

Wittenberg's Wandering Spirits: Discipline and the Dead in the Reformation

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This article examines early protestant efforts to confront the belief that souls in purgatory appeared to or haunted the living. It demonstrates that a series of Articles on the Conjuraton of the Wandering Dead (1521 or 1522) long attributed to Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt were actually written by Martin Luther or a close disciple. More importantly, it shows that these Articles participated in an extended effort by Luther to realize the doctrinal foci of the Reformation in the daily lives of believers as they encountered apparitions and poltergeists, worried about lost loved ones, and faced their own deaths. Luther aimed, in particular, to discipline Christians' senses of hearing and sight. Relating inward and outward senses, and explaining the apparent wandering dead as demons in disguise, Luther counseled Christians to hear the Word rather than the dead, to see Christ rather than the devil. Karlstadt also sought to realize doctrinal concentration, but in a manner shaped by his conception of faith as knowledge. Addressing anxiety about those who died before the Reformation, Karlstadt explained the wandering spirits as ignorant souls, destined for salvation but still needing to learn the right way. These wanderers spurred the living to diligent study of God's will.

IN September 1522, Adam Petri printed in Basel a compilation of *Propositions of Luther, Melanchthon, Karlstadt, etc.* It was the third such compilation of academic theses printed by Petri, and among its pages was an anonymous series of 48 *Articles on the Conjuraton of the Wandering Dead* (*Articvli de conivratione mortvorvm migrativm*).¹ The *Articles* represent a historically significant formulation of early evangelical

¹*Lvtheri, Melanch, Carolostadii etc. Propositiones, Wittembergae uiua uoce tractatae* . . . (Basel: Adam Petri, 1522), C1v–C3v, in *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1983–2000) https://opacplus.bibvbv.de/TouchPoint_touchpoint/start.do?SearchProfile=Altbestand&SearchType=2 (hereafter VD 16). This text is L 7642. In Alejandro Zorzín's index of Karlstadt's printed works (see idem, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990], 273–307), it is number 51, while the first two collections are numbers 29 and 36. The *terminus ante quem* for the third collection—established by a dated transcription discovered by Dr. Hans-Peter Hasse—is August 26, 1522. The second collection was printed in September 1521. Thus, Zorzín concludes that the academic theses contained in the third collection were written between August 1521 and July 1522. Idem, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, 235–236.

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arguments regarding individual eschatology:² they were perhaps the first public evangelical repudiation of the existence of purgatory, preceding by a full eight years Luther's *Renunciation of Purgatory*.³ Even more, they contained a biblical-theological argument against the belief—then widespread among scholars, clerics, and the laity—that souls in purgatory would appear to or haunt the living, seeking the intervention of the living in order to secure their escape from purgatorial punishment.⁴ The idea that the living could offer masses, pilgrimages, indulgences, and other works to God on behalf of the dead was a pillar of the relationship between the living and the dead in the Middle Ages.⁵

Scholars have long attributed the *Articles on the Conjunction of the Wandering Dead* to Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, an early and significant academic ally of Martin Luther who was denounced by the latter in March 1522 for his supposedly legalistic and uncharitable insistence on “external” religious reforms.⁶ Shortly after the *Articles* were published, however, Karlstadt produced his *Sermon on the State of Christ-Believing Souls, on Abraham's Bosom and the Purgatory of Departed Souls* (henceforth *Sermon vom Stand*, after the German title)—an effort to revise

²Because the term “protestant” was not in use in the early 1520s, the term “evangelical” will be used to describe Martin Luther, his allies, and their followers.

³Stefan Oehmig, “Karlstads Auffassung vom Fegefeuer. Entstehung und Wirkung,” in *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486–1541), ein Theologe der frühen Reformation: Beiträge eines Arbeitsgesprächs vom 24.–25. November 1995 in Wittenberg*, ed. Sigrid Looß and Markus Matthias (Wittenberg: Drei Kastanien Verlag, 1998): 73–120, 85. For Luther's *Widerruf vom Fegefeuer*, see *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–), 30.II: 367–390 (hereafter WA). Luther, to be sure, sought to revise teachings about purgatory already at the time of the *Ninety-Five Theses* and the later *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*; see WA 1: 525–628; *Luther's Works: American Edition*, 55 vols. (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress; St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1955–1986), 31: 83–252 (hereafter LW).

⁴Bruce Gordon, “Malevolent Ghosts and Ministering Angels: Apparitions and Pastoral Care in the Swiss Reformation,” in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (New York: Cambridge University, 2000): 87–109, notes that belief in ghosts was by no means limited to the laity or the uneducated.

⁵Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, “Introduction: Placing the Dead in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” in *The Place of the Dead*, 3–4; this introduction offers an overview of prior research on “how groups of people in late medieval and early modern Europe sought to determine what the place of the dead should be.” The relevant research is too extensive to cite here.

⁶The *Articles* were first attributed to Karlstadt by Hermann Barge, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt* (Leipzig: Friedrich Brandstetter, 1905 [reprinted in 2 vols., Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1968]), I: 494–495. Recent scholars have affirmed this attribution, including Zorzin, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, 234–240; Oehmig, “Karlstads Auffassung,” 85–91; and Craig M. Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450–1700* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000): 31–32, who follows Zorzin. Regarding Karlstadt himself, Ulrich Bubenheimer has been the leading researcher of recent decades; see his “Andreas Bodenstein genannt Karlstadt (1486–1541),” *Fränkische Lebensbilder* 14 (1991): 47–64.

rather than reject the idea of purgatory.⁷ Scholars have traced this alleged about-face by Karlstadt to a variety of personal contacts and intellectual sources, as well as to the theological and pastoral difficulties created by Karlstadt's conviction that baptism should be delayed until recipients could demonstrate true faith. For Karlstadt and his hearers, an intermediate state in the afterlife might have served to maintain the possibility of salvation for children who died unbaptized.⁸

By pointing to extensive and substantial parallels between the *Articles* and several of Luther's contemporary works—particularly surrounding the use of Deuteronomy 18:10–12 and Luke 16:19–31—this essay will demonstrate that the *Articles* were not authored by Karlstadt but by someone firmly in Luther's sway on questions of individual eschatology; most likely, they were written by Luther himself.⁹ More importantly, this essay uses the *Articles* as a starting point to explore the theological and pastoral difficulties that belief in the wandering dead created for early Wittenberg reformers. It shows that the Wittenbergers' questions about the status of the dead and the existence and nature of purgatory frequently turned on the question of how the living should conduct themselves and maintain their salvation in a world filled with troubling voices from extra-natural realms.¹⁰ Prior scholarship has assumed that the reformers' counsel about the ghosts was derived from their thought

⁷*Ein Sermon vom Stand der Christglaubigen Seelen von Abrahams Schoß vn[d] Fegfeur der abgeschydenen Seelen* was first printed in Augsburg by Philipp Ulhart, possibly already at the end of December 1522; it is VD 16 B 6197. Zorzin's index (see number 52) records 6 subsequent editions. Citations here are from the Ulhart edition. For an excellent overview of the influence of this treatise, see Oehmig, "Karlstads Auffassung," 91–102.

⁸Zorzin, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, 239–240, points to the baptism issue. Thomas Müntzer and Nicholas Storch have been proposed as possible personal and intellectual influences upon Karlstadt's alleged shift. More certain is the intellectual influence of Wessel Gansfort (d. 1489) and his spiritual conception of purgatory. In addition to Zorzin, see Oehmig, "Karlstads Auffassung," 89; and Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead*, 32. Koslofsky also points to the change in audience: "The shift from a collection of Latin academic theses to a vernacular sermon called for a message which would edify Karlstadt's parishioners. Gansfort's spiritual Purgatory could provide such a message of hope." This essay argues that, in fact, the message and program of the Latin *Articles* also was advanced in a series of vernacular writings, authored by Martin Luther.

⁹See section 3 below for a discussion of whether and how the *Articles*, especially the first eight, might have cohered with Luther's then-developing notion of the soul's sleep after death. See Werner Thiede, "Nur ein ewiger Augenblick. Luthers Lehre vom Seelenschlaf zwischen Tod und Auferweckung," *Luther* 64, no. 3 (1993): 112–125; and Thiede, "Luthers individuelle Eschatologie," *Lutherjahrbuch* 49 (1982): 7–49. Summarizing Thiede's argument and its relationship to prior scholarship: Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1999): 325–329.

