



# MARTIN LUTHER

SELECTIONS FROM HIS WRITINGS

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
JOHN DILLENBERGER

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*Selections From His Writings*

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## A NOTE TO THE READER

The selections in this volume are intended for the general reader. They are meant for individuals interested in gaining a picture of the essential insights of Luther and of his enduring significance on the basis of a direct, even if limited, acquaintance with his writings. With this in mind, the selections have been made with a concern for variety in form and content. Hence, expository and polemical treatises, Biblical commentaries, sermons, and theses have been included. Moreover, an attempt has been made to cover the major subjects on which he wrote. At the same time, the general order of arrangement is such that his central, positive ideas are given in the early documents. In this way, the reader will have the core of Luther's thought before him as he examines its implications for specific problems or sees it in contrast to previous or subsequent developments in his thought.

The selections, as will be noted from the Table of Contents, have been arranged in general groupings of allied subject matter. In most instances, later works precede earlier ones. In sections I and II this order appeared to be the best path into the heart of Luther's central conceptions. In sections III and IV it was felt that it would be more advantageous to read the later and generally more positive and less polemical works first. Such an order can in fact help in the understanding of the more polemical writing. Section V is in the form of an Appendix. This is because this material does not directly or necessarily imply a Reformation conception of the Church. It is a

debated question whether or not Luther had come to his new understanding of the Gospel at this time. It is incontrovertible that neither the new understanding nor its implications are explicitly present. For the reader who wishes to read the selections in chronological order, the dates have been provided in the Table of Contents.

Brief introductory notes have been provided for each selection. The footnotes and Biblical references are largely those of the translators and editors of the respective volumes from which the materials are taken. But they have frequently been condensed and, wherever possible, they have been eliminated entirely because of considerations of space. Brackets—[ ]—indicate editorial comments and additions throughout.

For the reader who wishes an account of the life of Luther in his context and a delineation of his Reformation ideas as a whole, either as a preface to reading or as a sequel, an Introduction has been provided.

It is of interest to note that, although Luther lived at the beginning of the sixteenth century, his writings have never been published in their entirety. The definitive Weimar edition, begun in Germany in 1883, will be completed by approximately 1970 and will include fifty-seven volumes of his writings, twelve volumes of his work on the German Bible, eleven volumes of letters, and six volumes of the Table-Talk, the latter being material taken down by students and others at Luther's table. The first extensive English edition is now in process of publication: a fifty-five-volume edition produced jointly by the Muhlenberg Press and the Concordia Publishing House. Each year at least a dozen major books appear on Luther, as well as approximately fifty articles and a not insignificant number of pamphlets. In addition, nearly all German Protestant theologians, and not infrequently their American colleagues, feel impelled to comment extensively upon Luther in the course of their own theological exposition.

J. D.



## AN INTRODUCTION TO MARTIN LUTHER

It would be as wrong to attribute the breakup of the medieval world and its consequent course to the genius of Luther as it would be to interpret Luther himself as just a product of the forces then bringing a new world into being. The corporate world of Christendom, once exhibited in church, state, and culture alike, was being undermined as the result of a variety of factors. Such divergent movements as mysticism, with its emphasis upon the direct encounter with the divine, and nominalism, with its stress upon the concrete and discrete, inadvertently challenged the hierarchical and corporate claims of the Church. Humanists, with the enthusiasm of their new discoveries in the field of classical learning, favored the culture of Greece and Rome rather than the studied subtleties of the scholastic theologians. The empire itself was beset with the self-consciousness of rising ethnic and national feelings. The consequence was that the demands of empire frequently had to be adjusted to the aggressive demands of such new groups, which, in German lands, were usually represented by princes and nobles. In the social context, the feudal system was challenged by the rise of a middle class interested in trade and commerce. Small towns became urban centers, and there was a new feeling of independence from the feudal lords. Peasants dissatisfied with their lot were ready to revolt, and did so in the period of the Reformation. The travels of Columbus and Magellan, the new ideas of Copernicus, and above all

the spread of information through the printing press exposed new horizons of knowledge not heretofore available.

Surely, without those forces, Luther would only have been another martyr. Sometimes men supported him because they believed in the rightness of his cause and his convictions concerning the Gospel. Sometimes men supported him because he seemed to belong to the new age and helped to weld new patterns of social cohesion. Not infrequently Luther himself was bewildered by the new world he encountered, and his instincts in such moments were conservative.

While he helped to give form and direction to many of the new patterns, a good deal of the subsequent direction of the Reformation and its impact upon history were out of his hands.

Fundamentally, the significance of Luther must be seen in the religious understanding which he forged. That came not through the new cultural forces but through the insights which Luther won in the struggle to understand Scripture. These insights became decisive in forging an understanding of the Gospel which necessitated a break from the medieval church. That such a break could occur was made possible by the non-religious developments previously mentioned. But these developments in no sense explain the faith which informed the Reformation development. Luther the man and the time were matched in a manner seldom seen in history. In the late Middle Ages, the Church had consolidated its power and defined the expression of its claims to power. But at the same time new currents of life and thought had risen, all of them potentially explosive. Many of these forces were given new form and power through Luther's reformation insights.

