Doctor Faustus: Treating the Soul, Then and Now

Nathan Rosentrater

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors

Part of the Religion Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/106

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
I can remember the church camp altar calls. Sometimes I felt a guilt that I couldn't shake loose. Other times I wanted to go up front for prayer and confession to God “just in case.” In the times when guilt haunted me most, a church elder or leader would pray over me, knowing me as an upstanding youth, not guessing the weight of conviction that rested upon me. Sometimes I went away feeling a bit better. Other times nothing notably changed; I still felt that dull chill in the pit of my stomach, telling me I knew the truth deep down and was only trying to fool myself into thinking everything was alright, that God had forgiven me. I remember the thinly carpeted basement floor in my house in Ottawa, Canada, and myself curled up on it at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, praying, almost wrestling with God, begging for some sort of unmistakable confirmation He had forgiven me. I needed to know. So I got off the floor and opened the scripture I was using to study for Bible quizzing. I turned to Ephesians ch. 2:1

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great

---

1 All Bible quotations are taken from the 1984 NIV translation of the Bible.
love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were
dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. . . For it is by grace you have
been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by
works, so that no one can boast. (2.1-6, 8-9)
The Apostle Paul said that everyone had sinned, disobeyed and deserved wrath. Maybe I was
simply like every other Christian, and my sin was just that: sin, nothing that God's grace couldn't
cover. It seemed that this was almost the answer I sought, but I still wasn't completely satisfied,
because I had also memorized Hebrews chs. 6 and 10:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly
gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of
God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to
repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and
subjecting him to public disgrace. . . . If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have
received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful
expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.
(6.4-6, 10.26-7)
The thought of committing the unforgivable sin haunted me. Isn't most sin a deliberate
disobedience against God, choosing something over Him? I once hypothesized, hoping to justify
myself and assuage my anxieties. But no, the sin which the writer of Hebrews addressed here
was a different matter. And I feared it was mine.

I hungered for assurance, something concrete, a confirmation. Yet I found myself from
time to time revisiting a place of distressing uncertainty, wallowing in a fretful limbo between
unforgivable sin and grace completely by faith. Gradually I decided that even if I could never know beyond the shadow of a doubt whether or not I were indeed forgiven or where I would spend eternity, I would do my best to follow and obey Christ.\(^2\) It was like my pastor once said, “even if there were no heaven, I would still follow Christ.”

Fast forward three years from my episode on the basement floor. This time I sat at my desk in my Messiah College dorm room, curled up with Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus.* Expecting to revel in a nice bit of classic entertainment provided by my Religion and Theater assigned reading, I jumped in excitedly. The book was short too, only 103 pages. Now I was really in a merry mood. As I became immersed in the story, however, my sentiment took on increasing gravity as I encountered a protagonist who struggled with some of the deepest, most tormenting quandaries which had troubled me. I couldn't quite put my finger on the specifics, but when I turned the last page and finished the story I could only sit in silence muttering an occasional, somewhat shaken “wow.”

Upon re-examining the text, I discovered why the play had impacted me so powerfully. I realized that Faustus struggles with uncertainty about his eternal destination just as I had, despite (or perhaps because of) his familiarity with scripture and theology like mine. But the ambiguity and lack of a clear and final resolution, in many ways essential to faith, drives him mad to the point where he prefers confirmed and definite damnation over merely probable or hoped for

\(^2\) At one point, following a period of exposure to Calvinist theology, I entertained the question, if there are predestined reprobates whom God has elected to live evil lives in order that His people might distinguish themselves from that evil and that God may be glorified and His kingdom expanded, could a reprobate in a sense disobey God by obeying Him, living in a righteous way, seeking to honor and fulfill the commands that God has decreed, living as Jesus lived? I concluded that even if God had chosen me as a reprobate, which I didn't think was likely, that He would not become angry with my attempts to serve Him and live a life out of love and faithfulness to Him. Part of the tragedy of Doctor Faustus is his unwillingness to continue to trust God's forgiveness and serve and obey Him regardless of uncertainty about his eternal destination, simply because it is the right thing to do.
eternal peace, joy and union with God.

Faustus identifies the cause and nature of his inner tension regarding his eternal destination in one line: “Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast” (18.72). Throughout the play, Faustus finds himself torn between the conflicting claims of Heaven and Hell upon him:

*Faustus.* Be I a devil, yet God may pity me;

Yea, God will pity me if I repent.

*Bad Angel.* Ay, but Faustus never shall repent.

*Fau.* My heart is harden'd, I cannot repent.

Scarce can I name salvation, faith, or heaven,

But fearful echoes thunders in mine ears,

'Faustus, thou art damn'd!' (6.15-21)

Eventually Faustus attempts to convince himself that he has committed unforgivable sins. The evil spirits and Lucifer himself continually affirm Faustus' belief that he belongs to them, his soul cannot be salvaged, and God cannot forgive and save him. In the end, after many struggles with the forces of good, Hell gains conquest in the life of Faustus. This left me pondering if Hell had also gained victory in my own life, causing me to despair of God's grace. Had I like Faustus swallowed the devil's deceitful bait?

*Faustus.* Is't not too late?

*Bad Angel.* Too late.

*Good Angel.* Never too late, if Faustus will repent

Faustus. O Christ, my savior, my savior,

---

3 All quotations from *Doctor Faustus* come from Jump unless otherwise noted.
Help to save distressed Faustus' soul.

_Lucifer._ Christ cannot save thy soul, for he is just;

……………………………………………………

_Faustus._ . . Faustus vows never to look to heaven,

Never to name God or pray to him. (6.80-2, 85-7, 98-9)

Once Faustus buys into the devil's message, he gives up hope in forgiveness and rejects the pursuit of God and a righteous life, exchanging it for a set number of years dedicated to pursuing sinful pleasures, revenge, power, riches, etc. His despairing of God's grace, the sin which some recognize as ultimately hindering him from receiving forgiveness, transforms his approach to life and leads him far away from God. My state of uncertainty had not led me down the exact same path as that of Faustus. Yet I noticed signs in my own life perhaps pointing to a similar though hidden despair: I didn't find satisfaction in singing worship songs about grace because frankly I wasn't sure it was for me; I placed a very high emphasis on my own actions, sometimes at the belittlement of the mercy and power of God. Faustus' example warned me of the pitfalls of my own despair, even if I hadn't fallen so far as to seal a contract with the devil in my own blood as Faustus had.