¹⁰As Gordon and Marshall note in their introduction, "Relations [between the living and the dead] were not only shaped by, but themselves helped to shape the processes of religious change" (3).

about purgatory.¹¹ Often, the reverse occurred. Questions about how to deal with ghosts on the basis of the doctrinal foci of the Reformation controlled discussions of purgatory.

Accordingly, this essay argues that the Latin *Articles* were but one piece of an endeavor initiated by Luther himself—and also carried out in Luther’s vernacular works—to focus believers’ attention on scripture as the sole source of truth and Christ as the sole source of salvation. Interpreting the appearance of “wandering spirits”¹² and, indeed, every communication from the supposed dead as a demonic distraction from the few true sources of salvation, Luther counseled Christians to look for truth in scripture alone. Luther’s stance on the wandering spirits belonged to a disciplinary program seeking to realize the “normative concentrations” of the Reformation in believers’ lives.¹³ As defined by Berndt Hamm, late-medieval normative centering sought “the alignment of both religion and society towards a standardizing, authoritative, regulating and legitimizing focal point.”¹⁴ Luther’s efforts to translate doctrinal centering into lived religious discipline in relation to the wandering spirits focused on believers’ sensory experiences, particularly their sight and hearing; Luther addressed physical, outward senses, while also invoking the physical senses as metaphors for inward comportment.¹⁵ Thus, Christians who were troubled by ghosts or poltergeists—or perhaps tempted to consult the dead via the “black arts”—were instructed by Luther not to hear the supposed wandering dead. In a kindred manner, Luther instructed the dying to close their eyes when the devil assailed them with terrifying “images” of death, sin, and hell.¹⁶

¹¹See esp. Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead*, 19–39; in regard to Luther, see the scholarship cited in Note 9.

¹²An appropriate term is “revenant”; this essay will refer to the “wandering dead” or “wandering spirits,” following the vocabulary of Luther and Karlstadt.

¹³See Berndt Hamm’s discussion of “normative centering” in Hamm, *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety: Essays by Berndt Hamm*, ed. Robert J. Bast (Leiden: Brill, 2004): 1–49. Scholarship on religious and ecclesial discipline in the early modern era usually has initiated study in the later sixteenth century and focused extensively on the formal mechanisms of discipline, as well as the relationship between church and secular authorities. See esp. Heinz Schilling, ed., *Kirchenzucht und Sozialdisziplinierung im frühneuzeitlichen Europa* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994). For an English-language introduction to these themes: R. Po-chia Hsia, *Social Discipline in the Reformation: Central Europe 1550–1750* (London: Routledge, 1989). More work is needed on discipline as a theme and goal of the early Reformation, and on the role of persuasion and exhortation to self-discipline.

¹⁴Hamm, *Reformation of Faith*, 3.

¹⁵See the remarks of Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohmann (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2014), 131–132.

¹⁶Luther’s 1519 *Sermon on Preparing to Die* will be discussed below. Claudia Resch, *Trost im Angesicht des Todes. Frühe reformatorische Anleitungen zur Seelsorge an Kranken und Sterbenden* (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 2006), has demonstrated that early evangelical clergy were instructed to console the dying; however, literature on preparation for death—which concerned

Karlstadt participated fully in Wittenberg efforts to organize doctrine around a few key *loci*—faith, grace, Christ, scripture—and to see this concentration realized in the daily lives of evangelicals. Yet his conception of salvation as a process of learning that might continue beyond the grave inspired a different interpretation of the wandering spirits and different advice to believers confronted by these spirits.¹⁷ Scholars have overlooked the fact that Karlstadt's *Sermon vom Stand* contradicts the *Articles*' contentions not only about purgatory, but also about the wandering spirits. *Sermon vom Stand* does not, as scholars have claimed, dismiss the wandering spirits as always demonic;¹⁸ rather, Karlstadt argues—quite possibly in direct, critical conversation with the *Articles*—that these apparitions might be confused, ignorant souls who still need to learn the right way to salvation. The relevant pastoral context reveals itself to be, in part, anxiety about the fate of persons who had died before the claimed rediscovery of the gospel in Wittenberg. That said, alongside his work of consolation, Karlstadt still demanded lived concentration in the form of learning, just as Luther demanded concentration in relation to the senses.

I. THE *ARTICLES ON THE CONJURATION OF THE WANDERING DEAD*

We do not know precisely when the *Articles* were written or debated. Barge, who was the first to argue for Karlstadt's authorship, posited that they predated Luther's return from hiding in the Wartburg Castle and his denunciation of Karlstadt in early March 1522;¹⁹ Zorzin and Oehmig find traces of Karlstadt's response to tensions between Luther and himself after March 9.²⁰ This section highlights a few parallels between the *Articles* and Luther's thought and writings; above all, it discusses the use of

the living and not the presently dying—sought not only to console but also to guide, exhort, and admonish Christians. Current scholarship on evangelical *ars moriendi* literature has failed to discern purposes beyond consolation; see Austra Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying: the ars moriendi in the German Reformation (1519–28)* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007). The disciplinary nature of Luther's 1519 sermon provokes Thiede's objection that it risked turning faith into a work and leading Christians "into fundamental uncertainty and fear"; see Thiede, "Luthers individuelle Eschatologie," 19.

¹⁷On salvation as learning and faith as knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) in Karlstadt's writings, see Vincent Evener, "Divine Pedagogy and Self-Accusation: Reassessing the Theology of Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 87, no. 3 (July 2013): 335–367.

¹⁸Oehmig, "Karlstads Auffassung," 77; see also Zorzin, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, 237n16. Barge, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, II: 9n20 mentions but does not discuss the relevant passage.

¹⁹Barge, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, II: 5.

²⁰Zorzin, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, 236; Oehmig, "Karlstads Auffassung," 87–89.

Deuteronomy 18:10–12 and Luke 16:19–31 in the *Articles*, for it was especially in their treatment of these two texts that the *Articles* participated in Luther's broader efforts in 1521–1523 to instill in believers a disciplined, evangelical stance toward wandering spirits. These efforts are described in Section II.

The *Articles* begin with the declaration, "When it has departed from the body, the soul immediately enters heaven or hell" (Article 1).²¹ Articles 2 through 8 give supporting biblical citations, along with a line from the Athanasian Creed: "Those who did good will enter into eternal life, but those who did evil into eternal fire" (3). These biblical citations correspond to a series of citations made by Luther in his 1518 *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, where he noted that they "militate against the whole idea of purgatory because they do not establish an intermediary state between the dead who have been condemned and those who are saved."²²

Articles 9 and 10 turn to the topic of conjuring the dead, citing Deuteronomy 18:10–12, where the Israelites are forbidden to sacrifice their sons or daughters, consult diviners, interpret dreams or auguries, consult soothsayers, or "seek truth from the dead." The apparitions of souls resulting from such practices are "either dreams or diabolical deceits," the *Articles* assert, and the answers they dispense are false (11–12). Articles 13–19 compare the work of conjurers to the work of witches: witches and conjurers believe in the efficacy of their practices, and hence, with God's permission, they are deceived by the devil (17–19). The conjuration of the dead, moreover, has the appearance of worship (15)²³ and involves the (mis)use of divine words (16). Article 20 broadens this theme, arguing that the devil apes the divine and "mingles his deceitful signs with the sacred gospel" in order to smear his sword with honey and make his poison sweet. While the reference to the sword smeared with honey reminds of Karlstadt,²⁴ the *Articles* (especially 15–24) reflect Luther's life-long concern for the devil's mimicry of true worship and faith.²⁵

²¹The *Articles* will be cited parenthetically according to number.

²²WA 1: 563.18–39; LW 31: 138–39. The passages cited are Ecclesiastes 11:3, Revelation 14:13, Galatians 6:8 and 6:10, John 9:4, and Hebrews 9:27. Oehmig, "Karlstads Auffassung," 84, notes Karlstadt's use of these passages in *Sermon vom Stand*; the parallel to Luther's *Explanations* is more direct.