This has not always been clearly understood. We have at our disposal today a more adequate and extensive body of knowledge of Luther and his period than has ever existed since his lifetime. For the most part, too, we have been able to separate the man as he was from the legends which have grown up around him, and this has cleared the ground for a more realistic appreciation of his contribution to theological thought. This does not mean that Luther is now thought to be beyond criticism. Karl Barth has said, for example, that the German people suffered from "Martin Luther's error on the relation between Law and Gospel, between the temporal and the

spiritual order and power," and that Hitlerism was the "evil dream of a German pagan who first became Christianized in a Lutheran form."<sup>1</sup> But Barth, like other interpreters, has seen in Luther a man who saw the nature and ramifications of faith with a clarity seldom witnessed in history.

Some current criticism of Luther is overly doctrinaire. The earlier Roman Catholic polemic has largely subsided as a result of the responsible work of scholars like Joseph Lortz.<sup>2</sup> Overdoctrinaire comment now comes from the psychological and psychiatric interpreters.<sup>3</sup> There is no question but that much about Luther, seen in isolation from the rest of the man, borders on the pathological. But many men who exhibit pathological traits nevertheless see depths and dimensions of existence and of faith which are denied to others. To see such men only in psychological terms is to misunderstand them.

Luther was a robust spirit who had many facets to his being. Sensitive to the complexity of issues and problems, he was yet impatient. Aware of the important differences made by nuances of thought, he nevertheless rejected the subtlety of the Scholastic theologians. He was given to zest and enthusiasm, and he had a healthy sense of the incongruous; but he was also merciless in his attacks on others and not seldom vulgar in his demeanor. Like many great men, he was pushed from issue to issue, and one wonders how he found the strength to carry through. Practically nothing which Luther did could be planned or anticipated. Once his direction was clear, he met problem after problem as they arose, resolutely making decisions profoundly affecting the developing new shape of Western history.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *This Christian Cause* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), no pagination.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, I and II (Freiburg, 1939-40).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1958). This is a well-meaning book, but there is too much of the "clinician's judgment" and not enough substance from Luther, hence the doctrinaire designation. More instructive, though not to be accepted uncritically with reference to the sources, is the chapter on Luther in Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959).



### *I. The Making of the Reformer*

Luther's early development took place within the limitations of conventional medieval education and ecclesiastical life. Born in 1483 of Hans Luther, a peasant who had turned to the copper-mining industry and become prosperous, and Margarete Ziegler, daughter of a family of some social standing, Martin Luther spent his early years in the city of Mansfield, located in the heart of the mining district in Thuringia. But we know little for certain about these years. Luther's reflections in his old age indicate a rather oppressive and stern atmosphere pervading the early years at home and at school. In any case, from his fourteenth year on, Luther was mostly away from home. After a year in the Latin School of the Brethren of the Common Life in Magdeburg, and from three to four years at school in Eisenach—the ancestral area to which he had been sent by his parents—Luther matriculated at the University of Erfurt in 1501. In 1502 he received his bachelor's degree and in 1505 the Master of Arts. Although Luther had entered the university at the age of eighteen—several years older than the average age in those days—he completed these university degrees in the minimum time permitted and took his Master's at the earliest allowable age of twenty-two.

Soon thereafter Luther began his studies with the Faculty of Law at Erfurt, in preparation for the respected and prosperous legal career which his father so desired for him. Returning to Erfurt from a visit to his family in July of the same year, he encountered a violent thunderstorm. When a bolt of lightning knocked him to the ground and nearly took his life, Luther cried to the patron saint of the miners of his youth: "St. Anne, help! I will become a monk!" Approximately two weeks later, in obedience to his vow, he entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt.

Surely this dramatic event is not understandable by itself. There is too much evidence that Luther had long been exercised by religious questions. Moreover, his own education had accentuated rather than diminished his interest and concern. Extremely sensitive to the problem of how one could become worthy to receive the grace of God rather than the

damning consequences of His righteousness, Luther was prepared for the decision to take what was accepted as the higher path of becoming a monk. Being a monk was a matter of special status and safety as well as of responsibility in the mediation of grace. While the thunderstorm precipitated the decision to become a monk, the possibility of that course of action was surely part and parcel of Luther's natural and educational equipment. In the monastery, like others before him from the University of Erfurt, Luther strove to acquire that holiness on the basis of which he could stand before God and reflect His purposes and will in the world.

The first two years in the monastery were apparently traditional enough. They were marked only by Luther's serious attempt to follow the prescribed way and to do even more than was required. Two years later we find Luther saying his first Mass, with the usual anxiety attendant upon those who for the first time celebrated the holy mysteries. Luther's father and a number of fellow townsmen were present for this event and the subsequent celebration. Though Hans Luther had at first opposed the entrance of his son into the monastery, in the interim he had become reconciled to Martin's destiny. But Luther, pressing for his father's full approval on this occasion, only precipitated the latter's haunting declaration: "God grant it was not an apparition of the Devil." Luther was, however, more disappointed than troubled by his father's outburst. We must look elsewhere for the source of Luther's developing anxieties.