Since Faustus cannot feel assured that God will reject or accept him, he endeavors to take matters into his own hands and perform deeds which he believes will irrevocably seal his eternal fate and free him from the haunting tension of doubt; he seems to prefer the absoluteness of definite damnation to the incomplete knowing of faith, hanging in the limbo of unseen hopes, potential salvation, and yet possible damnation.\(^4\) Instead of following the path of faith which

\(^4\) Faustus turns to a reverse or opposite absolution to find peace for his soul, displaying his tendency to trust in the power of sin and evil as superior to the power of faith, forgiveness and the absolution offered by the Church.
still leaves room for doubt and insecurity, Faustus decides to commit sins he (and/or the evil spirits with whom he interacts) describes as irrevocable or unforgivably damning. Faustus' quest for a resolution to his fears and doubts litters the pages of the play:

How am I glutted with conceit of this!

Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please,

.Resolve me of all ambiguities,

Perform what desperate enterprise I will?” (1.77-80);

“Faustus hath cut his arm, and with his proper blood / Assures his soul to be great Lucifer's” (italics added for emphasis) (5.54-5); “this bill is ended, / And Faustus hath bequeath'd his soul to Lucifer” (5.74-5).

Responding to the lack of absolute assurance in reserving a spot in heaven offered in the Christian faith, Faustus seizes the chance to command those in the spirit realm rather than having his fate determined by them. He seems attracted to the opportunity to secure any eternal position; he is offered a chance to give his soul to the devil in all finality and he takes it: “Now, Faustus, must / Thou needs be damn'd, and canst thou not be sav'd” (5.1-2). The visibility of the evil forces attracts Faustus to them; he cannot see God, thus he cannot or will not trust God's salvific power completely, but he can see Lucifer and Mephostophilis. Drawn to the concreteness which the demons' visibility affords, Faustus tastes the potential for assurance about his eternal destiny. Furthermore, his power over the spiritual realm through sorcery gives him a sense of triumph over the unknown of the spiritual realm (though in the end it proves a tainted and limited power); instead of fretting over where God or the Devil will ultimately send him, he controls the devil, or at least dictates the actions of his servants, sending them where he wills (the
qualifications of his proposal to Lucifer include his possessing absolute control of
Mephostophilis. Reveling in his new found power Faustus exclaims,

How pliant is this Mephostophilis,
Full of obedience and humility!

Now, Faustus, thou art conjuror laureate,
That canst command great Mephostophilis. (3.31-2, 34-5)

Now I wasn't about to start meddling around in witchcraft to secure myself a hot spot in
Hell. But I certainly found myself attracted to the tangible, cut-and-dried measurable things of
life in which I could place full assurance and never have to doubt. I had lost some faith; I
wanted to live a Christianity that depended mostly upon me rather than investing everything in
hope in God. As I read Dr. Faustus in my dorm room, I found my voice joined emphatically
with that of the Old Man and Good Angel, reasoning with Faustus to read scripture correctly, to
understand and accept the grace of Christ, to repent and not despair. Simultaneously, I found the
Old Man and the Good Angel speaking right back to me as though I were Faustus, lovingly
urging me to accept the grace of God, to return like the prodigal son, to stop despairing in God's
ability and willingness to forgive me.

During the 1500's when Marlowe wrote Dr. Faustus, people were wrestling as much
as ever with the same uncertainty that had plagued Faustus and me. Popular Christian preaching
and teaching techniques featured “the fluctuation of the temperature of the afterlife” and “the
oscillation between wrath and mercy on the part of the members of the divine hierarchy” which
drove people like Martin Luther to fear for his salvation (Bainton 28). The Catholic church
claimed to offer the “the only secure course” via “sacraments, pilgrimages, indulgences, the intercession of the saints” (Bainton 30). Reforming Protestants rejected the authority of the Catholic church, and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination maintained that any human effort was utterly irrelevant in determining one’s eternal fate. Assurance was hard to come by.5

In his biography of Martin Luther Ronald H. Bainton comments on the general scramble for spiritual certainty at this moment in history: “[Luther] became a monk for exactly the same reason as thousands of others, namely, in order to save his soul” (Bainton 34). Even while Luther lived devoutly as a monk, like Faustus and me he still entertained doubts about his acceptability to God and feared for his salvation;

he was extraordinarily sensitive and subject to recurrent periods of exaltation and depression of spirit. . .The explanation lies. . .in the tensions which medieval religion deliberately induced, playing alternately upon fear and hope. Hell was stoked, not because men lived in perpetual dread, but precisely because they did not. (Bainton 28)

Bainton further remarks, “All such drastic methods [Luther's intense fasting, praying, etc] gave no sense of inner tranquility. The purpose of his striving was to compensate for his sins, but he

5 Calvin himself in his writings allows for assurance in Christian faith, not only on the ultimate basis of God’s mercy, but also to a small extent on the basis of tangibly assessable elements of life: habits, actions, desires, etc. In fact, it seems Calvin speaks directly to Faustus’ predicament when he writes, “...thence unbelief obtains weapons and devices to overthrow faith. Yet these are always directed to this objective: that, thinking God to be against us and hostile to us, we should not hope for any help from him, and should fear him as if he were our deadly enemy...And when any sort of temptation assails us—suggesting that God is our enemy because he is unfavorable toward us—faith, on the other hand, replies that while he afflicts us he is also merciful because his chastisement arises out of love rather than wrath...Thus the godly mind, however strange the ways in which it is vexed and troubled, finally surmounts all difficulties, and never allows itself to be deprived of assurance of divine mercy” (John Calvin Institutes of the Christian Religion 3.2.20-21, qtd. Assurance 7). Thus, the lack of assurance within Christian faith in England during Marlowe’s time resulted not from Calvin’s writings themselves but from the intensification of his doctrines by Englishmen such as Cambridge professor William Perkins and other theologians who debated with him.
could never feel that the ledger was balanced” and “Luther simply had not the capacity to fulfill the conditions [for satisfying the precepts of Jesus]” (Bainton 46, italics added for emphasis).