²³"Coniurationes hae, non nisi sub praetextu religionis placent Kakodaemoni, ne illius astus praesentiat."

²⁴See Zorzin, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, 237, 237n18. It is not clear that the "sword" in the passage—"Diabolus similis uolens esse altissimo suos praestigiosos characteres sacrosanctis immiscet euangelii, quo gladius mellitus fiat, et uenenum dulce"—refers to scripture "als bitterem, richtenden Wort Gottes" (Zorzin) instead of to the devil's intention to slay through deceit. The former meaning would be very uncharacteristic for Luther.

²⁵See Susan E. Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University, 2011): 294–295.

In addition, Articles 25–28 contain a series of assertions that Luther made often in 1521–1523. These assertions describe apparitions of souls as a profound threat to the doctrine of salvation by faith alone:

25. . . . [M]asked demons (*personati daemones*) desire many masses, pompous alms, public fasts, and pilgrimages. 26. Whence it happens that these attractive (*speciosa*) works extinguish faith and hope in God. 27. For people seeing these works now suppose that they are saved not by faith, but from these works.

Article 28 states simply that these masses, alms, fasts, and pilgrimages do not please God, while Articles 29–31 contrast the “signs of the promise” instituted by Christ, namely baptism and the Eucharist, to false signs left behind by the devil, including “holy water, consecrated herbs, sanctified salt, the words of the gospel, the signs of the cross.” “The use of these is Christian,” Article 32 explains, but “the abuse of them” desired by the devil “is wicked and stinks of idolatry.” People must not be deceived by the appearance of lost loved ones, the *Articles* explain, for “the devil is able to fashion the face of any person, as he wishes, from existing matter (*ex materia praeiace[n]te*)” (33). In so doing, the devil deceives people in the same manner that he deceived Eve (34).

The *Articles*, finally, cite the story of Lazarus and the rich man from Luke 16:19–31 in order to deny that tormented souls appear to the living and seek their assistance. As discussed below, on numerous occasions between 1521 and 1523, Luther used Luke 16 in connection with Deuteronomy 18 to make this point. In Luke’s account, Jesus describes “a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and lived luxuriously and with pleasure every day”²⁶ and a poor, boil-covered man, Lazarus, who lay at the rich man’s gate longing for table scraps, while the dogs came and licked his sores. Both men died, and Lazarus was carried by angels to Abraham’s “bosom (*Schoß*),” while the rich man found himself in hell and torment. From hell, the story continues, the rich man begged Abraham to “send Lazarus, so that he might dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue,” but Abraham responded with the rebuke, “Remember, son, that you received your good things during your life, while Lazarus received evil.” Abraham also explained that “a great chasm” stood between them, so that “those who would descend from here to you cannot, and [they] also cannot cross over from there to us.” The story concludes with an exchange surrounding the rich man’s plea that Lazarus be sent to his five living brothers, to warn them to avoid their sibling’s fate. Abraham says that the living must listen instead to Moses and the prophets; the rich man counters that a dead person would

²⁶My translations from the *Luther Bible*.

be more convincing and move his brothers to repentance; but Abraham retorts, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they also will not believe if someone were to rise from the dead.”

The *Articles* offer this tale as evidence that there are two possible eternal fates, and that the place of torment is impregnable and inescapable; the “captives” in hell cannot receive help from the blessed or the living, nor cross over to another realm. The *Articles* read:

37. Whoever receives his good things in this life, like the rich man adorned in purple, will be tormented in another place, 38. but whoever receives evil things with Lazarus will enjoy everlasting solace (*solatio sempiterno*) in that place. 39. Between the place of solace and the place of torment a giant chasm has been established. 40. Just as those who enjoy solace, whenever they wish to cross over from here to the wretched, cannot, 41. neither are the captives able to cross over from that place to this place. 42. Thus neither are the captives able to return into their own homes.

Here, the *Articles*’ reformulation of individual eschatology made an urgent demand of believers. They must not only rethink the fate of their lost loved ones, but also close their own ears to apparent messages from the tormented dead. Set in opposition to Article 10 and its citation of Deuteronomy 18 (“To seek truth from the dead is a transgression and abomination before God.”), Article 43 declares with reference to Luke 16, “The truth must be sought from Moses and the prophets, that is, from sacred scripture, not from the dead.” Those who base their faith on the dead or their belief in immortality on St. Patrick’s purgatory are unbelievers (44–45). Like the casting of a spell, the conjuring of the dead is a type of idolatry (47).

The final article, “I stand before the tribunal of scripture, at which I must be judged” (48), has a defensive ring, and Zorzin—in his argument for Karlstadt’s authorship of the *Articles*—proposes that it may reflect tensions in the theology faculty after Luther’s return to Wittenberg in March 1522.²⁷ If Luther wrote the *Articles*, however, such a defensive conclusion might have reflected his well-documented uncertainty in the early 1520s about the fate of souls after death; in other words, the last article might reveal lingering doubt behind the literary form of confident assertion. Here, it is important to underline that Luther was uncertain about souls’ post-mortem condition, not about the demonic origins of the wandering spirits. Another possibility is that a close disciple of Luther wrote the *Articles* and wanted, in the final thesis, to defend his readiness to make bold assertions about the afterlife, even as

²⁷Zorzin, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, 236. On the Wittenberg movement and Karlstadt’s role in it, see the excellent account of Jens-Martin Kruse, *Universitätstheologie und Kirchenreform. Die Anfänge der Reformation in Wittenberg, 1516–1522* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2002), 279–389.

Luther himself wavered. Whoever wrote the *Articles*, the parallels to the vernacular works of Luther discussed below evidence their close connection with Luther's endeavor to discipline evangelical faithful not to listen to the dead, and to arm these faithful for combat in an appropriate, evangelical manner with apparent wandering souls. The next section describes this program and connects it to Luther's instructions on facing one's own death.

II. DEATH, THE AFTERLIFE AND THE WANDERING DEAD IN LUTHER'S WORKS, 1521–1523

The model sermons (*Postille*) penned by Luther during his "exile" in the Wartburg from May 1521 to March 1522 occupy a place of considerable historical significance as the beginning of an ambitious effort to guide evangelical clergy in right preaching and right exegesis according to Luther's understanding of the gospel. By controlling preaching, the *Postils* sought to shape the faith profession and the "lived religion" of evangelical Christians.²⁸ Here, we are concerned with a passage from the *Christmas Postils* (*Weihnachtspostille*), which were completed by November 1521 and published in March 1522, before the *Advent Postils*.²⁹ It is thus likely that the *Articles on the Conjuraton of the Wandering Dead* were penned after the relevant postil.³⁰

The wandering spirits appear in Luther's discussion of Matthew 2:4–6, where Luther begins by asking why the star brought the magi to Jerusalem rather than Bethlehem. In Jerusalem, Luther explains, the priests and scribes consulted scripture to identify the birthplace of the messiah; thus, Christ "teach[es] us to cling to Scripture and not to follow our own presumptuous ideas or any human teaching . . . It is in Scripture and nowhere else, that he permits himself to be found." Luther supports his exegesis by citing Abraham's rebuke of the rich man's request that Lazarus be sent to his brothers. Luther complains that "our learned scholars (*unßer gelerten*)" have ignored this rebuke and "devised all manner of ways to learn the truth"—through human-invented laws and doctrines, through the "lives and example of the saints," and through the scriptural interpretations of the saints and church fathers. According to Luther, Christians must regard scripture as the

²⁸See Jared Wicks, *Luther's Reform: Studies on Conversion and the Church* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1992), 189–196; see also Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 110–111.

²⁹See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, trans. James L. Schaaf, 3 volumes (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress, 1985–1993): II: 15–18; Josef Benzing and Helmut Claus, *Lutherbibliographie. Verzeichnis der gedruckten Schriften Martin Luthers bis zu dessen Tod*, 2nd. ed. (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1989), nos. 1061–1067.