We must recall the problem which plagued Luther before he entered the monastery, namely, how one could stand in holiness before a righteous, demanding God. This problem tormented him no less when a monk—that is, when exercising the very vocation which was the epitome of man's relation to God. To understand Luther's difficulty, we must have before us a picture of the thought and practices of the medieval Catholic Church. Fundamental to its understanding was the belief in grace as an objective reality given in the celebration of the sacraments. Through the sacraments man was presented as blameless and acceptable in the sight of God. From birth to death, from baptism to extreme unction, there were sacraments for all the occasions and problems of man's existence; God's

grace was freely available. In order to receive such riches, only one condition was to be met, namely, to confess one's sins, exhibiting thereby a minimal worthiness for the reception of grace. What could be more reasonable than that!

With an acute sensitivity hardly reasonable, Luther discerned a telling difficulty in trying to live in terms of this outlook. Could one be sure that one confessed all one's sins? In attempting to find that certainty, Luther frequently made confession of his sins. His fellow monks were not only annoyed by the frequency with which they were sought out as confessors without regard to time or place but also by the apparent triviality of the offenses he confessed. The counsel of the Superior of the monastery, Staupitz, that if Luther expected Christ to forgive him he should come with something really needing to be forgiven, such as murder or adultery, instead of the trivialities he enumerated, and that Luther should not be angry with God, because God was not angry with him, did not allay Luther's agony. For Luther, the declared views of the Church had to be taken seriously or consciously modified. They could not be subverted by fatherly advice.

Moreover, there was a further difficulty inherent in the accepted views. Even if one formally met the requirements, had the expected and demanded internal transformation of man really taken place? It was believed that man, anchored, to be sure, in God's grace, could effect a total contrition, that is, both confess his sins and maintain a proper relation to God. Difficult though it may be, it was believed that one could love God with a good deal of the spontaneity with which God loves us. Luther did not find himself so persuaded. Neither in his conduct nor in his attitude did Luther find ground for hope. Instead he saw despair, and God appeared as wrath, not as love.

In spite of such questionings, Luther's superiors apparently had confidence in him. He had been encouraged in the study of theology, loaned to the University of Wittenberg in the year 1508 to lecture on philosophy, and recalled to Erfurt to lecture on the *Sentences of Peter Lombard*, that topical collection of passages from Scripture, the Church Fathers, and occasional Scholastics which formed the basis of lectures in theology in the Middle Ages. In 1510 Luther was part of a delegation to Rome which pleaded the cause of the Augustinian monastery



in Erfurt in a jurisdictional dispute. In 1511 he was permanently transferred to the University of Wittenberg and, in the following year, took his doctorate in theology. Behind these last developments was the hand of his Superior, Johann Staupitz, who had selected him to be his successor at Wittenberg in the chair of Bible. In addition to his university lectures, Luther had to undertake preaching assignments, and he soon found himself assigned to administrative responsibilities in the university and to supervising monasteries in the area. In the years 1513 to 1515 Luther gave his first series of lectures on the Psalms, followed in 1515-16 by lectures on Romans, and in 1516-17 by his first lectures on Galatians.

Luther came to a fresh understanding of the Gospel sometime between 1513 and 1519. The most dramatic event in that reconception is generally known as the "tower experience," because his new insight apparently came to him when in the tower of the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg. But exactly when this experience took place and what its precise meaning was are not settled. In the *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* of 1545, Luther himself refers to the discovery as having taken place at a time when he was engaged with the second series of lectures on Psalms in 1518. But until quite recently the prevailing interpretation of Luther held this to be a mistaken recollection and, instead, dated the "tower experience" as early as the first lectures on Psalms in the years 1513-15. More recently still, scholars such as Ernst Bizer have again placed it in the years 1518-19.<sup>4</sup> Other interpreters have despaired of coming to an exact date. The precise meaning of the event is as difficult to ascertain as the date. In fact, its precise meaning may have some bearing on the date. It makes a difference whether the "tower experience" represents a moment when Luther came to a fresh understanding of the Gospel, which later underwent extensive transformation, or whether it represents the view of the mature

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Bizer, *Fides ex Auditū, Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung des Gerechtigkeits Gottes durch Martin Luther* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1958). See also F. Edward Cranz, *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on Justice, Law, and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); Hans Pohlmann, *Hat Luther Paulus entdeckt?* (Berlin, 1959).

Luther, which is subsequently elaborated with reference to all other problems. We shall not tarry at this point. Since Luther, even if in retrospect, movingly indicates in the *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* how his eyes were opened to the center of the Gospel, that work has been included in this volume. It conveys Luther's awareness of the focal point of his mature understanding, whether or not it represents the actual "tower experience."

Luther's great contribution centers in the recovery of the Biblical meaning of the righteousness of God. Generally the medieval church defined the righteousness of God as the demanding justice of God; for the mature Luther, by contrast, the righteousness of God was fundamentally the mercy of God. This transformation in understanding was made in three stages. In so far as the medieval view interpreted the righteousness of God as His demanding justice, the fundamental problem was how man could stand before such a God.

The medieval church did not believe that man could do this in terms of his own righteousness. Rather, in the prevailing medieval view, man hoped to stand before the righteousness of God by virtue of a combination of serious intentions, righteous works whose imperfections are met by grace, and the sacramental realities which covered all the situations of men. It was a combination of grace and of the best acts of men. We have already delineated this position and the difficulties Luther discovered in it.

