

UURAS SAARNIVAARA

LUTHER DISCOVERS THE GOSPEL

New Light upon Luther's Way from
Medieval Catholicism to Evangelical Faith

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Preface

WHEN the Protestant world in 1883 celebrated the quadricentennial of the birth of Martin Luther, the great Reformer, a new interest was aroused in the study of his life and teachings. This interest received a new impetus from the crushing defeat brought by the First World War to the optimistic dreams of the "liberal" theology and culture. Men felt that they needed a more vital Christianity and a deeper theology than the anemic one which had been prevalent up to the great war. This seemed to be offered by the great Reformer, who had found a way to the fountains of divine grace and life and who had rediscovered the Gospel, which helps men to be reconciled with God and to come into a living experience of fellowship with Him.

The revitalized Luther research, which was now growing into a "Luther renaissance," was not satisfied with studying the teachings of the Reformer. It felt that its first task was to give answer to the question: How did Luther himself find a way to a fellowship with God and to an evangelical faith? It was convinced that his teaching of the way of salvation could be rightly understood only in the light of his own struggles and experiences. An intense study was therefore focused on the early life of Luther and on his way to the evangelistic faith. More prominent scholars studied this question, and more studies were published on it than on any other topic in the field of Luther research.

It was, however, unfortunate that many of the men who tried to trace the path of the Reformer from the Roman Catholic to an evangelical faith had received their theological schooling in the "liberal" tradition of the pre-war theology. The result was very strange indeed: These students of Luther came to the conclusion that Luther's early teaching of justification, which was somewhat related to the ideas of the prevalent liberal theology, was his real

teaching and that he himself did not remember correctly his own struggles and his path to the light of the Gospel. He made gross mistakes — these theologians said — in relating his own way and the decisive turning points of it. Only now his way to the evangelical faith and the doctrine he taught was rightly understood.

Some theologians doubted these results, and no wonder. It is hard to believe that a man like Luther could have given such a wrong picture of the great turning points of his spiritual pilgrimage.

The present writer became aware of the unreliability of the prevalent "results" of recent Luther research while making an investigation into the issue in preparing a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. The present volume is an outcome of this investigation. It tries to show what was Luther's path to a living fellowship with God and to a participation in the grace through which he gained the joyful assurance that he was acceptable to God. The author is confident that his interpretation is more reliable than the prevalent one because it respects Luther's own statements on the matter and takes into account all the other documents and facts which throw light on the issue.

The author feels himself under obligation to express his gratitude to Professor Wilhelm Pauck, his adviser, for valuable guidance and constructive criticism during the course of the work. Professors William Arndt and Theodore Graebner of Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., have also read the manuscript. The author wishes to express his appreciation for their co-operation and kind appraisal of the work. He also wishes to express his sincere thanks to Professor Joseph Sittler of the Chicago Theological Seminary and Rev. Walter J. Kukkonen of Superior, Wis., for their help in preparing the English text of the book.

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UURAS SAARNIVAARA

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Introduction

WHEN Luther was seeking a way to peace with God and to an assurance of salvation, he had to find a solution to the greatest issue of life and death in man's personal relation to God: How can man, cut off from God by his sins and guilt, become acceptable to Him and enter into a living personal fellowship with Him? In Luther's life this quest for salvation was made up of two subissues: first, how could he find peace for his conscience through the forgiveness of sins? — second, how could he become justified or righteous in the sight of the Holy One? As we shall see, Luther did not face these two sides, or aspects, at the same time. There was an interval of several years between the two crises of his life in which he found a solution to each of them.

In order to understand the young Luther's struggles in his search for a solution of these problems, we have to recall the three interpretations of the way to righteousness which were offered to him. The term "justified" or "righteous" were used from Old Testament times to signify the state in which man is acceptable to God, to live in fellowship with Him.

First of all, Luther met the view, common to the religious people of all times, that God looks with favor upon those who have done their best to obey His Law. He rewards good deeds and punishes evil deeds. In theological terminology this is called the "active" view of justification, because, according to it, man is acceptable to God if he is just in his activity, that is, if his behavior and walk conforms to the demands of the divine Law.

Secondly, Luther learned to know the official teaching of the Roman Church, according to which man is justified by being healed from his sin-sickness and corruption so that he is able to love God

and his fellow men and thus to fulfill the Law. He becomes acceptable to God, or righteous in His sight, by this grace-wrought renewal *and* the ensuing righteous activity, or good works. Thus, man is both "passive" and "active" in justification: he receives the healing and renewing grace as a gift of God, that is, "passively," but he is "active" in doing good works by which he merits eternal life. This healing of sin-sickness does not take place in a moment, and time is needed for doing the good works by which eternal life is merited. Therefore justification is a gradual process of becoming righteous through a co-operation between divine grace and the efforts of man. God forgives what is lacking in man's righteousness, not imputing his remaining weaknesses and sins for guilt. — The justifying and forgiving grace is poured, or infused, into the soul of man in the sacraments, and it empowers him to merit eternal bliss through good works.

The third way to righteousness was taught by the Apostle Paul and other New Testament writers. According to it man is justified through faith, by the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. The man whose sins are pardoned and to whom God does not impute sin is righteous in His sight for the sake of the blood and the atoning sacrifice of Christ, in which he puts his trust in faith (Rom. 3:23-25; 5:3-6; Heb. 10:14). The justifying faith is a living faith, through which man lives in communion with God and bears good fruits in love and obedience. Christ dwells through faith in the believer's heart, and, constrained by the love of Christ, he no longer lives to himself, but to Him who has loved him and given Himself for him. He is a new creature, created in Christ Jesus for good works. But these good works are only the fruit, not the foundation of justification (2 Cor. 5:15; Eph. 2:8-10; Gal. 2:20; 5:6; etc.). In this kind of justification man is wholly "passive": as an unmerited gift he receives the forgiveness of sins; and he is reckoned righteous, righteousness is imputed to him, not on the grounds of anything that is in him, but for the sake of Christ's finished work alone.