³⁰See note 1 above.

sole source and measure of truth; in turn, scripture teaches that faith cannot abide where a person thinks that salvation comes from any other sources.³¹ Luther particularly criticizes an alleged reliance on “natural light and pagan knowledge” in the church’s theology; he found this undue reliance epitomized in the belief that one must understand Aristotle to be a theologian.³²

Most important for our purposes, Luther describes the consultation of the dead as an extreme form and consequence of seeking truth outside of scripture. He writes:

they fall into the hands of the devil and follow the examples of those who have visions of departed souls and pray to them for help; without fear or trembling they believe everything that those spirits told them. That is why the mass has fallen into such abuse, with masses for departed souls and the sale of masses . . . The devil permitted himself to be adjured (*beschweren*) and compelled to speak the truth. So he has made a joke and game out of our faith and sacrament, just as he wanted it.³³

The final two lines here mirror arguments from the *Articles*. According to Luther, the learned and the laity following the former gave credence to a demonic trick—to apparent visions of the dead and stories of the same—and this misdirected belief led to a massive perversion of the faith, centered on the mass.³⁴ The resulting false, if apparently pious, faith and sacrament represent divine punishment “for our inquisitiveness, because we were not satisfied to have God’s Scriptures alone.”³⁵

Importantly, Luther treats the wandering spirits here not only as historical sources for the belief that the mass was a sacrifice—and hence a possible offering to God on behalf of the dead—but also as a present threat to normative concentration on scripture: “God does not desire that you should learn from the dead and seek the truth from them,” Luther instructs with reference to Deuteronomy 18. Christians must accept the sufficiency of God’s instruction in scripture, particularly in regard to the afterlife: “He knows well what he ought to tell you about the living and the dead.” Attempting to inculcate right behavior in the face of hauntings, Luther instructs Christians to despise “all this swindle of the spirits and not be

³¹WA 10.I.1: 576.4–584.8; LW 52: 171–177.

³²WA 10.I.1: 584.9–585.3; LW 52: 177–178 (translation altered). Luther underlines that he does not criticize the “natural knowledge” available to reason for the sake of daily living, but “idle dreams and useless thoughts about things which do not exist, and about which they are ignorant.”

³³WA 10.I.1: 585.4–11; LW 52: 178.

³⁴See as well Luther’s treatises on the abuse of the mass, WA 8: 411–76; 482–563; esp. 534.18–537.34; LW 36: 133–230; esp. 194–198. Written at the end of 1521 and published in January 1522, these treatises confirm the nearness of the *Articles* to Luther’s thought and program in regard to the wandering dead.

³⁵WA 10.I.1: 585.11–17; LW 52: 178.

afraid of them." A "poltergeist and tapping spirit (*pollter- unnd rumpellgeyst*)" is never a good spirit, he argues, and Christians confronted by such noise should cross themselves and cling to faith. A poltergeist will cease when combatted with faith and God's Word.³⁶ The haunted can take their stand on Luke 16:29:

From this text it clearly follows that God does not desire to have the dead teach us, but that we should cling to his Scriptures. Therefore, wherever a spirit crosses your path, do not ask whether he is evil or good, but make short shrift of him, despise him and push this word, *Habent Mosen et prophetas* right up his nose, and he will soon know what you think. If he is a good spirit, he will like you all the more because you use the words of God . . . so bravely and joyfully; if he is an evil spirit, as all of the poltergeists are, he will soon say farewell.³⁷

To the armament of Luke 16, Luther adds Deuteronomy 18:10–11, explaining that Abraham himself regarded this passage in rebuking the rich man. Thus, the Christian may inform spirits, "Non queras a mortuis, dicit dominus."³⁸ The academic positions of the *Articles* are translated into practical advice for the haunted in the *Christmas Postils*. The question was how to live "normative concentration":³⁹ how to fight with faith and the Word alone when poltergeists raged, and how to concentrate on necessary and useful truth, revealed in scripture, when evil spirits or their conjurers promised to reveal the secrets of the afterlife.⁴⁰

The doctrine of purgatory was implicated in the context of this concern for believers' concentration. Admitting that "the scriptures know nothing of it [purgatory]," Luther strategically withholds a doctrinal decision and addresses instead belief in the effectiveness of interventions for the dead: the doctrine of purgatory has damned "innumerable souls," he says, because they "placed their reliance on works and consoled themselves with the thought that works would bring them release." Luther adds that he will not stop those who wish to pray for the dead, but in his opinion, "purgatory is not our common lot" and "very few souls get there."⁴¹

³⁶WA 10.1.1: 585.18–587.2; LW 52: 178–179.

³⁷WA 10.1.1: 587.3–14 ("Die wort gottis, darauff du trotzen solt, sind die Luce. 16"); LW 52: 179–180.

³⁸WA 10.1.1: 587.14–588.19; LW 52: 180.

³⁹See also WA 10.1.1: 592.3–16; LW 52: 183.

⁴⁰According to Luther, Deuteronomy 18 condemns and commands avoidance of eight classes of persons who deal in demonic knowledge, including "die todten, die wandellenden geyster." WA10.1.1: 590.12–591.15; LW 52: 181–182. The magi of Matthew 2 belonged to the first of these groups, the "weyßsager"; see Luther's discussion at WA 10.1.1: 559.11–563.12; LW 52: 160–163.

⁴¹WA 10.1.1: 588.19–589.17; LW 52: 180–181.

To summarize, in his discussion of Matthew 2:4–6, Luther brings together Luke 16:19–31 and Deuteronomy 18:10–12, treats all communication with the (supposed) dead as threatening to normative concentration, dismisses apparitions as demonic tricks buttressing the false religion of the mass and other works, and addresses purgatory within this context. These arguments and strategies join the discussion in the *Christmas Postils* to the *Articles on the Conjuraton of the Wandering Dead*, as well as to two sermons on the rich man and Lazarus that Luther produced in 1522 and 1523; together all of these texts, Latin and vernacular, were part of a single, sustained project of refining and securing the life of faith among evangelicals. This effort to inculcate evangelical concentration in the face of wandering spirits, moreover, paralleled efforts to promote concentration in believers as they prepared for and faced their own deaths. Luther pursued the latter instruction most notably in the *Sermon on Preparing to Die*, which was printed often after its initial appearance in October 1519,⁴² and which represents an important precursor to the 1522–23 sermons.

Christian concentration according to Luther had auditory and visual dimensions. Thus, Luther advised Christians to ignore, shut out, and despise the sounds of the spirits—whether the seductive information offered by the supposed dead or the loud clamoring of poltergeists. In the *Sermon on Preparing to Die*, the visual metaphor dominates. Beginning with the assumption that the saved die willingly and gladly—thus demonstrating their true faith (i.e. trust) in God’s promises, signified by the sacraments—Luther teaches his hearers and readers how to close their eyes before or look away from the terrifying images of death, sin, and hell that a person faces at death. These images are hurled at the dying by the devil, who works hand-in-hand with a person’s “foolish and fainthearted” nature and “fearful” conscience in order to produce fear of divine wrath and, hence, an unwilling death that brings eternal damnation. The devil’s greatest conceit, wrapped up in the image of hell, is to tempt souls into seeking to penetrate God’s hidden will regarding election—a searching that leads to “hatred and blasphemy of God” and to the presumption to have knowledge equal to God’s.⁴³

For Luther, two visual exercises can save the soul in the combat of death: first, in life, “we should constantly have our eyes fixed on the image of death, sin, and hell.” In order not to despair, however, these three images are to be contemplated within counter-images of life, grace, and heaven (or

⁴²The *Sermon on Preparing to Die* appeared in 25 editions before 1525, including in Latin and Dutch translations; see Benzing and Claus, *Lutherbibliographie*, nos. 435–460. Modern studies of the sermon are too numerous to list here; very useful and informative is Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 110–153 (“Luther’s Instructions for a Blessed Death, Viewed against the Background of the Late Medieval *Ars Moriendi*”).