The second stage in the transition is that found in Luther's first lectures on the Psalms and to some extent in his lectures on the letter to the Romans. Two significant shifts in the emphasis of Luther's thinking are apparent at this stage. In the first place, the righteousness of God is no longer seen as just a demanding justice before which a man may stand by virtue of his own good works and the forgiving grace of God. The righteousness of God is now primarily the grace which transforms and makes man righteous. The righteousness of God is no longer encountered in terms of a transaction in which satisfaction is made to God. In the second place, human activity no longer has any part in the ultimate determination of man's destiny. Grace alone enables man to stand before the righteousness of God. This general view was shared to some extent by

figures who represent the Augustinian tradition in the Middle Ages. But Luther gave it a more classical and evangelical expression, and for this reason many have dated Luther's new insights from this period.

The third position is Luther's full-blown Reformation conception. Formally, it bears similarities to his earlier understanding. The righteousness of God and His grace are identified, though now more emphatically than before. Grace alone is decisive, though now in an entirely new way. The crucial difference is that the emphasis is no longer on God's grace in enabling man to be righteous. God's grace, which is His righteousness, is shown in His treating man as righteous whatever the state of his life. Still utilizing the medieval language in which a man needed to stand in righteousness before the demands of God, Luther declared that acceptability is imputed to man; righteousness is ascribed to him. A man now stands before God in the light of His grace alone, and that righteousness of life and man's activity, so important in other contexts, are irrelevant here.<sup>5</sup>

This understanding, on which we shall elaborate in its various ramifications in the next section, gave birth to the Reformation in its radical character. On its basis, the medieval sacramental understanding was challenged at its best. Gone was any idea that man's relation to a righteous God depended on works and the infusion of actual righteousness. In its place stood grace alone.

That conception was not yet fully developed in Luther's mind as he posted the *Ninety-five Theses* in Latin on the Castle church door in 1517, in the hope of precipitating a debate on the system of indulgences. The *Theses* clearly hinted what later became explicit. Already here, Luther maintained that the reference to repentance in Matthew 4:17 meant that the "entire life of believers is to be one of repentance" and had no reference to the sacrament of penance. Penitence, rather than being a single act, was a continuous mood and

<sup>5</sup> It is possible that Luther telescoped and thereby obscured the distinction between his earlier and later discoveries in the *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings*. Such a telescoping, even if unconscious, is different from a mistaken identification, which the older theories demanded.



determination of spirit in the presence of God who is both holy and gracious. It was precisely because Luther took repentance so seriously, as the mark of the believer before God, that he was moved to attack the practice and claims of the indulgence system through the *Theses*.

An indulgence was a way of drawing upon the merits of Christ to meet the inescapable punishment for sin and to make satisfaction to God even though one's sins were forgiven. In consideration of the payment of a sum of money to the Church or some other virtuous act, a great deal, if not all, of the punishment for one's sins was said to be remitted, and a written certification of this remission was provided by the Pope's agent. Such an indulgence, when proclaimed by the papacy, was considered of great worth for the welfare not only of oneself but of the departed dead. Indulgences had been declared for service in the Crusades. More recently, however, they had been offered for gifts to the Church when special financial goals had to be met.

The immediate occasion for the posting of the *Ninety-five Theses* was the indulgence preaching of the Dominican, Johann Tetzel. In the effort to raise money for the completion of St. Peter's in Rome, he apparently promised not only release from punishment but also the forgiveness of sins. In the *Theses*, Luther proposed that the indulgences had no reference either to purgatory or to the making of satisfaction to God. Indulgences had reference only to the possibility of the remission of penalties which the papacy had the right to impose upon believers as a sign of their seriousness. But to say this, was to make indulgences relevant to the discipline of the Church, not binding upon the Eternal. It was to attack a medieval development which long since had become standard and accepted practice. Thus, in the *Theses*, the Roman development is directly attacked, even though the evangelical Gospel is apparent only partly in this document.

The evangelical concern is more apparent in the *Theses* which Luther prepared for the disputation at Heidelberg in the spring of 1518. This is due to the fact that the *Ninety-five Theses* were addressed to the correction of an abuse, while the *Heidelberg Theses* were directly concerned with such central issues as sin, free will, and grace. Staupitz, who arranged the

disputation at the Augustinian monastery in Heidelberg, had asked Luther to concentrate on those points in order that his more evangelical ideas might become apparent and open to examination. In these *Theses*, Luther gave classic expression to the theology of the cross in contrast to the theology of glory: that is, the apprehension of God in suffering and lowliness in contrast to the apprehension of Him on the basis of the visible things of creation. He also opposed the Scholastic theology in an outright attack upon Aristotle. Since the theology which informed the *Ninety-five Theses* is more apparent in the *Heidelberg Theses* than in the *Ninety-five Theses* themselves, the theological theses for the Heidelberg debate have also been included in these selections.