Thus, despite his devoutness, his commitment to dedicating himself fully to God, and his status of monk, even Luther, along with many others of his day, doubted his eternal security.

Like the fictional Doctor Faustus, Luther hailed from Wittenburg, not England where Marlowe's play was originally staged. Nevertheless, Elizabethan England afforded to Christians, non-Christians, and any other playgoers its own abundant opportunity for spiritual uncertainty and dread via popular debates concerning competing strains of Calvinist theology and through the language and teaching of the ubiquitous 39 articles of the Church of England, most significantly article 17:

Before the foundations of the world were laid, [God] hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen. So, for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's predestination is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchlessness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation. (*Article 17 of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Elizabethan Settlement*)

Gerald M. Pinciss writes about the spiritual and psychological repercussions of the emergence of the 39 articles in England during Marlowe's time;

Quite naturally, many felt bewildered, alienated from their God. For some, the loss of the spiritual comfort afforded by the Catholic belief in Purgatory, or in the effectiveness of prayers for the deceased, or in the practice of Confession was made
even more painful by the desecration of churches and by the elimination of ritual elements from the service. (2)

It is precisely this unrest and bewilderment which Marlowe captures in the character (as well as the play) of Dr. Faustus. This was the same bewilderment that haunted me, the same evanescence and unattainableness of spiritual comfort and assurance I struggled with on my knees at camp meetings, on my basement floor, in my mind.

II

Unlike average moviegoers today, Marlowe's contemporary audiences would have been used to, perhaps even expecting, some sort of Biblical content or message in the plays they attended. Pauline Honderich explains the cause of this expectation of theater: “The origins of English drama are, of course, predominantly ecclesiastical, the mystery plays being essentially dramatized renderings of Bible stories and the morality plays. . .dramatized homilies” (2). It comes as no surprise, then, that Faustus begins quoting Bible verses in the early scenes of the play. What does surprise us is the manner of his quoting, the function of scripture in the play which marks a definite aberration from the function of Bible passages in the typical morality play of the time: Faustus quotes scripture partially and selectively, an exercise which leads him to overlook the gospel and despair in salvation which results in his eventual damnation. Pinciss notes that in Elizabethan English Protestantism some matters were deliberately left unsaid or stated vaguely in an attempt to head off controversy. But in its effort to be all-encompassing, the Elizabethan settlement was rendered susceptible to influences from all directions, especially of those Reformed
writings that issued from Geneva. (2)

In light of Pinciss' observation, Faustus' omission of scriptural passages which introduce controversy among strains of Protestantism, complicating some of their proudly held theological positions, seems a type of analogy for religion in Elizabethan England. Marlowe's staging of the religious turmoil and tension between disputing Christian sects and their ideologies immediately makes his play relevant and significant to his particular audience.

The two primary passages which Faustus misreads are Romans 6.23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus,” and 1 John 1.8-9, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” In both cases, Faustus quotes only the first half of the whole which point out his sinfulness and leave him feeling hopeless, having left out the essential redemptive promises which follow in the second halves of the respective verses. Adrian Streete observes that

Marlowe stacks. . .[the] text against Faustus in a movement that leads towards his ultimate destruction. The exegesis of 1 John 1:9 becomes rather more than a straightforward borrowing. It is an example of a writer utilizing his intertextual sources interactively in a movement that produces the conditions of his protagonist's damnation.

(3)

Joseph Westlund suggests that Faustus' interpretation of the Bible would have obviously fallen short in the eyes of Elizabethan Christians as Faustus “states what no Christian audience would accept as true.” Westlund continues, illustrating the impact Faustus' incomplete renderings of scripture would have had on a 16th century English audience;
The significance of this passage is lost to most of us because we bring a less lively awareness of the Bible to it than an Elizabethan audience would. 'The reward (or wages) of sin is death' has become proverbial, and we tend to accept the statement at face value. The phrase may have been proverbial to some extent in Marlowe's day, but one is certainly not supposed to accept it as such in Faustus's speech. Thus, one would see Faustus take the Vulgate in hand and read:

\[
\text{Stipendium peccati mors est: ha, Stipendium, &c.}
\]

The reward of sin is death: that's hard.

To a Christian audience in the sixteenth century. Faustus's distortion should be evident. He quotes only the first half of the familiar verse, and omits the crucial point that it makes: 'For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord'. This gospel is precisely what Faustus cannot believe. The point of the passage which he has before him is the very opposite of what he claims it is, and Faustus distorts his text to bring it into line with what he thinks is relevant to his own position.

(Westlund 192-4)

Like Westlund, Honderich highlights the faultiness of Faustus' exegetical approach to scripture in the play. But she ventures to explore a bit further into the ramifications of Faustus' scriptural abuse which proves most significant to discovering what makes the play so powerful and transformational for its hearers:

From his juxtaposition of the verses 'the reward of sin is death' (Rom. 6.23) and 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and there's no truth in us' (I John 1.8), he has drawn the logical conclusion
Why then, belike, we must sin,
And so consequently die.
Ay, we must die, an everlasting death.
What doctrine call you this? Che sera, sera.

'What will be, shall be.' Divinity, adieu! (1.1.44)

In each case he had omitted the merciful modifications which follow and so was left with a syllogism supporting a Calvinist view of man as naturally depraved and sinful, and destined to eternal death. (9)

Original listeners of the play would have immediately picked up on Faustus' misquoting of scripture. But is that all? Is Faustus merely a helplessly poor reader of scripture, or ignorant of the salvific second halves of the passages he employs to form his self-condemning doctrines? Did his example warn original audiences only against the dangers of selective Bible reading? It seems that Faustus' butchering of scripture results not from ignorance or lack of training in divinity, but from a partial or unresolved understanding of God. Honderich hints at the presence of Calvinism in Faustus' (theo)logical conclusions, and for good reason. Without examining the nature and reality of the scholarly debates over Calvinism in its varying strains and doctrinal minutiae during Marlowe's era, we would likely miss one of the most important elements of the play as it concerned sixteenth and seventeenth century hearers and Marlowe himself.