⁴³WA 2: 685.20–688.22; LW 42:100–103.

salvation), all of which are embodied in Christ. The Christian must look away from the self to Christ, for on the cross, Luther says, Christ “prepared himself as a threefold picture for us, to be held before the eyes of our faith against the three evil pictures.” The second exercise, then, is to focus in the moment of death itself exclusively upon the positive, trust-producing images.⁴⁴ Christ serves as an example. According to Luther, “the Jews” assailed Christ with images of death, sin, and hell, just as the devil assails the dying; yet Christ “acts as though he does not hear or see them and makes no reply.” In the same way, Christians must forget the dread images and “only Christ’s image must abide in [them].” The sacraments aid this concentration, giving concrete auditory and visual presence to the image of Christ.⁴⁵

In short, the faithful who in their lives had plugged their ears before and turned their eyes from the wandering spirits and their tales of purgatory, and who had sought Christ alone in the spoken word (auditory) and printed scripture (visual), were admonished to shut their inward eyes before terrifying images at the moment of death, and to turn their (metaphorical) heads and eyes instead to the image of Christ, made immediately present to physical, outward hearing and seeing in the sacrament.⁴⁶ The physical senses are disciplined in life according to spiritual comportment, and in turn, they aid the soul at death by receiving the sacrament.

In Luther’s 1522 and 1523 sermons on Luke 16:19–31, his chief aim is to depict Lazarus and the rich man as respective exemplars of faith and unbelief, trust and distrust.⁴⁷ Yet Luther also addresses difficult questions raised by the biblical passage about the afterlife and the fate of souls. For one, Luke 16 references physical realms and physical bodies—bosoms, tongues, fingers—although bodily resurrection was believed to occur only at the end of history. Luther underlines in the 1522 sermon that the bodies of Abraham, Lazarus, and the rich man all lay in the grave. He interprets Abraham’s bosom as God’s Word of salvation through Christ, first pronounced to Abraham in Genesis 22:18. According to Luther, those who die with firm faith in this Word sleep secure as in a bosom until the Last

⁴⁴WA 2: 687.31–690.32; LW 42: 102–106.

⁴⁵WA 2: 691.22–695.15; LW 42: 108–112.

⁴⁶See also Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 131–132, 144–145.

⁴⁷The sermons would have been preached on the first Sunday after Trinity Sunday, June 22, 1522, and June 7, 1523. An edition of the first sermon was printed four times in 1522, but without Luther’s knowledge or consent. Luther himself oversaw the production of a corrected edition, printed 14 times from 1523–1525, including in three low-German editions. See Benzing and Claus, *Lutherbibliographie*, nos. 1374–1392. Both editions are provided by WA 10.III: 176–200 (no. 33); this essay cites from the edition issued under Luther’s direction. The 1523 sermon was printed only once, by Jobst Gutknecht in Nürnberg. See Benzing and Claus, *Lutherbibliographie*, no. 1792; and for the text, WA 12: 592–597 (no. 19). A Latin transcription by Rörer is found at WA 11: 127–131.

Judgment. Conversely, the “hell” of the rich man is not the “true hell, which will begin at the Last Judgment,” but the rich man’s “evil conscience, which is without faith and God’s Word.” In this evil conscience, “the soul is buried and bound until the final day, when the person with body and soul will be cast in the true, bodily hell.”⁴⁸ Thus, finally, the conversation between the rich man and Abraham illustrates the torment of the rich man’s wicked, unbelieving conscience at the moment of death.⁴⁹

In regard to the temporality of the afterlife in Luke 16:19–31, Luther again notes some vexing questions: when did the conversation described by Jesus occur? Does the rich man still suffer “daily and without ceasing until the Last Judgment”? Luther declares the latter question “subtle” and “not easy to answer for the inexperienced. For here one must put time out of his mind and know that in that world there is neither time nor hour, but all is an eternal moment.” The rich man, Luther says, is an example of the torment in conscience of all unbelievers when their eyes are opened in death; this torment may last “a moment long and afterwards cease until the final judgment, however it pleases God.” No “certain rule” can be established here; all depends on the divine will.⁵⁰

Tellingly, Luther does not dwell on the uncertain landscape of the afterlife, but instead addresses concrete questions of how the living should interact with the dead. One question was whether Christians should pray for the deceased, given that Luke 16 describes “no middle realm (*standt*)” between Abraham’s bosom, where the dead need no prayer, and hell, where prayer cannot help. This was an urgent question for evangelical Christians, because prayer for lost loved ones had long been upheld as an important religious duty of the living. Luther answers that, because God does not command prayers for the dead, omission of such prayer is no sin; at the same time, Luther will not hinder prayers for the dead, because God leaves human beings uncertain about the state of departed souls.⁵¹ What matters most is that praying Christians are content to remain uncertain; they should repeat their prayers only one or three times, then trust that God hears prayers, just as God has promised.⁵² It is an indication of distrust of God that one “endows eternal masses, vigils, and prayers, and blabbers on (*plerret*) every year, as if God has not heard it for a year.”⁵³

⁴⁸WA 10.III: 191.11–192.23. This hell is “where God’s Word is not”; it is “an empty, unbelieving, sinful, evil conscience.”

⁴⁹WA 10.III: 192.24–193.20.

⁵⁰WA 10.III: 193.29–194.21.

⁵¹WA 10.III: 195.14–18: “Denn wyr yhe auß dem Euangelio gewiß sind, das viel todten aufferweckt sind, wilche wyr bekennen muessen, das sie yhr endlich urteyl nicht empfangen gehabt haben. Also muegen wyr auch noch nicht von yrgent eynem andern gewiß seyn, das er seyn endlich urteyl habe.”

⁵²WA 10.III: 194.22–195.27.

⁵³WA 10.III: 195.28–196.17.

What if a “rumpel geyst” or poltergeist demanded such interventions, however? Luther raises this concern and answers that such a spirit is surely the devil. Luke 16:19–31 shows that there is no intercourse between the living and the *tormented* dead. “No soul has ever appeared from the beginning of the world, [and] God also will not permit it,” Luther explains. Accordingly, Abraham will not permit that “a dead person teach the living, but he directs them to God’s Word in scripture.” As in the postil, Luther notes that Abraham recalls and directs Christians to Deuteronomy 18. “It is certainly a mere trick of the devil that some spirits let themselves be called up and ask for however many masses, such and such pilgrimage or other work, and later appear with clarity and claim they have been delivered.” With this trick, the devil causes people to fall from faith into works-righteousness.⁵⁴ To counter the devil’s deceit, according to Luther, the people should disregard a poltergeist (“achte seyn nicht”) or strike it with the words of Luke 16:29 and Deuteronomy 18:11; the poltergeist will soon withdraw, and if he does not, Luther advises, “let him rage (*polter*) until he becomes tired of it, and suffer his wantonness with firm faith, for God’s sake.” Even if the haunting specter were “a soul or a good spirit,” one must not learn from or ask questions of it, Luther warns; the very reason behind the incarnation was that God wants the Son to “teach us everything that is necessary to know.” God demands a narrow focus on one truth source: Christ teaching and taught in scripture.⁵⁵

As an exemplum of a right response to ghosts, Luther offers a story about Gregory Thaumaturgus (d. c.270). According to the tale, Gregory once passed the night in a haunted bathhouse, in which many previous lodgers had been found dead in the morning. Gregory entered the bathhouse fearlessly, knowing “this was a trick of the devil (*teuffels gespent*).” Gregory had “a firm faith that Christ was lord of the devil,” and through his prayers and presence, the haunting ceased. “See,” Luther announces, “there you see that the poltergeists are devils, and that a person should not argue with them at length, but rather despise them with joyful faith, as if they were nothing.”⁵⁶

A second, longer tale about Gregory confirms the point and concludes the sermon: according to this story, Gregory once spent the night with a “heathen sexton (*kirchner*)” who had an idol that would answer his questions. The sexton earned a living by telling people secrets learned from

⁵⁴WA 10.III: 196.18–197.18. Luther remarks, 197.19–22: “Darumb sey klüg und wisse, das Got will uns nichts wissen lassen, wie es mit den toden zü gehe, auff das der glawbe raum behalte durch Gotis wort, der da glewbt, das Gott nach dißem leben die glewbigen selig macht, die unglewbigen verdammet.”

⁵⁵WA 10.III: 197.22–198.19; included in the printed edition of the sermon is a cross reference to the *Christmas Postils* and Luther’s treatise on the mass.