The events which followed the publication of the *Ninety-five Theses* had not been anticipated by Luther. Instead of instigating a scholar's debate, the *Theses* were surreptitiously translated into German and widely disseminated. That this happened testifies to the widespread unrest and dissatisfaction with the practices of the Roman Church in Germany. As an attempt to elaborate on what he meant and to avoid misunderstanding, Luther wrote and had published his *Explanation of the Ninety-five Theses*. A copy of the *Theses* had been forwarded to the Pope, and initially there was little reaction, apparently under the conviction that the matter was not too serious. But the popular interest in and support of Luther, and Luther's attacks on the power of the papacy, with reference to such crucial questions as the power to consign men to purgatory, drastically changed the picture. When Luther heard that he was under a papal ban, he proclaimed that the papacy had no ultimate power with respect to a man's relation to God. This made the matter worse. At that juncture, the Pope asked the Dominican, Sylvester Prierias, to answer Luther. Moreover, the Pope demanded that Luther appear in Rome to respond to the charge of heresy and of flouting constitutional authority. But the Elector Frederick (the ruler in whose territory Luther lived), partly from political motives, successfully brought pressure to have the issue joined in Germany rather than in Rome. It was arranged that Luther should be given a personal hearing by the papal legate, Cardinal Cajetan, prior to the Diet of Augsburg. But no agreement resulted and



Luther appealed from the Pope to a general council. In the meantime, the Vatican clarified its understanding of indulgences and purged some of the most offensive practices. Further, John Eck, a professor from the German University of Ingolstadt who was sympathetic to Rome, persuaded the University of Leipzig to sponsor a debate with Luther. And in 1519 the Leipzig debate was held, in the wake of which both the papal party and Luther's side claimed victory.

More important than who could claim victory was the fact that in the debate Luther was driven to see and to express more clearly the limits which must be put on the power of the papacy. Now the final conflict appeared inevitable, and the groundwork was complete for the stand he was to take when he was later summoned to appear before the Imperial Diet at Worms in 1521.

It would serve no purpose here to elaborate on the complex political events or on the threats and counterthreats during the period from the posting of the *Theses* through the Leipzig debate to the Diet of Worms. More significant for us is that this is the period in which Luther's Reformation faith—whether already present for many years or now newly emerged—was hammered out to its full consciousness and to an awareness of its implications. In the controversy with Rome, the initial abuses against which he protested were left far behind and a conception of Christianity emerged which rejected the very foundations of the medieval church. From that point on, nothing less than the total reformation of the Church would do. In the debates of this period, Luther kept coming back to certain definite and inescapable convictions. Fundamental to them all was that the norm of the Church's life could be taken only from Scripture. Hence he rejected the notion that the Roman pontiff cannot err in matters of faith and that he alone can interpret Scripture. Moreover, Luther was forced to the conclusion that councils could not be trusted entirely either, since the decisions of various councils contradicted one another. When Luther was finally summoned to the Imperial Diet meeting at Worms in 1521 and asked to repudiate his writings, he replied in terms of a conviction which had already become clear three years earlier: "Since then your serene Majesty and your Lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this man-

ner, neither horned nor toothed. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the Pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. . . . May God help me. Amen."<sup>6</sup>

In the previous year, 1520, a papal bull had been issued condemning all of Luther's writings and giving him sixty days within which to recant. But it was a productive year from a literary standpoint. There appeared such major writings as *The Treatises on Good Works*, *The Papacy at Rome*, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality*, *The Pagan Servitude of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*. With good merit, the latter three have frequently been called the Reformation Treatises. In *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality*, Luther called upon the nobles to reform the Church and indicated the grounds upon which this was essential. In *The Pagan Servitude of the Church* he attacked the entire sacramental system of the Church, particularly the Mass, and delineated his own conception of the sacraments. *The Freedom of a Christian* is an eloquent account of the nature of Christian faith and life. Since these selections are included in this volume and since we shall delineate Luther's thought in another section, the contents of these writings will not be summarized here. But by the end of the year 1520, on the eve of the Imperial Diet of Worms, Luther's newly won theological views had been fully expressed and the implications drawn for the life of the Church. From here on, the emergence of a Reformation church was inevitable.

We have followed the main contours of Luther's life and development to the Diet of Worms. In the period immediately following the Diet, Luther was taken into protective custody at the Wartburg Castle in order to protect his life from attack by the papal proponents. In this enforced isolation, he began the translation of the Scriptures into German. Meanwhile, in Wittenberg, the Reformation reorganization of the liturgy and

<sup>6</sup> *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), volume 32, pp. 112-13.



life of the local church was beginning to take place under the leadership of Luther's colleagues, Philip Melancthon and Gabriel Zwilling. But from the neighboring town of Zwickau, self-styled prophets came to Wittenberg, claiming special revelations of the spirit over and above Scripture. When they appeared to succeed in winning some to a radical reorganization of the Church rather than its reformation, Luther cut short his exile and risked returning to Wittenberg (at first temporarily, then permanently) to take command of events.