Pinciss writes of the religious trends of Marlowe's day, remarking that “attention in the 1580s had been shifting from these operational concerns to doctrinal and philosophic matters that were closer to the heart of the differences between Calvinist and anti-Calvinist views” (2). Especially at Cambridge where Marlowe studied, debate concerning Reformed theology was
frequent and heated. And the strain of the debates made an impression not only on Marlowe, but also on the wider society as their varying doctrines trickled down through churches and pulpits to those outside of the university.

Performed in the midst of radical and divisive theological debate, *Dr. Faustus* displays the dangers of viewing God partially or incompletely, in this case as only terrifying and condemning, with little tempering of grace, mercy, forgiveness and compassion. Since Marlowe was primarily exposed to Calvinist theologians and their debates, his play naturally features “a God cast in an uncompromisingly Calvinist mould” (Honderich 9). *Dr. Faustus* showcases the pitfalls of the rigid Calvinist theology of his day; people might end up erring on one extreme side like Faustus did, despairing and condemned because of an erroneous view of God, not because of God Himself or anything He has done. In its day, it seems the play served to question the behavior of those on both sides of contemporary Calvinism debates in their uncompromising insistence upon the correctness of their own views on contestable and not fully knowable theological minutiae.6

Hundreds of years of positing and theorizing have not produced an indisputable conclusion about Marlowe's aims in writing *Dr. Faustus*. Scholarship has not agreed that the play critiques one theological position or another, although some argue Marlowe pointedly critiques hardline Calvinism. What remains constant in scholarship is disagreement. Marlowe staged the reality of the theological debates of his day, at several points borrowing directly from

---

6 “During the 1590s English Calvinism had been very much in the ascendant, and nowhere was that ascendancy more obvious than at Cambridge University. Symptomatic of the situation is the publication in 1590 of William Perkins's Armilla Aurea . . . [which] asserted the doctrine of absolute predestination against its critics. . . . Paradoxically, however, the propagation of such views also helped fuel the anti-Calvinist sentiment. . . .The differences between English and Continental Protestantism were becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, and the hostility between those who held opposing points of view intensified. Through these quarrels, through public debate and preaching, ministers on both sides grew more outspoken, their skills sharper and more finely honed.” (Pinciss 3)
texts like Calvin's commentaries and other well known sources (Streete 3). He captured the reality of diverse contemporary theology with its complications, implications and frustrations, laying them bare before the public eye for consideration and critique. This explains in part why so much literature has been published about the play attempting to uncover which theological camp Marlowe wished to malign or embarrass; even after four hundred years of research and scholarship no clear consensus has been reached concerning Marlowe's intent or conviction in writing the play. This lack of conclusion stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of what Marlowe was doing with the play; like Shakespeare, it seems he wrote about reality with all its confusion and imperfection. He didn't make a final point or conclude with a concise moral in an epilogue explaining what the play meant or what he hoped to accomplish by it. Perhaps we would profit more from examining the play itself in order to recognize it for what it is, watching as it unfolds an account of reality with which it asks us to grapple, rather than speculating about Marlowe's secret intentions behind it. Herein lies the source of the power of the play in its own day: it forced those entrenched in narrowly defined modes of thought to visualize the implications of their own philosophies - the terrifying and angst-filled damnation of a person they would casually designate as a reprobate - and contemplate the implications of opposing theologies.

Honderich asserts that “[t]heology as taught at Cambridge in the 1580s was scholastic in

7 It seems Marlowe dipped generously and calculatedly into the theological dialogue of his day, perhaps borrowing ideas, images and phrases from Cambridge speakers and writers of his day such as William Perkins. Pinciss writes that “Faustus is like the man described by Perkins in a sermon delivered in 1595: a sinner in his first estate . . . hath a veil before his face so that he seeth nothing. The wrath of God and the curse due for sin, hell and damnation seeking to devour him he seeth them not . . . but rusheth securely into all manner of sin, the night of impenitence and the mist of ignorance so blinding his eyes that he seeth not the narrow bridge of this life, from which if he slide he falls immediately into the bottomless pit of hell” (7). While this sermon was delivered after Marlowe wrote Doctor Faustus, it is reasonable to assume that Marlowe would have come into contact with an ample corpus of similar material which likely worked its way into the dialogue, minds and behavior of the characters themselves.
form and orthodoxly Protestant in doctrine, with Calvinism the prevailing point of view” (5). The pathos of the theatrical medium converts theology from a merely intellectual discipline to a momentously practical force which permeates the grit, intimacy and feeling of real everyday life. By honestly representing on stage the scholastic theologies of his contemporaries, Marlowe obligated them to assess their conclusions in a non-debate atmosphere. Unfortunately, many have missed this simple truth, opting instead for conducting microscopically close readings of the play or Marlowe's biography in an attempt to produce some obscure new epiphany about the play's real intended meaning or function. Huston Diehl maintains that

Critics deprive Marlowe's play of its motivating conflict and flatten out its disturbing ambivalences when they ignore the religious controversies that raged in England in the late sixteenth century or gloss over the crucial distinctions that Elizabethans made among Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and other reformed theologies. (80)

Furthermore, she attests to the potentially “disruptive” effect of Dr. Faustus upon Elizabethan theologians settled nicely in their well-established schools of thought when she argues that the play “is conflicted because it celebrates the human imagination and yet forces a recognition of the insubstantiality, impotence, and silliness of all imagined things” (81).