⁵⁶WA 10.III: 198.20–199.14.

the idol. Gregory knew nothing of the idol, but his prayers and presence compelled the demon to flee. Later, while the sexton was sorrowing over his loss, the demon appeared to him in a dream and revealed the cause of his flight. The sexton then pursued Gregory in complaint, and he obtained from the saint a mocking letter permitting the demon to continue its trickery. Finally, however, the sexton was more impressed by Gregory's power over the demon; he came to his senses and pursued Gregory again, this time to be taught and baptized, and he later became a bishop. Luther concludes with commendation of Gregory's simple disregard for the demons: "See how simply faith proceeds here and nevertheless it works so boldly, certainly, and powerfully. Do likewise to your poltergeists."⁵⁷

Luther accepted the reality of the wandering spirits, but he explained their origin as demonic: they were noisy distractions from true faith or tempting sources of information about the dead and the afterlife. Thus, they were a threat to the lived religiosity demanded by the Reformation's normative concentrations on faith, scripture, and Christ alone. Christians under Luther's instruction were to be content to accept faithfully a lack of knowledge about the afterlife and the dead. Whatever Luther's own uncertainty about purgatory in 1521–1522—an uncertainty springing from seemingly contradictory biblical witnesses⁵⁸—he strategically channeled that uncertainty into a counsel of proper religious discipline.

In its interpretation of the eschatological dimensions of Luke 16, Luther's 1523 sermon on the rich man and Lazarus repeats much of the 1522 sermon: admitting his uncertainty,⁵⁹ Luther argues that the bosom of Abraham cannot be bodily, but only the Word or promise. At death, a Christian "must close his eyes and cling to God's Word alone and trust that God will accept us: he must go there courageously in the faith that nothing is there but the Word; thus he enters into the bosom of Abraham."⁶⁰ Luther also asserts, once again, that the conversation between the rich man and Abraham occurs in the former's tormented conscience,⁶¹ and that temporal categories do not apply to the afterlife.⁶² Luther will not affirm or deny purgatory, for the matter "stands in God's power."⁶³ Thus, Christians may pray for departed souls, but only once or twice; thereafter, the fate of souls should be

⁵⁷WA 10.III: 199.15–200.16. Incidentally, the verb Luther uses to describe the custodian's idol-enabled practice is "weyssagen"—the same verb used for the magi of Matthew 2.

⁵⁸Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 328 ("By means of these various ideas Luther intended to translate the biblical statements.").

⁵⁹WA 12: 592.5–6.

⁶⁰WA 12: 595.38–596.9; cf. WA 11: 130.1–12.

⁶¹WA 12: 596.10–24; cf. WA 11: 130.13–23.

⁶²WA 12: 596.26–33; cf. WA 11: 130.25–26.

⁶³WA 12: 596.33–34; cf. WA 11: 130.29–30. See also WA 12: 596.41–597.1; WA 11: 130.32–33.

commended to God.⁶⁴ The devil is behind the appearance of souls asking for countless masses. Scripture says nothing about wandering souls, but it does describe wandering devils that fly in the air and inhabit house and court. Addressing concrete, sensory experience, Luther advises, "If you hear something, say 'you are the devil.'"⁶⁵

Along with these repetitions of his 1522 sermon, however, Luther in 1523 adds revealing criticism of speculation about the afterlife. This criticism may well have been a response to Karlstadt's purgatory tract, which appeared in the year between Luther's two sermons and which contained confident assertions about souls' post-mortem experiences. Luther says:

There are several things contained there [in Luke 16] that even I do not know. They are very difficult (*scharpff*), and nature likes to inquire curiously about such things as what heaven, hell, and Abraham's bosom are: whatever a person says about these things, I commend to God. In summation, you have here that a Christian life should proceed and consist in devotion to one's neighbor . . . But the rest of these things are for the illuminated (*erleuchten*); nevertheless, I will say a little.⁶⁶

While Luther could not resist the temptation—or the pastoral necessity—to address the afterlife in conjunction with Luke 16:19–31, he nonetheless devoted more attention to explaining the passage's lessons about faith and love, and he enjoined a disciplined acceptance of limited knowledge about the afterlife.

III. THE SLEEP OF DEPARTED SOULS AND THE *ARTICLES*

Thus far, this essay has demonstrated Luther's call for new, evangelical discipline in relation to death, dying, and the relationship between the living and the dead. Christians were to cling in faith to scripture, the Word, and Christ alone, plugging their ears to the clamor of the poltergeists and closing their eyes to apparitions of lost loved ones. In their own deaths, moreover, they were to shut their inward eyes before fear- and distrust-inducing images of death, sin, and hell, and to gaze instead at images of life, grace, and heaven, embodied in Christ and made physically present to the outward eyes and ears in the sacraments. Luther constantly advanced this religious program by bringing together Luke 16 and Deuteronomy 18. The *Articles on the Conjunction of the Wandering Dead*, discussed in Section I above, belong to this program.

⁶⁴WA 12: 596.34–41; cf. WA 11: 130.30–32.

⁶⁵WA 12: 597.1–13; cf. WA 11: 130.33–131.3.

⁶⁶WA 12: 595.31–37. Significantly different is WA 11: 129.31–34.

Luther may not have written the *Articles*, however. Indeed, the *Articles*' seemingly assured exclusion of purgatory does not correspond to the hesitation of the two sermons on Luke 16:19–31. Furthermore, the *Articles* argue for a universal and immediate entry of souls into the afterlife, while Luther, from January 1522 onward, often expressed the opinion that souls sleep between death and the final judgment.⁶⁷ With that said, Luther remained inconsistent throughout his life regarding whether intermediate sleep awaited departed souls or immediate judgment and entry into heaven or hell.⁶⁸ His views were in flux in the early 1520s. Luther's January 13, 1522 letter to Nikolaus von Amsdorf, which Lohse calls an exemplary "exposition" of the soul's sleep,⁶⁹ is actually remarkably uncertain. "Concerning your souls, I have not enough [insight] to answer you," Luther writes. "I am inclined to agree with *your opinion* that the souls of the just are asleep and that they do not know where they are up to the Day of Judgment." Yet Luther must admit some exceptions due to various scriptural passages, including Luke 16.⁷⁰ In any case, Luther appears to have reconciled opposing scriptural testimonies regarding the afterlife—intermediate sleep versus immediate bliss—through his beliefs, first, that sleeping souls would not experience the passage of time and, second, that temporal categories do not apply to the afterlife.⁷¹ It is not implausible that Luther would have spoken, in a series of academic theses from early 1522, of souls' immediate entry into bliss or damnation.

In any case, the *Articles on the Conjuraton of the Wandering Dead*, aside from mirroring discrete arguments and assertions made in contemporary writings by Luther, participated in Luther's overarching program of

⁶⁷See esp. Thiede, "Nur ein ewiger Augenblick," 116–124; and Thiede, "Luthers individuelle Eschatologie," 26.

⁶⁸See Thiede, "Nur ein ewiger Augenblick," 120–124; and Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 326–328.

⁶⁹Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 326n4.

⁷⁰*D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–1948), 2: 442.4–26; LW 48: 360–361 (emphasis added). In the ensuing, Luther declares that he does not think purgatory "a certain place" or that all souls "who remain outside heaven or hell are in purgatory." Describing purgatory as "that punishment which they call a foretaste of hell and under which Christ, Moses, Abraham, David . . . [et al.] suffered," Luther states that this punishment certainly is felt "in body," but it cannot be proven that it occurs "outside the body," although Luther thinks that it does. The LW translator renders *in corpore* and *extra corpus* as "physically" and "emotionally." In fact, the opposition is between an experience felt while alive and a post-mortem experience.

⁷¹On these two points, see WA 12: 596.26–31, cited along with other passages by Thiede, "Luthers individuelle Eschatologie," 38; and Thiede, "Nur ein ewiger Augenblick." The relevant remarks are severely compressed in WA 11: 130.25–26. For Thiede's reconciliation of Luther's two manners of discussing the afterlife, see his "Luthers individuelle Eschatologie," 28–41. Certainly, Thiede risks imagining a systematic intention (see esp. *ibid.*, 29) behind disparate exegetical efforts with disparate aims. Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 328, is duly critical of Thiede's elevation of *Seelenschlaf* to a "doctrine (*Lehre*)."

excluding conversation with the dead—of concentrating believers' faithful attention on scripture and Christ alone in preparation for their own, decisive confrontation with death. Conversely, while Andreas Karlstadt shared in the effort to center Christian life around faith, Christ, and scripture alone,⁷² his concept of faith as knowledge inspired a different approach to life, death, and the dead.