For a general orientation, it is superfluous to chronicle the further events of Luther's career. In the ensuing years the reformer was engaged in preaching, teaching, writing, and dealing with innumerable problems and crises of church and state. His problems multiplied, as did his irascibility. There were protracted periods of illness, during which his literary productivity was prodigious. After the Diet of Worms and the stay at the Wartburg, Luther threw his energies not only into negating the pretensions and errors of the Roman See but also into the positive task of the reformation of the life and thought of the Church. From the preaching of the Word for the edification and education of the masses through the reformation of the liturgy and the organization of new patterns of church life, there would have been problems enough even in the normal course of things. One example will suffice. When Luther denied that monasticism was a higher calling than the other stations in men's lives, the foundation for monasticism collapsed in many sections of Germany, and the Reformation faced the problem of the rehabilitation of the lives of countless monks and nuns who were fleeing the monasteries, as well as the difficult task of reconceiving the whole understanding of Christian vocation. It is common knowledge that on one of these occasions, when several nuns had left the cloistered walls, Luther took to wife one of the nuns who apparently would settle for nothing less than Luther himself. Katharine von Bora, whom Luther came to love and cherish, was a woman of unusual ability, managing the large household and "hangers-on" who were always around her husband.

There were also problems occasioned by differences within the emerging Protestantism and by the close connection between religious and political aspirations. On the question of

baptism, Luther found himself between the Roman Catholic sacramental views, on the one side, and the Anabaptist conception of believer's baptism. For the latter, baptism expressed the faith in which believers already stood, and they therefore rejected infant baptism. On the Lord's Supper, Luther found himself between the Roman Catholic concept of transubstantiation (that at a point in the Mass the elements were transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ) and the Zwinglian concept of remembrance (that the rite of the Lord's Supper was a dramatic recalling of the meaning of life, death, and the resurrection of Christ). And in spite of numerous attempts to come to agreement on the Lord's Supper, as we shall see later, no final agreement was reached.

When the peasants interpreted the new freedom of the Christian man as favoring their own plight, and revolted, Luther showed himself at his worst. While sympathetic to their situation, his own judgment on theological and social grounds was that their action would open the world to anarchy and that constituted authority must therefore be supported at every point. Some of his most vindictive writings came out of this period. An example of Luther's more balanced viewpoint on authority, even if one should judge it mistaken, is his writing on *Secular Authority*, which has been included in this volume. Whatever Luther may or may not have been in controversy, his unmistakable achievement was his singlehanded recovery of the Gospel and the spelling out of its implications for the life and thought of the Church.

## II. *Luther's Reformation Affirmations*

It is not by accident that the slogans associated with the Reformation were "justification by faith" and "Scripture alone." The first points to the central Christian reality recovered by Luther, and the latter points to the source through which faith becomes a reality. In looking at the former we need to delineate more fully the meaning given by Luther to the words *righteousness, justification, grace, and faith*. The central meaning of the Reformation is usually expressed in the phrase "justification by grace through faith." That formula makes clear that the righteousness of God is seen most clearly in the



grace by which we are accounted right and justified before God. It also points to, but inadequately expresses, the notion of faith as the matrix of the appropriation of grace. Faith is nothing else but the lively apprehension of grace made known and received. It is the stance of the believer as a result of the grace which he has known and in which he trusts. Therefore, the phrase "through faith" is not to be understood as a means for apprehending grace but as the mode of living by and in the power of God's graciousness.<sup>7</sup>

It is particularly important to note the radical character of Luther's central concept. It ruled out every attempt to justify or acquit oneself before God. One was made acceptable or justified before God in faith, that is, in the lively apprehension of God's word of love and mercy. Before God, this alone was the ground of trust.

One can hardly overemphasize the emancipation which this discovery brought to Luther. He had not tried to justify himself before God simply on the basis of his deeds. He had tried to do so by that combination of trusting and living in accord with a sacramental system which allegedly guaranteed that a man could be righteous before God. His new discovery ended his religious attempt to justify himself before God in terms of the prescribed combination of sacraments and works. For this reason, Luther declared that even if the path of works were possible, he would not want to have to depend upon works before God, for that would be to depend on a broken reed, namely oneself. That possibility could only introduce uncertainty and be oppressive. For Luther, the joy and freedom of a Christian was that in faith he did not need to look to self but only to God for his destiny. From this it followed logically that the fundamental sin of man, that sin which is the foundation of all other sins, is man's attempt to justify himself, his unwillingness to accept that his future rests alone in the gratui-

<sup>7</sup> The phrase "justification by grace through faith" (cf. Ephesians 2:8) or "justification by faith" (Romans 5:1) is a slogan which points to the way in which Luther broke through the medieval development at a central point through a recovery of a certain Pauline understanding. In our day, it is better to speak of "grace" and "freedom," defining them, than to continue to use the term "justification." In that way, Luther's classical insight can more readily become our own.

tous act of God. It is man's unwillingness to let God be God for him.

Two questions immediately arise in this context. First, what is the origin of faith? Second, if works are of no avail before God, what is their place? Reared in the tradition of the Church, Luther himself never faced the question of the origin of faith as a movement from unbelief to belief, that is, from disbelieving in God's existence to believing in it in a meaningful way. But the distinction which Luther knew, the difference between believing in the mere existence of God and the lively apprehension of His reality in Christ, corresponds in our day to the difference between denying His existence and affirming a genuine encounter with Him. For Luther, as for many others in his time, the belief that there was a God without knowing that He was a God for oneself was tantamount to atheism, that is, to acting as if His existence made no difference. The question of faith and un-faith is the same then as now. The decisive transition rests on apprehending the incomprehensible, gratuitous mercy of God.