The play contains its own form of theological argument, juxtaposing a diversity of contradictory theological positions: Faustus' view of God, the Old Man and Good Angel's view of God, and Satan and the other demons' views of God. Faustus seems to view God as the coldest kind of Calvinistic God, forgiving not out of compassion but on the basis of human submission or satisfaction of His standards, ruling as a “Deity of power, not love” (Ornstein
1383). Pauline Honderich observes a strictly Calvinist God and protagonist, the one predestining for wrath, the other consequently unable to repent as his fixed reprobate destiny binds him. Contrary to Ornstein and Honderich, Westlund maintains that “Faustus' tragedy... lies precisely in the fact that he had a chance for salvation” (205). The devils reiterate that God cannot forgive or overlook Faustus' sin and that God hates him, while the Old Man and the Good Angel offer heartfelt counter arguments maintaining that God stands ready to forgive Faustus with mercy, to deliver him from the grip of the devils, etc. Though the play does not explicitly advocate a specific view of God as either harsh Calvinistic judge or compassionate forgiving Father, it does effectively inspire conversation and thought about fundamental Christian beliefs. Thus when it was first performed, the play challenged extreme Reformed theology by staging its unnerving logical conclusions in a more moving context than that of semantics, lectures, dry debates, and even written mediums which could allow theologians, writers and others aligned with Reformed theology to distance themselves from genuinely assessing the conclusions and arguments they wrote out in their comfortable secluded studies.

III

As someone who has both been impacted by Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and intends to enter ministry as a career in the future, I find myself contemplating how the play might serve as a tool for Christian ministry, how I might utilize it in a ministry context to communicate to others its messages about faith and relating to God that spoke so clearly to me. It occurred to me that some sort of performance or visual reproduction of *Dr. Faustus* would offer leaders in ministry one way to avoid the trap of the secluded study in which theology becomes merely a mental exercise,
and to actively engage others in discussing and wrestling with important theological issues in a more holistic and hands-on capacity. To some extent, the job of a pastor is just this: searching and mulling over the truths of God on his own in order to bring them to life and present them clearly and powerfully to his congregation or audience.

From personal experience I can attest to the effectiveness of a skit to illustrate and bring to life the point of a sermon on a Sunday morning. On an almost weekly basis, the pastor at my home church writes and helps to act in a one, two, or three person skit preceding the sermon which introduces the message, challenges the audience, and captivates my attention for the remainder of the service, expectant to find how the skit and Biblical instruction for the day will enhance and illuminate one another.

Admittedly, the most creative and practiced persons may extract applicable morals or virtues from even the seemingly most vile and unwholesome films. But because of its content Dr. Faustus requires little creativity or stretching to apply to Christian faith and function beneficially within the context of Christian ministry. Biblical elements in Dr. Faustus naturally tailored to use as a springboard for evangelical ministry include the character of Faustus as a type of prodigal son, various Biblical quotations such as those from Romans and 1 John, (though obviously taken out of context at many points), recognizable figures like Lucifer, God, angels and demons, and the discourse featuring Heaven and Hell. In addition, the play proves ripe for use in Christian ministry with its frightening and honest depictions of the consequences of sin, pride, and yielding to temptation, and the hollowness, deceitfulness and dissatisfying nature of the promises and gifts of the devil.
In contemplating how *Dr. Faustus* might function in modern day Christian ministry, I return to my own experience with the text. I found it possessed a strongly evangelical power to urge a sinner to repent and trust in the extravagance of God's grace, mercy and forgiveness to bring God-human reconciliation. Living in a world where “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” I know many human beings besides myself have wrestled with their own sinfulness, the weightiness of their mistakes. Some of them have turned away from God because of shame, others because they prized self-sufficiency and independence over relying on a divine power or anyone else to help them right their lives. Still others, like Faustus, have become estranged from God because they feel that He could never accept or forgive them after all the bad things they have done.

The A-text of *Dr. Faustus* offers caution and hope to those who are lost, who feel far away or unforgivable, in much the same way that Jesus' parable of the Lost Son offers hope to those living in sin and separation from God. In fact, the play parallels the Luke ch. 15 parable in a number of significant ways, suiting it naturally for implementation into Biblical Christian evangelism. I include the entirety of the parable text below for three reasons. First, acknowledging that not all of my readership may have ready access to a Bible as they read, I want to supply a visual reference to return to throughout my paralleling of the parable and the play. Second, I prefer to set Scripture before readers so they may determine from their own reading whether or not the connections I make are reasonable. Thirdly, since summaries are typically tailored to support the arguments and conclusions of the summarizer they may overlook significant details or parallels which others might discover and contribute to the discussion as a
result of reading the passage with their own eyes. Here, then, is the Parable of the Lost Son.

**The Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15.11-27)**

11 Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

13 “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ 20 So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am

---

8 The parable in its entirety continues through verse 32. In context the final five verses are essential as a critique of or challenge to Jesus’ audience of Pharisees and teachers of the law, revealing how they refuse to celebrate with God in His extravagant forgiveness of and mercy toward repentant sinners. Therefore, these verses are by no means superfluous, but are omitted solely because they do not pertain directly to the parallel at hand featuring the Lost Son and Faustus.
no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

Both the Son and Faustus reject God in favor of pleasures or mentally constructed gods in beginning their new escapades: the son in the parable basically wishes his father's death upon him by asking for his inheritance in advance (Luke 15.12); Faustus proclaims necromancy as his new god as he bids adieu to divinity (1.47 and following) and later boldly turns against God proclaiming

…Faustus vows never to look to Heaven,

Never to name God, or to pray to him,

To burn his Scriptures, slay his ministers,

And make my spirits pull his churches down. (6.91-4)

Both Faustus and the son desire riches and use their power and money for pursuing pleasure, specifically immoral sexual gratification: the son “squandered [his father's] property with prostitutes” (Luke 15.30); Faustus obtains the mythic Greek beauty Helen as his paramour (though in reality it is merely a demon or devil appearing in the form of Helen) (18). The
Parable of the Lost Son also tells us that the son squandered some of his wealth in wild living. Similarly, Faustus spends his power and much of his contracted twenty-four years before damnation conjuring up trifles to gain popularity and respect from powerful figures and playing malicious tricks on people like the Pope and the horse-courser.