IV. KARLSTADT, THOMAS MÜNTZER, AND THE *ARTICLES*

Karlstadt's creativity and independence vis-à-vis Luther makes him an unlikely candidate for authorship of the *Articles*. It is far more likely that Karlstadt's affirmation of purgatory in *Sermon vom Stand* was developed over several years and in a relatively consistent trajectory, inspired in part by studies of Johannes Tauler and the *Theologia Deutsch* begun in 1517–1518.⁷³ This conclusion corresponds to what we know about the relationship of Karlstadt to Thomas Müntzer, while also helping to clarify Müntzer's complaint in a March 29, 1522 letter to Philipp Melancthon about the Wittenbergers' denial of purgatory. Ulrich Bubenheimer has proposed that Karlstadt and Müntzer studied Tauler together during Müntzer's time as a student in Wittenberg between 1517 and 1519.⁷⁴ If so, they may have developed their kindred but distinct commitments to spiritual purgation in close conversation with one another.⁷⁵ In any case, if the analysis advanced here is correct, Müntzer's 1522 complaint about the denial of purgatory by Wittenberg theologians cannot—as the editors of the new critical edition of Müntzer's works suppose—have applied to Karlstadt as the author of the *Articles*. Rather, Müntzer entered with Karlstadt into a debate against the *Articles* and Luther.⁷⁶ Esteem for a properly-refined concept of purgatory represented

⁷²On the relationship of common ground and diversity in the Reformation, see esp. Berndt Hamm, "Einheit und Vielfalt der Reformation—oder: was die Reformation zur Reformation machte," in *Reformations-theorien. Ein kirchenhistorischer Disput über Einheit und Vielfalt der Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Reprecht, 1995), 57–127.

⁷³See Oehmig, "Karlstads Auffassung," 78–79; and Hans-Peter Hasse, *Karlstadt und Tauler: Untersuchungen zur Kreuzestheologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1993).

⁷⁴Ulrich Bubenheimer, *Thomas Müntzer: Herkunft und Bildung* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989): 183–185; for the dates of Müntzer's residence in Wittenberg, see *ibid.*, 152.

⁷⁵Unlike Karlstadt, Müntzer does not seem to have extended his concept of purgatory into the afterlife; see *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 46n299 (henceforth CWTM).

⁷⁶For Müntzer's letter, see *Thomas Müntzer Briefwechsel*, ed. Siegfried Bräuer and Manfred Kobuch, vol. 2 of *Thomas-Müntzer-Ausgabe. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Helmar Junghans and Armin Kohnle (Leipzig: Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 127–139; here, 136.3–137.1 (henceforth TMA II). As possible objects for Müntzer's criticism 136n52 lists the *Articles*, presuming Karlstadt to be the author, and Luther's *Misuse of the Mass*. An English translation of the letter is found in CWTM 43–46.

important common ground between Müntzer and Karlstadt and likely played a role in motivating Müntzer's decision in December 1522 to reach out to Karlstadt as a fellow outsider vis-à-vis Wittenberg theological circles.⁷⁷

V. THE *SERMON VOM STAND* AND KARLSTADT'S PASTORAL CONCERNS

The radical discontinuity between life and death described by Luther did not apply to believers in Karlstadt's perspective. While Karlstadt agreed that faith in the moment of death was necessary for salvation, he taught that the faithful would continue post-mortem an experience and process of purgative learning begun in life. His teachings on the wandering spirits in *Sermon vom Stand* were situated within this view: the spirits might be ignorant and confused souls, destined for salvation but still needing to learn. Regrettably, scholars have largely overlooked the relevant remarks and noted only Karlstadt's statement that apparent spirits might be demonic.⁷⁸ In fact, this statement appears to be a concession to arguments made by Luther and in the *Articles*. At the same time, Karlstadt responded to a pastoral concern absent from the above-discussed writings by Luther—namely, to evangelical anxiety about the fate of those who died before the claimed rediscovery of true doctrine in Wittenberg. Here, the voices of the dead became for Karlstadt spurs to earthly learning, and evidences of the religious confusion surrounding works-righteousness.

Karlstadt's *Sermon vom Stand* was preached on All Saints' Day (November 2) 1522, and may have been printed already in December. Taking up the lectionary text, I Thessalonians 4:13–18, Karlstadt assures his hearers and readers that they will be reunited in the resurrection with loved ones who died in Christ.⁷⁹ Christians should rejoice that these loved ones have been freed from their bodies, which imprisoned them in “the law of sin.”⁸⁰ It is foolish, Karlstadt says, to “endow masses, sing vigils and matins, and spend money” in order to free souls from a state that is better than that of the living—a state “they enjoy with heartfelt delight and wish for us [to attain].” In fact, the departed faithful ask God that the living “might come to them and rest in true yearning love and powerful desire for God.” Faithful

⁷⁷See TMA II: 150–154; CWTM 52–53. For a helpful study of the correspondence between Karlstadt and Müntzer, see Siegfried Bräuer, “Der Briefwechsel zwischen Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt und Thomas Müntzer,” in *Querdenker der Reformation: Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt und seine frühe Wirkung*, ed. Ulrich Bubenheimer and Stefan Oehmig (Würzburg: Religion & Kultur Verlag, 2001): 187–210.

⁷⁸Oehmig, “Karlstadts Auffassung,” 77; Zorzin, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, 237.

⁷⁹*Sermon vom Stand*, a2r-v; a3v. At a4r, Karlstadt criticizes the “foolish priests, popes, and bishops” who taught “that we should be troubled.”

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, a3v.

departed souls have a “hot and burning desire for God” and desire “that their state and life become more and hotter each day.” They do not want their desire to “be lessened and become cooler.” “Oh, he would have been a friend indeed,” Karlstadt exclaims, “who wanted to rescue Lazarus from the bosom of Abraham.”⁸¹ Those who die without faith, however, are beyond help according to Luke 16:19–31.⁸²

Karlstadt claims that there are three grades to “eternal life.” It begins on earth for those who believe and live in Christ, dying to their fleshly life. They attain true knowledge of God, which “does not happen in reason or in the false natural light, as the doctors [imagine who] dispute about God, but rather in the ground of the soul, in the divine undeceiving light, and makes the person a friend of God, for it unites the soul to God the Lord . . . Eternal life is a true knowledge of God and Christ, which the Spirit alone gives and teaches, for it unites and becomes one thing with the soul.”⁸³ According to Karlstadt, eternal life, so defined, increases when the hindrance of the flesh is left behind, and this increase is its second grade. The third grade is in heaven itself.⁸⁴ While Karlstadt declines to discuss the final grade, however, he argues at length that the second grade is the bosom of Abraham described in Luke, a “state and life of comfort.” Souls in this state surpass the living in their love, righteousness, and knowledge, and in their desire and yearning for God.⁸⁵

The final section of Karlstadt’s sermon addresses “the purgatory of human beings and departed souls.” Karlstadt notes that it is customary to say that departed souls are in purgatory, but no evidence is produced from scripture. Luke 16 is contrary to the claim, showing that there are only two states in the afterlife, that the damned are tormented while believers are comforted, and that there is no fire in the bosom of Abraham. Karlstadt thus repudiates the “unbelievable” and “groundless” notion that “the souls sit in material or elemental fire.” Nonetheless, Karlstadt continues, scripture “sometimes compares evil and good people to wood and God’s Word to a fire,” as in Jeremiah 5. God’s Word “births yearning, love, justice, wisdom, and newness of life; should it then not burn, set fire, sweep, and purify? Accordingly, I would like to call the yearning and wounding desire for God (which come from the living Word of God) a purgatory, and say that the

⁸¹Ibid., a4r-v; see also *ibid.*, b2v-b3r, c2v.

⁸²Ibid., a4v, b3r, b4r.

⁸³Ibid., a4v-b1v. To be noted here is the influence of the gospel of John (chapters 6, 11, 15, and 17 are cited), as well as of the *Theologia Deutsch*.

