CHAPTER ONE

“THINK ABOUT THESE THINGS”:
LUTHER’S “FOURTEEN CONSOLATIONS” (1519)

Self-help books of various sorts—on diets, herbal remedies, exercise, meditation, ‘life strategies,’ etc.—claim to provide today’s afflicted Christian abundant prospects for health and recovery.1 In early modern Europe people often turned to the saints for assistance and comfort. Luther’s “Fourteen Consolations” requires instead that readers turn to Christ.

I. Orientation to Luther’s Document

This is the longest of Luther’s writings that we are examining. Moreover, it puts death into a larger context of suffering and its place in the providence and provision of God. In order to approach Luther’s book properly, one needs to be informed about its reception and intention. Consequently, I consider here the production aspects of the book and then take note of its preliminary parts (Preface, Letter of Dedication, and Introduction). Only the last item was included in the original printings; Luther added the first two items in 1536.

Originally written to comfort a gravely ill Frederick the Wise (1463, 1486–1525), Luther’s “Fourteen Consolations” was eagerly received by readers of Latin and German. He finished the document in August 1519, and it was first printed in 1520 in Wittenberg.2 In addition, that same year four more Latin editions were published in Leipzig, Augsburg,

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1 “The good choice is no longer the choice that is right according to external authority, but simply the choice that I have made: it is authenticated simply by me, the chooser….Discovering needs thus becomes the project of the individual, ensuing in a never-ending quest for the self, with seekers devouring therapies and self-help psychology books and meditative techniques without end. If once the priest told me how to live, now the therapist helps me to find my own way”; Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death*, 27.

Cologne, and Zwolle. In 1521 a Latin edition from Basel was released. Also in 1520 Georg Spalatin (1484–1545) prepared a German translation at Luther’s request, and five editions in all (at Wittenberg, Leipzig, and Augsburg) were printed, with two additional printings in 1522 and 1525. There were also translations into Dutch (1521), French (1534), and English (1538).

Luther himself oversaw a ‘revised’ Latin edition in 1536, in which he claims to have restored the sense of his original (which he felt had been mutilated by the many subsequent editions). He refused to update anything, so as to preserve the document’s historical meaning. Luther claimed in the 1536 Preface that the thought contained in the present edition reflected his thoughts at that earlier time (1519) and, when viewed nearly two decades later, would thus provide “proof of my progress and also please my adversaries by giving them something on which they can vent their malice” (WA 6:104.12–13).

Also omitted until 1536 in the Latin printings, but included in all the German editions, is the Letter of Dedication (LW 42:121–124; WA 6:104–106). While not originally included (and therefore not available to Frederick), Luther’s piece provides us a glimpse of his theology of caregiving. We read arguments from Scripture about what believers are to do when they discover people in need, this information coming to us in the context of Luther’s relationship with, and responsibility to, his prince. An outline of the dedication’s organization can be seen as a series of five steps: (1) Christ commanded us to minister to others, and in the incarnation he also set an example of ministering to others; (2) Christ himself suffers when anyone—especially a Christian—is sick; so fulfilling our duty by ministering to a sick brother is ministering to Christ; (3) The significant role of Frederick as head of state means his fate is to be shared by his subjects, of whom Luther is one; (4) All subjects have a duty not only to suffer along with their head, but also...

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3 Benzing Nr. 592–95 (‘B’–‘D’ in WA 6:101).
6 Benzing Nr. 605–608.
7 Wittenberg: Josef Klug; Benzing Nr. 597 (‘F’ in WA 6:101).
8 “...testimonium ostendere mei profectus et gratificari Antilogistis, ut habeant quo suam malitiam exerceant.”