The direct parallel appears to disintegrate at the conclusion of the respective stories. Marlowe's play offers listeners a finale in which the prodigal son figure, Faustus, refuses to return to God, to leave his life of sin and find forgiveness from God. Yet, while *Dr. Faustus* presents a conclusion to the story radically different than that of Jesus' parable, its teaching about God's characteristic willingness to forgive remains consistent with the teaching in the parable. The trustworthy sources of the Good Angel and the Old Man emphasize God's mercy and grace toward the repentant sinner: “Faustus, repent; yet God will pity thee,” “Never too late, if Faustus will repent,”

I see an angel hover o'er they head,

And, with a vial full of precious grace,

Offers to pour the same into thy soul:

Then Call for mercy, and avoid despair. (Bevington (A-text) 5.1.53-6)

In addition to appealing to sinners on the basis of God's mercy and grace, the play depicts the consequences and dangers of not returning to God, brandishing another means of persuading listeners of the preferability of repentance over remaining in sin. This particular theme, while not featured in the parable of the Lost Son, agrees with teachings throughout the scriptures such as this passage from Paul's letter to the Romans:

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What
benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. (6.20-2)

In a church or other ministry setting, a discussion on the parable of the lost son following the presentation of this play or some adaptation of it would clarify and confirm the Old Man's and Good Angel's testimony about God, revealing the truth of God's compassion, mercy and willingness to forgive a wretched sinner (like Faustus), allowing for the pastor or person presenting the scripture to issue a final and definite call to repent and turn to God on the basis of both the play and scripture. A compare and contrast de-briefing featuring the prodigal son and Faustus would eventually lead to an examination of the fundamental difference between them: one confessed, repented, returned to God, and was forgiven; the other refused to avail himself of God's forgiveness and thus did not experience it and needlessly lost his life prematurely and in a terrifying fashion.

The parable of the lost son highlights the forgiveness and love of the Father. Some modern adaptations of the Faustus play such as Dorothy Sayers' *The Devil to Pay* alter the play to communicate a similar point. Yet, such adaptations rob the original text of its capacity to elicit change or repentance in its listeners. The strength of the play results from its combination

9 Sayers' concludes the play with God ultimately claiming Faustus' soul because she insinuates that Faustus never had power to give his soul away and it belonged to God all along. 

Angels. But he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire.

{FAUSTUS follows MEPHITOPHELS into Hell. . .

Hell-mouth is shut upon them.} (120)

Thus in accordance with the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, Faustus indeed enters Hell, but Sayers' makes it clear that Faustus will not remain in Hell forever; his rejection of God and everything he has done will not result in eternal separation from God. He will merely spend an indeterminate stint in Purgatory before eventually entering Heaven. Sayers' ending signifies a clear departure from Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* because it suggests that everyone will eventually end up in Heaven, having been saved by God, regardless of how they have lived on earth. In Marlowe's play, Faustus expresses the eternality of his approaching time in hell, lamenting that he “must remain in hell for ever. Hell, ah, hell for ever!...” (19.51)
of both the promise of God's sovereign ability to save Faustus from his sins and the frightening
display of the consequences of embracing sin and refusing God's salvation. Reverse or omit
Faustus’ damnation at the end of the play, and suddenly sin and human behavior become
insignificant; viewers may as well “go on sinning so that grace may increase.” In Sayers'
adaptation, the fear of sin's consequences vanishes and with it the play's power to prod sinners
toward new, redeemed life.

Anyone wishing to utilize the play for ministry might find it accessible for conveying an
additional message about the promise and joy of a life redeemed by God which would
compliment the warning about the fruit of sinful living. I believe that performing an alternate
ending to the play following the initial full performance would most effectively enable a
ministering party to communicate both truths in a reinforcing manner. The alternate ending,
displaying a what-if scenario where Faustus repents and becomes reconciled with God, would
create a startling contrast between the two Faustus characters displaying not merely a deliverance
from eternal hell after death but deliverance from the hell of separation from God and slavery to
sin during mortal existence on earth. If Faustus would repent, like the prodigal son, for example,
and avail himself of God's grace and forgiveness he could also escape the extreme agony and
stress which haunt him all throughout the play. He could possess eternal life in the present. By
presenting the alternate ending showing what Faustus should have done, the play would testify to
God's power and willingness to forgive and transform lives in the present and eternally without
sacrificing the gut-wrenching force of convicting its viewers about their need to repent as other
adaptations have lamentably done.

Admittedly, at first glance my proposal may appear presumptuous. It seems a bit
audacious to suggest that any pastor, church or ministering body meddle with Marlowe's canonized, classic tragedy. Yet, writers and visionaries have been altering popular beloved texts effectively and for good purposes for hundreds of years. For instance, the *King Lear* which many of us read and cherish today would not exist if Shakespeare had not radically re-imagined its conclusion and reworked the existing *King Leir* text to make it his own. On principle, then, the idea of creating an alternate ending to Marlowe's *Faustus* for use in ministry seems reasonable and good. However, since not all ministers or persons seeking to undertake such a performance of *Dr. Faustus* boast the imagination and literary mastery of Shakespeare, I have proposed a number of guidelines, suggestions and cautions regarding the alternate ending and how one might best compose it.

Staging a happily-ever-after sort of alternate ending to a story which originally ends in woeful damnation poses a challenge to those desiring to stage it. After the audience has witnessed the first play and its tragic ending, some may indeed long for a happier more hopeful resolution, but others will doubtlessly value the way in which the play leaves them to grapple with the unanswered questions and to tie up the loose ends. The challenge consists in striving to preserve the impact of the first ending by not cheating it with a cheap or overly simplistic everything-works-out-in-the-end alternate ending, ideally both should poignantly communicate distinct but related messages which reinforce one another.

Rather than writing an alternate ending completely from scratch, I condone an approach of quarto mixing/borrowing and adaptation. For example, the B-text version of *Dr. Faustus*

---

10 The transformational power of God's forgiveness and intervention in a person's life can result in immediate, miraculous and extraordinary change. If I were putting on alternate ending of the play I would want to be careful not to downplay or dismiss this potential reality by too conscientiously avoiding the cheap ending, making Faustus' life after repentance seem little freer or better than his life in bondage to sin and trepidation, thus usurping the alternate ending of its purpose all together.
contains passages from the Good Angel and the Old Man which display a deep compassionate love for Faustus and exclamations of truth about God’s nature and repentance unequalled in the A-text. Such passages would prove useful in scripting an alternate ending without unduly sacrificing its Marlovian authenticity, retaining the style of the original play while drawing new themes from it. One such exemplary passage of merit and pathos worth incorporating in the alternate ending appears only in the B-text in 5.2:

*Good Ang.* Oh, Faustus, if thou hadst given ear to me,

Innumerable joys had followed thee.