The transition from un-faith to faith occurs through the Word—usually the proclaimed Word—which is given and received in the miracle of faith. There is a strong element of discontinuity between the "before" and the "after" of the inception of faith, irrespective of whether the change is traumatic or gradual. The conditioning factors do not account for the new situation. This point is clearly made in *The Bondage of the Will*, the forceful reply to Erasmus which Luther considered to be his best book. (A selection from this work has been included in this volume.) By "the bondage of the will," Luther did not mean that man is incapable of making significant and meaningful decisions. Nor did he mean that man as man is a stone, beast, or rascal. But he did mean that there is no act or capacity of will by which the self can successfully will itself into an adequate and proper relation to God. In more contemporary language, man cannot by his own resolution and effort overcome his estrangement from God. In theological terms, it is this incapacity which previous generations, not without giving cause for considerable misunderstanding, called "the total depravity of man." It is the incapacity of the best of men at the crucial point of their existence.



Luther developed this point through his concept of the "all-working" character of God and of the notion of predestination. Because of the context in which he worked, both concepts were developed in deterministic categories. It is as if the argument was that if God determines all things, no one has any ground for self-defense or merit. It is partly because of this deterministic frame of reference, which was historically developed as a powerful source of confidence against the dark powers of fate and fortune, that *The Bondage of the Will* has not received the attention which it deserves. Since the problem of freedom as we know it today is a development subsequent to the Reformation, it is hard for us to grasp the context within which Luther was working. But the crucial theological point, as distinguished from its elaboration, was that predestination was a comfort to the believer. It was an affirmation on the part of the believer that God could be trusted, trusted even at the point where one's faith was weak and wavering. It was the confession that God could be trusted, that He had a sure and safe destiny for us. Predestination was confessed by those who, by a miracle which they could ascribe only to God, discovered themselves delivered from the incapacity of their wills and now living by God's grace and promise.

It is important to stress that faith here means, basically, not the decision to assent to a proposition, but a fundamental re-orientation and redirection of life. The life of faith is the mode of existence which finds its vital source and center in God's forgiving and renewing grace. This means further that faith includes a new possibility of decision. Decision itself is placed *within* the dynamics of a relationship of grace. It is not that grace is offered and then man decides whether or not to accept it. This would be man's last work, his last attempt to justify himself. Rather it is confessed that the mystery of God's act in all its priority incorporates and includes the redirection of man's capacity of decision. Another way of putting this is to say that faith includes infinitely more than the deciding capacity of man. Certainly without the inclusion of will and the voluntaristic aspects of man, faith is not fully faith for the mature man. But as a gift, faith cannot be reduced to rational and voluntaristic levels. Because Luther believed that the voluntaristic aspects were too prominent among those who in-

sisted upon believer's baptism, he continued to insist upon the baptism of infants and suggested the notion of "infantile faith." The latter term could hardly be elucidated; but it protected the mystery of God's initiating gift and act against those for whom voluntaristic and decisional aspects loomed prominent in any description of faith.

In faith, man stands before God in the light of grace. For him, even at his best, there is no other possibility. Hence, for Luther, good works are not determinative of one's relation to God; they follow from faith as day follows night, as good fruit comes from a good tree. Where there are no works, there is no faith; the seriousness and joy of belonging to God are not known. But the temptation of the believer is to look at the works which he does in faith and suddenly to reinstitute works and merit as a new form of slavery in the very citadel of the freedom of the Gospel. For Luther, the ethical rigor of the New Testament teachings and of the law should convince the Christian that he, too, is still sinner. Moreover, the very looking at one's works spoils them. Genuine works point to God, not to self. This is why Luther can declare that, apart from faith, all works are nothing but "truly wicked and damnable sins."<sup>8</sup> On the external, moral level, they may be better than other courses of action. But in terms of their total orientation, that is, in terms of one's status before God, they are of no effect. On that level, everything is a matter of relationship, a relationship into which man enters by virtue of God's unaccountable activity. Confronted by God, man cannot depend on a combination of works and faith, or faith and works, but only on faith not without works, or of faith active in love. The Christian is to live and to struggle, to be a Christ to his neighbor, and above all to trust God. Luther's powerful delineation of this motif is to be found in *The Freedom of a Christian*, which is included in this volume.

In the light of God's imputation of righteousness to man, he is totally a saint; aside from this, the actuality of his situation is that he is totally a sinner. He is at once saint and sinner. The recognition that man is still sinner is a description of his life before God. The sin in his position before God is reflected

<sup>8</sup> See p. 69.



in the sins of his life. But to look at the latter in isolation is to misunderstand the problem of sin. This would be an anthropological rather than a theological view and would obscure the fundamental issue, man's trust or lack of trust before God.

The Scriptural commandments and teachings disclose man's lack of an adequate relation to God, but also serve to give direction to his responsibilities. The negative and positive functions of the law, as well as the way in which faith transcends every aspect of law with respect to man's ultimate destiny, are most graphically delineated in Luther's 1531 lectures on Galatians, selections from which are included in this volume.

