. Ritschl does Luther a great service in this restorative work.

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50. Ritschl, III, p. 212.
 51. Ritschl, III, p. 40.
 52. Ritschl, III, p. 78.
 53. Ritschl, III, p. 199.
 54. Ritschl, III, pp. 58 and 54. Otto Heick states that man's guilt over his failure to trust and serve God causes him to construct a false picture of God's holiness and wrath, which he naturally fears. This fear prevents man from venturing near God and sustains his alienation. I think Heick is essentially accurate in this interpretation. See Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, II, p. 238.
 55. Ritschl, III, p. 607.
 56. Ritschl, *Three Essays*, p. 21. Philip Hefner contributed the excellent introduction to Ritschl's essays.
 57. Lotz, p. 37. Lotz writes that in Ritschl justification is manifestly forensic in nature, on the model of "the pronouncing of one as righteous by the sentence of a judge." The words quoted come from Ritschl's "Instruction in the Christian Religion." This quotation does not conflict with Ritschl's rejection of penal conceptions of justification; it merely asserts that God's pardon of men through Christ possesses a finality in its authority, not unlike the official pardon of a judge.
 58. Ritschl, III, pp. 2, 4. This assertion was meant, at least in part, to follow in Luther's footsteps and sidestep the charge of subjectivism. Luther was not subjectivistic and was able to distinguish between true and illusory faith. The touchstone of faith was always its object, Christ.
 59. In volume 3 Ritschl wrote the following: "We must give up the question of how man is persuaded by the Holy Spirit. We must only verify life in the Holy Spirit in the believer's knowing God's gracious gifts, calling on God as Father, and cherishing a spirit of union" (p. 22).
 60. Ritschl, III, pp. 94ff.
 61. Ritschl, III, p. 260.
 62. Ritschl, III, p. 273.
 63. Ritschl, III, p. 282. Ritschl's emphasis is not an un-Lutheran one, but his stress upon love at the expense of God's other attributes raises some difficulties with both the early and the mature Luther.

64. Ritschl, III, p. 260. Ritschl called the retribution of God a carry-over from Greek mythological thought about the gods. As a foreign, unscriptural element, it did not belong to a Christian theological system. Because of this and other such positions, Otto Heick refers to Ritschl as a "biblicist." Given the climate of Ritschl's time, the appellation fits. His general confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture, compromised by occasional critical interpretations, made him somewhat conservative in his day. He was sincerely, yet scientifically, trying to uphold the principle of *sola scriptura*.
65. Ritschl, III, p. 142.
66. It is Calvin's definition of faith (coming from the early Calvin, naturally) which Ritschl uses approvingly.
67. To my knowledge, which is admittedly limited, Ritschl is the first to use the category of value judgments in the description of faith, which is a development worthy of note.
68. Ritschl, III, pp. 203ff.
69. My description of Ritschl's thinking here, while not doing complete justice to him, is essentially accurate. His thinking raises some very difficult questions in the area of conversion. What does he say of those whose wills are not "excited" when confronted with the gospel? What does he say of those who refuse to make what seem to be the appropriate value judgments of faith? Ritschl says, "The love of God can be conceived in relation only to such sinners as have not fallen into that degree of sin which excludes conversion of the will" (III, p. 383). He even speaks of men being incapable or "capable" of conversion. This distinction would appear to be a rather lame attempt to escape from the problem and seems to suggest a degree of morality in the subject before divine grace can become operative. (Ritschl thereby comes dangerously close as well to doing something he censures, namely, describing the process of justification.) Ritschl concludes that we cannot say whether there are any people whose opposition to divine purposes has come to full consciousness and determination; the answer is beyond our knowledge.
70. Ritschl, III, p. 591.
71. Ritschl says, "The origin of the Person of Christ—how His Person attained the form in which it presents itself to our ethical and religious apprehension—is not a subject for theological inquiry, because the problem transcends all inquiry" (III, p. 451).

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72. Ritschl, III, p. 414.
 73. Ritschl, III, p. 436.
 74. Ritschl, III, pp. 449ff.
 75. Ritschl, III, p. 414.
 76. Ritschl, III, p. 464.
 77. Ritschl, III, p. 384.
 78. Ritschl, III, p. 344.
 79. Ritschl, III, p. 320.
 80. Ritschl, III, p. 327. Ritschl, very modern in this regard, looked upon death as an existential reality, not a dogmatic dictum.
 81. Ritschl felt that speaking of sinful propensities promoted the faulty conception that man was somehow bound to sin, which he felt lessened one's responsibility and guilt for religious or moral failure.
 82. Ritschl states that original sin was originally developed as a means to uphold the sacramental character of infant baptism.
 83. Ritschl, III, p. 340.
 84. Ritschl, III, p. 54.
 85. Ritschl, III, p. 100.
 86. Ritschl, III, p. 142.
 87. Ritschl, III, p. 543.
 88. Ritschl, III, pp. 544-545.
 89. The certainty of salvation, or complete assurance of the forgiveness of sins, is a recurring theme in Ritschl, as it was in Luther. In a characteristic passage he writes, "Personal assurance, springing from justification, is experienced in and through trust in God in all the situations of life, and especially in patience, by him who through his faith in Christ incorporates himself into the community of believers" (III, p. 192).
 90. Lotz, pp. 108-109.
 91. Ritschl, III, p. 513.
 92. Ritschl, III, pp. 513-514.
 93. Ritschl, III, p. 511. As the believer engages in the religious and moral life of his faith relationship, he completes the three points of the circle of religion, which are God, man, and the world. When any of these elements are minimized, religious conceptions suffer grievously.

94. In his work *Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century* Bernard Reardon speaks of a "practical incentive" which "finds its highest expression in Christianity, the monotheistic, completely spiritual and ethical religion, based on the life of its founder, Jesus of Nazareth, by whom was established that Kingdom of God whose end is the pardon of sinners, the motivation of conduct by love and the deepening of men's sense of filial relation to God" (pp. 138-139).
95. Ritschl, *Three Essays*, p. 224. In "Instruction in the Christian Religion" the point is made that the pure spiritual motivation involved in seeking the Kingdom of God places it above other societal forms.
96. Ritschl can be accused of equivocating on the nature of the Kingdom of God. If it is to be a temporal kingdom, in which God's end is realized in the moral perfection of man, then one might fairly ask Ritschl to produce evidence of its historical progression. If one can perceive no moral change, can the perfection of man in the ethical realm be said to be taking place at all?
97. Ritschl, III, p. 30.
98. Ritschl, III, p. 445. Ritschl's thinking closely parallels Luther's idea of the priesthood of all believers. Ritschl clearly approved of this emphasis in Luther and appropriated it effectively and consistently in his articulation of the Kingdom of God.
99. Ritschl, III, pp. 627-644.
100. David Lotz, *Ritschl and Luther* (New York, 1974).
101. Lotz, p. 28.
102. Lotz, pp. 98-104.
103. Lotz, p. 124.
104. Lotz, p. 105.
105. Lotz, because of his delimited purposes, does not examine as closely as he could have the reasons underlying Ritschl's misinterpretations of Luther. Certainly something other than a simple misreading must have been the cause. Van Harvey raises this question politely, but firmly, in his review of Lotz's work.