But though didst love the world.

........................................

O what will all thy riches, pleasures, pomps,

Avail thee now?

........................................

O thou hast lost celestial happiness,

Pleasures unspeakable, bliss without end.

Hadst thou affected sweet divinity,

Hell or the devil, had had no power on thee.

Hadst thou kept on that way, Faustus, behold,

In what resplendent glory thou hadst sit

In yonder throne, like those bright shining saints,

And triumph’d over hell . . . (5.2.99-101, 104-5, 106-13)

The person composing the alternate ending may conclude that these moving words spoken by the
Good Angel more pointedly highlight the bliss Faustus has sacrificed in going his own way than that of the Old Man's exclamation in the A-text (found only in A1):

*Old Man.* Accursed Faustus, miserable man,

That from thy soul exclud'st the grace of Heaven,

And fliest the throne of his tribunal-seat!

(18.119-21)

The director or writer may thus cut and paste pertinent selections from a variety of quartos in order to produce an alternate ending which jives with Marlowe's style and language while serving the director's good purposes for reaching a contemporary audience.

Considering how to wrap up the alternate ending I appeal to a classic work of literature which has thrilled and warmed the hearts of both its readers and those who have beheld its theatrical adaptations: Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol.* The popularity of Dickens' tale with its storybook conclusion assures us of the potential to dramatically display the miraculous transformation of a character at the end of a play with great effect upon an audience.

Furthermore, the structure, plot and protagonist of Dickens' tale parallel those of *Dr. Faustus* hinting at the potential interchangeability of certain elements of their stories (in this case their endings). Both Scrooge and Faustus are directly confronted with what will happen to them if they continue living as they are. Scrooge might have easily hardened himself and ended his life like Dr. Faustus, and Dr. Faustus might have just as easily repented of his wrongdoing and lived happily ever after as Scrooge did. Dickens' ending indicates the permanence of the change and redemption in his once rotten-to-the-core protagonist. The alternate ending of *Dr. Faustus* should accomplish the same task, featuring Faustus' agonizing struggle over whether or not to
repent, leading to his firm resolution to turn away from sin to God and culminating in his confession and repentance. Finally, the alternate ending should include several moments displaying the joyous and lasting effects of spiritual transformation and freedom from sin in Faustus' life akin to those experienced by Scrooge though perhaps less extensive.

In order for *Dr. Faustus* to function effectively as a tool for evangelism it must stress the viewers' responsibility to choose to repent rather than their utter helplessness to choose as a result of their predetermined destiny. Honderich underscores the significance of the personal approach to God which Faustus' adopts; “throughout the play the Evil Angel's work had been made easy by Faustus's conception of a stern and unforgiving God” (13). Accordingly, to focus and maximize the play's impact in a ministry setting, a church, for example, I would either briefly precede or follow the performance of the play by teaching from complimentary scriptures which emphasize the significance of each individual's decision in choosing to repent and obey God, such as Matt. 3.8: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” Other pertinent scriptures I would relate to the play and the importance of willingly repenting of sin, asking God's forgiveness, etc, include Luke 13.24, “*Make every effort* to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to,” 2 Peter 3.14, “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him” (though admittedly this could apply equally to the elect in a Calvinist framework), Deut. 30.19-20, “This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now *choose* life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him” and finally Joshua 24.15, “But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then *choose*
for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (all italics added for emphasis).

While Dr. Faustus certainly has the proclivity to scare viewers into repentance with its description of devils, Hell's torments and psychological limbo, it offers viewers more than a fear of eternal misery and separation from God; it supplies the context for discovering and obtaining eternal life in the present. Faustus' life of psychological anxiety, spiritual agony, unfulfillment and constant search for pleasure and power which ends up short-lived and evanescent portrays the needless travails of life without or in opposition to God. As Pinciss puts it, “Much as he may desire it, Faustus's conception of himself prevents him from achieving justifying faith” (9). Faustus could save himself so much trouble, worry and pain if he would only allow himself to be forgiven, repenting and returning to God.

Dr. Faustus inevitably either misunderstands the role he has to play in returning to God or he chooses to not to fill it, leaving his potential and purpose unfulfilled and his personal responsibility in the repentance process neglected. Thus, the minster or person providing leadership to a gathering and showing of the play would do well to address the role, extent and nature of human effort in overcoming sin and becoming reconciled to and right with God. Author Jerry Bridges illuminates the role of human will and action in turning from sin to God from a biblical perspective; his insights seamlessly link Faustus' feelings and thoughts with those of the typical Christian;

Having experienced failure and frustration with our sin problem, we are delighted to be told that God has already done it all and that we only need to rest in Christ's finished work. After struggling with our sins to the point of despair, this new idea is like a life preserver to a drowning man, almost like hearing the Gospel for the first time.
Most Christians, Bridges asserts, have felt despair because of their sins and he hints that their despair naturally leads them toward spiritual death or drowning. Likewise Faustus despairs in his sin and eventually experiences the death of which Bridges speaks, not having clung to the life preserver of the gospel. Bridges continues,

Years ago a fellow Christian warned me that Satan would try to confuse us on the issue of what God has done for us and what we must do ourselves. I have come to see the insight he had in making that statement. Lack of understanding on that issue has led to great confusion in our pursuit of holiness. It is very important that we make this distinction; for God has indeed made provision for us to live a holy life, but He also has given us definite responsibilities.

Bridges' anecdote further solidifies the connection between Faustus and the ordinary modern Christian, reiterating the pertinence of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* for ministry today. Like many of us at one time or another, Faustus is confused about God by Satan and his devils, and his lack of understanding, or his misunderstanding brought about by the deceit of Satan and Mephostophilis, results in his despairing and neglecting both God's provision for his redemption and his own responsibilities to seek and lay hold of that redemption. Faustus needs to recognize God's provision and his own responsibility in becoming free from the bondage of sin, and so do we all.