We have stated that the second slogan associated with the Reformation is "Scripture alone." It means that the sole source of authority for the Christian and for the Church is derived from Scripture. As a slogan, it is to be understood in the context of the medieval world, where, in spite of divergent interpretations, the Church was nevertheless considered the rightful interpreter of Scripture. In the more extreme forms of the medieval view, it was held that revelations were vouchsafed to the Church apart from Scripture. It is in this context that Luther insisted upon the sole authority of Scripture. But his position of insisting on Scripture is not to be understood in any literal or fundamentalist sense. While Luther, as a sixteenth-century figure, would not have challenged the literal accuracy of the Bible, the latter was not an item of concern. The Scripture was significant in the light of that to which it witnessed, namely Christ, and because by the power of the Spirit, Scripture became the agent through which faith was born and nourished. Scripture was the Word of God because through it the word of the living God became known to men in all its dimensions. So much, in fact, was this the case for Luther that he believed that Scripture itself was to be interpreted in the light of its center, Christ. This is why he did not consider all books of the Bible to be of equal value. As an indication of Luther's manner of interpreting Scripture, we have included several of his prefaces to Biblical books.

It was not easy for Luther to insist upon this particular interpretation of Scripture in face of the claims of both papacy and councils. Nevertheless, Luther's historical work showed

him that there was merit in his interpretation and that it could be maintained that the Church had made the Scripture captive to its own concerns. Luther's use of the term "right reason," alongside of or in connection with Scripture—in controversy both at Augsburg and at Worms—was not so much a call upon reason as a source of faith (a view which he found obnoxious), as it was a demand for sensible interpretation of Scripture against the presumptuous claims of the Church. Luther too believed that the Scripture needed to be interpreted. This he did extensively in his own preaching and teaching. But he also believed that, in the community of the Church, Scripture was its own interpreter. Such interpretation involved being grasped by the Biblical Word and the Spirit conjoined in such a way that one was laid hold of by more than what the text said. It was being grasped in one's depth, being redirected in one's total being, including heart and mind, by the living Word.

Luther's understanding of the Gospel dictated a conception of the Church different from that held in the medieval period. The Church was no longer fundamentally a sacramental agent; instead, it was the community of believers. The true Church, that is, the elect of God, was hidden in the visible Church. When Luther delineates the marks and characteristics of the Church, he refers to the visible community. He maintained that the Church exists where the Word is preached and the sacraments are duly administered. The Word of God may be apprehended anywhere in creation; but it is to be sought where God has made Himself manifest, that is, in preaching and in the sacraments. The worshiping community confesses its faith, hears the Word of judgment and, above all, of grace. In content, the Word preached and the Word in the Sacrament are not to be distinguished. They are two instituted forms addressed to man in the diversity and totality of his being. Hence, they belong together. According to Luther, the preaching of the Word is to be followed by the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and there is to be no administration of the sacrament without the preaching of the Word. The sacraments are essential; but they do not imply a special grace not imparted in the preached Word. One is to come to the sacrament as one comes also to the hearing of the Word, in

the expectation that the promise of God's presence in mercy will be fulfilled.

The sacrament of baptism implies incorporation into the Christian community, the dying unto self and the new life in Christ. It includes the gift and reality of faith unto life eternal. Luther frequently counseled distraught believers to remember the promises of God's presence made to them in the sacrament of baptism. In the midst of man's doubt and anxiety, his baptism, like predestination, was a comfort, a token, and a pledge of his safe destiny under God.

It is in the mode of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper that Luther's views set him in marked contrast to both the Roman Catholic and other Protestant traditions. Luther rejected the notion that the elements at a particular point in the Mass were transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ. But he maintained the view that believer and unbeliever alike masticated the actual body and blood of Christ in partaking of the elements of bread and wine. For Luther, Christ is present in the Supper not because at some point the priest as the agent of God is responsible for the transformation of the elements. Christ is present because God has promised to be present. Moreover, such presence for Luther meant total presence. For this reason, he insisted upon the notion of the bodily presence of Christ in the elements. For Luther, the designation "spiritual presence" did not sufficiently imply the full and total presence. But his conception of bodily presence did not imply spatial characteristics. For Luther it was not enough to say that in the Lord's Supper one remembered the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. He insisted upon the substantive meaning of "This is my body"; but he refused to become involved in discussions on the metaphysics of the "is."

Such an understanding of the sacraments presupposes that one receives them in faith. The sacrament is neither pleasing to God nor efficacious apart from faith. But it is not faith which makes the sacrament. A sacrament is instituted of God as a visible sign to which a promise is connected for the one who comes in faith. The sacrament therefore is more than faith; yet it is not a sacrament without faith.

Luther wrote extensively on the sacraments. Moreover, he touched upon them throughout his writings, and for this rea-



RELIGION

The development of Martin Luther's thought was both symptom and moving force in the transformation of the Middle Ages into the modern world. Geographical discovery, an emerging scientific tradition, and a climate of social change had splintered the unity of medieval Christian culture, and these changes provided the background for Luther's theological challenge. His new apprehension of Scripture and fresh understanding of man's relation to God demanded a break with the Church as then constituted and released the powerful impulses that carried the Reformation.

Luther's vigorous, colorful language still retains the excitement it had for thousands of his contemporaries. In this volume, Dr. Dillenberger has made a representative selection from Luther's extensive writings, and has also provided the reader with a lucid introduction to his thought.

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