⁸⁴*Sermon vom Stand*, b1v-b3r. Karlstadt’s comparison of the three grades to darkness, the morning sun, and the mid-day sun was likely learned from Wessel Gansfort; see Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead*, 27–34.

⁸⁵*Sermon vom Stand*, b3v-b4r.

burning and hot desire for God burns all the wood, hay, and stubble in the soul, and sweeps away every shortcoming, rust, or infirmity. I fear that many souls after death have shortcoming and infirmity with regard to their love of God, their righteousness, their wisdom.”⁸⁶

Karlstadt’s account of this purgatory sat uneasily with Luke 16:19–31, and with Karlstadt’s own adoption from I Thessalonians 4:13–15 of the language of sleep to describe death and the dead.⁸⁷ Aware of the tension but refusing to resolve it, Karlstadt asserts at one point that departed souls “sleep from all outwardness, but their hearts are awake and hear what the Spirit of God speaks and teaches to them.”⁸⁸

Karlstadt claims, in short, that a burning and purgative desire for God—and an accompanying hatred of one’s own “soul, the world, and everything that is worldly”⁸⁹—belongs to the experience of both the living and the deceased faithful. For Karlstadt, this desire and its growth are connected to the soul’s learning from God’s Word. Karlstadt emphasizes that he has described the post-mortem purgation only of souls “who learned to recognize Christ here, and who fell asleep through Christ.” He adds:

But I have said nothing about the souls who have little judgment regarding God (*vrtil gotes*) and who did not recognize Christ adequately. I believe that they must study and learn there (if they are otherwise predestined for blessedness) and recognize (*erkennen*) every true judgment or decree (*sententz*) that God wants them to know before he takes them into heaven . . . The unlearned souls must study there what they neglected here. But an hour for them will be more toilsome and harder than many years here, because they suffer or do everything without the hindrance of bodily circumstances, suffering, or works.⁹⁰

Karlstadt introduces here a fourth circumstance into the afterlife: there is heaven and hell, a state of blessed rest and purgation for the knowledgeable if imperfect faithful, and a state of painful learning for the ignorant but predestined. The resting and knowledgeable souls would not seek human

⁸⁶Ibid., b4v-c1r.

⁸⁷It is necessary to consult the Vulgate and Karlstadt’s German translation at *ibid.*, a2r. See Barge, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, II: 6n16. For Karlstadt’s concept of *Seelenschlaf*, see *Sermon vom Stand*, a3v-a4r, b1v (“ain süesser schlaff”), b3v-b4v, c1v.

⁸⁸*Sermon vom Stand*, c1v; Karlstadt cites Song of Songs 5:2.

⁸⁹*Sermon vom Stand*, c1v-c2r. Later, “Derwegen mag ich ain solche angstliche senligkait zu[o] got in den seelen ain fegfewer nennen / wiewol sy getro[e]st sein vnd ain tewer go[e]ttlich leben haben . . . [Das Fegefewer soll] nyemandts küelen . . . / wiewol es die selen engstet.”

⁹⁰*Sermon vom Stand*, c2v. Karlstadt cites I Peter 4:6—a passage with which he has far less difficulty than Luther. For Luther’s struggles to interpret this passage, see WA 12: 375.25–376.24; LW 30: 121; and, in regard to I Peter 3:19–20, WA 12: 367.27–369.30; LW 30: 113–115, 121.

rescue, but the ignorant might. The latter souls are the wandering dead for Karlstadt:

It may also have happened that many souls sought masses, alms, good works, pilgrimages to the saints and the like from their friends (all from the unknowing that they had here and carried with themselves [i.e. into the afterlife]), that they also finally did not come again when they recognized that neither masses nor alms nor works nor pilgrimages helped. It happened in the same way with the unlearned people here, and happens for as long as is necessary, until they learn the knowledge (*kunst*) of God and understand that masses and pilgrimages to saints are against God . . . [S]o long also are the stupid and foolish souls in their prison—and their conscience holds them so long in prison—until they learn the knowledge of God and recognition of the true divine speech.⁹¹

Here, Karlstadt brings what he takes to be common experience into his exegesis and instruction. “The experience of wandering souls (*vmblauffender seelen*) is so widespread,” he says, “that I cannot criticize or reject it.” Karlstadt does criticize, however, the explanations for the wandering spirits offered by Luther and the *Articles*. More specifically, Karlstadt concedes the partial correctness of Luther and the *Articles*, while adding other possibilities. First, Karlstadt admits “that the devil also transforms himself into the form of a wandering spirit and cries for masses, sacrifices, lights, and the like, so that he holds the priests in their error and robs the laity of goods and life.” Karlstadt insists, however, “that souls also can move around and, out of their old error, desire misguided and useless help, until they grasp the knowledge of God, which pleases God more than sacrifices, Hosea 6.” Second, Karlstadt makes a concession regarding the purpose of the spirits’ wandering: they do not appear, he says, “to proclaim penance and improvement of our life . . . for we have Moses and the prophets. If we do not believe them, much less would we believe the souls.” Nonetheless, Karlstadt adds, the ignorant souls must announce their “need, fear, and anguish no less than the rich man enumerated his suffering and need to the father Abraham.”⁹²

Like Luther, Karlstadt turns to a counsel of discipline, but Karlstadt’s counsel is uniquely shaped by his concept of salvation through learning. Those who prefer not to feel “terrible fear and the spirit of remorse” after death should study diligently now and “thoroughly grasp, receive, and hold

⁹¹*Sermon vom Stand*, c3r.

⁹²*Ibid.*, c3r-v.

God's Word." Only "divine knowledge and wisdom"—and not works, masses, or money—can rescue a person from "unknowing."⁹³

Interestingly, even though Karlstadt imagines a process of salvation continuing from earthly life into the afterlife, and even though he depicts a more porous boundary between the living and the dead than Luther, Karlstadt categorically excludes prayer for the dead in a way Luther does not. "We should ask nothing of God except what he wills," Karlstadt argues; thus, Christians should not pray for any change to the divinely-willed state of departed souls. Moreover, while the damned are beyond the help of the living, those undergoing purgation in the bosom of Abraham neither seek nor desire help. The prayers of the living also cannot contribute to their purgation.⁹⁴

Anxiety about the death of unbaptized children may play a role in Karlstadt's *Sermon vom Stand*, as Zorzin has argued,⁹⁵ but more prevalent is the concern, reflected in Karlstadt's remarks on the wandering spirits, about those who died in the supposed error of works-righteousness. Just as Karlstadt responded to widespread experience in accepting the reality of the wandering spirits, he also responded to evangelical anxiety about the fate of loved ones who died before the Reformation. Karlstadt pointed to the lamentable state of the wandering spirits in order to enjoin a rigorous life of self-accusation and learning; at the same time, he sought to comfort hearers and readers about the fate of those who could not have had this learning.

VI. CONCLUSION

In exhorting Christians to learn, Karlstadt exhorted them to work requiring concentration, and he invoked the wandering spirits as spurs to this concentration. Luther, conversely, regarded the wandering spirits as distractions from evangelical concentration, as demonic temptations to seek truth outside of scripture, as the source of false beliefs about purgatory and the mass—beliefs that buttressed works-righteousness. Both reformers, nonetheless, sought to discipline evangelical belief and habit, doctrine and lived religiosity in reference to the wandering spirits. Like death itself, Christians' interactions with the dead were to be remade through disciplined, faithful concentration upon scripture and Christ alone. Luther's advice was particularly striking in its attention to the senses of sight and hearing. Here,

⁹³Ibid., c3v. The "gayst des schlaffs / oder der durch beyssenden anmechtigkait" is first mentioned on c3r, where Karlstadt gives "spiritu[m] co[m]punctionis et extasis" as the Latin equivalent.

⁹⁴Ibid., a4v, b3r, b4r, c3v.

⁹⁵*Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, 239–240.

inward and outward senses worked together: not seeing and not hearing a poltergeist or apparition involved both inward comportment and outward conduct, while dying Christians could both gaze at Christ inwardly and see and hear Christ outwardly in the reception of the sacrament. The *Articles* belong firmly to Luther's program, which brought Deuteronomy 18:10–12 and Luke 16:19–31 together to enjoin Christians to close their ears and eyes to demonic din and trickery.