Moreover, Bridges shows that God's grace and forgiveness work in partnership with our willful acts of repentance. God freely offers grace to people like Faustus, but an experience of that grace requires an appropriate and requisite response by the recipient.

Faustus' flawed view of God and himself not only leads him to his eventual post-death
doom, but also deprives him of the abundant life he could have had if he would have repented and trusted in God; “For vain pleasure of four and twenty years hath Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity” (Bevington (A-text) 5.2.35-7). To follow up the performance of the alternate ending of the Faustus play, I would speak to the audience about eternal life in the present; repentance and reconciliation with God isn’t just about getting out of hell when we die, it’s about escaping the power of hell right now, about living in the kingdom of God while still in our mortal bodies. We often tend to think of eternal life only as that which comes after our physical death. Yet Mephostophilis verifies the belief of heaven and hell as inhabitable realms in mortal life: “Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it. / Think’st thou that I, who saw the face of God / And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, / Am not tormented with ten thousand hells / In being depriv’d of everlasting bliss?” (3.78-82).

Furthermore, scripture depicts eternal life as something we can participate in now, not solely after physical death. In John 17.3, Jesus characterizes eternal life as knowing God and himself (“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”). Similarly, 1 John 5.20 proclaims that Jesus and a knowledge of him constitutes eternal life:11 “We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” Moreover, scripture teaches that people cannot experience eternal life in the present if they are still enslaved in sin (“Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him” 1 John 3.15) and that eternal life accompanies deliverance from sin; “But now that you have been set

---

11 It is clear from the rest of 1 John that knowledge does not simply mean mental assent or understanding of, but an active participation in the things of God, living like Jesus did, not merely knowing about how he lived.
free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” Rom. 6.22. In *Dr. Faustus*, God is not the one who needs to change, though in the incarnation God in a sense does change specifically to save someone like Faustus, taking the initiative to offer forgiveness like the Father running to the lost son even before the son comes to him. Faustus must become willing to change himself and to be changed by God not only so he views God in the right way but also that he may obtain salvation and redemption in the present: the transformed abundant life that comes through God’s forgiveness and victory over sin. All of us like Faustus have gone astray and need to return to God, the only one who can purify us of our sins and give us abundant life both now and in eternity.

For its original audience, *Doctor Faustus* likely depicted the uncertainties extant in faith and the popular theology of the day, echoing the spiritual unrest of Elizabethan England. Its pages offered challenges to the concrete assertions of theological scholars. In the hands of a Christian today, however, it appears the play may possess a new power to proclaim assuring truths about God. Through the presentation of an alternate ending and the compassionate calls of the Good Angel and Old Man, *Doctor Faustus* can conquer spiritual uncertainty which haunts so many. By reintroducing the scriptural truths which Faustus overlooked, the modern adaptation of the play administers the good news to those losing the battle with despair: “the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus” and “If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (Rom. 6.23, 1 John 1.9).
Although the version of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* which I read (referred to in section I) was a mixture of *Doctor Faustus* quartos primarily consisting of B1, it seems that for an average contemporary audience the B-text may not possess the same capacity for communicating a clear cut evangelical message which the A-text does due to its inclusion of strong predestination doctrine (primarily from Mephostophilis) which seems to negate Faustus' free will;

I do confess it, Faustus, and rejoice;
'Twas I, that when thou wert i' the way to heaven,
Damm'd up thy passage; when thou took'st the book,
To view the Scriptures, then I turn'd the leaves,
And led thine eye. - (Bevington 5.2.91-5)

Mephostophilis' hard core Calvinist assertions regarding the role of Faustus' free will (or lack thereof) in his self-damning actions prove somewhat incompatible with an evangelical message stressing the importance of the individual's decision, concentrating on inclining his or her will toward good, urging the choice of repentance. While the B-text version may not be as specially tailored as the A-text to function as an altar-call inspirer for winning new converts or leading believers to renewed repentance, it has a unique capacity for stimulating intellectual discourse and sparking theological discussion, especially among mature or learned believers. Most importantly, the B-text possess the potential to soften the hearts of those who might unyielding hold to their cut-and-dried or narrow theological beliefs (in this case Calvinists or those adhering to extreme forms of predestination doctrine), who have perhaps not spent adequate time reflecting on the implications of their beliefs, or who have become calloused to the struggles and existence of those they may deem as reprobate. The Old Man models well how to practically balance a deep knowledge of God with an equally deep care for people stuck in sin, a balance which many believers have not obtained;

O gentle Faustus, leave this damnèd art,
This magic, that will charm thy soul to hell,
And quite bereave thee of salvation.
Though thou hast now offended like a man,
Do not persevere in it like a devil;
Yet, yet thou hast an amiable soul,
If sin by custom grow not into nature:
Then, Faustus, will repentance come to late,
Then thou art banish'd from the sight of heaven;
No mortal can express the pains of hell.
It may be this my exhortation
Seems harsh and all unpleasant; let it not,
For, gentle son, I speak it not in wrath,
Or envy of thee, but in tender love,
And pity of thy future misery.
And so have hope, that this my kind rebuke,
Checking thy body, may amend thy soul. (Bevington (B-text) 5.1.34-50)

The Old Man exhibits his understanding of the ways of God, the consequences of remaining and dieing in sin, and he correctly points out Faustus' own sinfulness. But instead of merely passing an intellectual judgement and comfortably returning to his own business like a pompous theologian, the Old Man actively pursues Faustus out of love and compassion, striving with all his passion and intellect to bring a lost soul back into the fold of God.
This play does not necessarily insinuate that strict predestination doctrine is false or should be eradicated. Rather, it seems, that those who hold to such a belief ought to exercise Christ-like compassion toward other sinners rather than comfortably pronouncing condemnation on them from afar. A presentation of the B-text, then, might serve to challenge believers to emulate the Old Man and the Good Angel, actively seeking out the redemption of the lost rather than attempting to pinpoint exactly what they had done wrong, why they were lost and unforgivable, after the manner of the devils in the play.

Works Cited


Pinciss, G. M.. “Marlowe's Cambridge Years and the Writing of Doctor Faustus.” Studies in