Until the period of recent Luther research Protestant theology

unanimously regarded Luther's doctrine of justification as belonging to the Pauline type. It was the discovery of this way to righteousness before God that made him the Reformer. But in recent times the renowned Luther scholar Karl Holl, and to some extent also his students, tried to prove that Luther's teaching of justification was of the second type, although in an improved and purified form, and that he found his way to peace with God in the way shown by this doctrine. One's conception of Luther's path to the evangelical faith depends, as we shall see, on the stand he takes on this primary issue. More than that, the solution of this problem involves and affects deeply his whole understanding of sinful man's way to God and of the Christian life in general.

Consequently, we have a twofold task in our study: first, to ascertain the contents of Luther's mature teaching of justification and his discovery of the Gospel, and second, to trace his own way to the peace of conscience and to the rediscovery of the Gospel, and the dates of these events. Luther himself states several times that particularly Augustine (bishop of Hippo, died 430 A. D.), Johann von Staupitz (general vicar, or superintendent, of the Augustinian Friars in Germany, to whom Luther belonged), and the Scriptures gave him help and guidance in his search for truth and peace. Our study will, therefore, take place in the form of an investigation of the influences of these three factors on his spiritual and theological development.

*Augustine's Conception of the Sinner's
Salvation and Its Relation to
Luther's Mature Teaching*

AUGUSTINE ON THE JUSTIFICATION OF A SINNER

AUGUSTINE deals with the justification of a sinner, for the most part, in those writings which he produced in his struggle against the Pelagian and semi-Pelagian heresies. It was mainly by these writings of the Bishop of Hippo that Luther was influenced in the time he was seeking for the truth.

What was the conception of the salvation of a sinner Luther found in these writings?

According to Augustine man's true relationship to God is one of humble subjection and trust. In the fall into sin, however, man set himself against God, arrogantly desiring to be his own lord and master. This rebellion so corrupted his nature that man no longer seeks his "good" — his joy and happiness — in God, but rather in created things. Consequently he has no freedom of will in spiritual matters, but his spirit is in bondage to his flesh, ignorance darkens his soul, and death hounds him. All because of sin.¹

The Law of God demands willing and spontaneous obedience. Man, however, is corrupt in just this respect that he is unwilling and unable to fulfill this demand. The Law reveals to him his weakness, his sinfulness, and the sickness of his will. When such a man hears the good news of the grace of God, a hunger and thirst for salvation are created in him. He begins to pray for pardon and the renewing grace which will enable him to love God and his neighbor.

God bestows this grace upon man in Baptism. Those who have fallen from baptismal grace are restored through repentance (conversion). In this manner man has his ailing nature and will cured and is enabled to seek his "good" in God and to obey His Commandments. More than the mere example of Christ is necessary. The divine Spirit must recreate the heart of man in order to free his will. The Spirit "inspires us with a good desire which replaces the evil lust (in other words, sheds abroad love in our hearts)."²

"The human will is divinely aided in the pursuit of righteousness, so that . . . man receives the Holy Spirit, by whose gift there springs up in his mind even in the present state a delight in and a love for that supreme and unchangeable good which is God."³

"It is the Spirit of grace that does it, in order to restore in us the image of God in which we are created. All sin, indeed, is contrary to nature, and it is grace that heals it."⁴

In this way "nature is repaired by grace."⁵ By inspiring in us a good will and acceptable activity, the life-giving Spirit writes the Law of God in our hearts.⁶

Augustine teaches that all love is acquisitive. Directed downward, to the created things of the world, it is a sinful love, *cupiditas*, or concupiscence. But when it is directed upward, to seek its "good" in God, it is a Christian love, *caritas* (charity). Man, as created by God, possessed charity, but in the Fall his desires and strivings, that is, his love, took a turn downward. It began to seek its "good" in the creature world. Only the renewing grace of God can restore the original and proper direction to man's desire and striving.

Staupitz and Luther

LUTHER'S TESTIMONIES CONCERNING STAUPITZ

IN 1518 Luther added to his book on indulgences (*Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentium virtute*) a letter of dedication to his friend and superior Johann von Staupitz. This letter throws much light upon the development of Luther in the question of repentance. We shall quote the most significant portion of its text.⁴³

"I remember, Reverend Father, that in one of your delightful and wholesome talks, by which the Lord Jesus usually gives me wonderful comfort, mention was made of the word 'repentance' (*poenitentia*). I received your word as coming from Heaven when you said that repentance is not genuine unless it begins with a love of righteousness and God (*ab amore iustitiae et Dei incipit*), and that what the torturers consider to be the end and consummation of repentance is rather its beginning (*esse potius principium poenitentiae, quod illis finis et consummatio censetur*).

"This your word fixed itself in me like a sharp arrow of the mighty. At once I began to compare it with the Scripture texts on repentance. And, behold, I had a most pleasant surprise! Statements from all sides began to sound forth in harmony and, plainly smiling, to gather around this dictum, so that the word 'repentance' which had been the most bitter term in the whole Bible to me, although with great zeal I pretended even before God and tried

Luther's Discovery in the Tower

LUTHER'S OWN TESTIMONIES

IN the *Preface* to the Wittenberg edition of his works, which he wrote in 1545, Luther relates some of the most decisive events of his early life. Having discussed the first incidents in his struggle against indulgences, which began with posting the Ninety-Five Theses on October 31, 1517, Luther continued:

“And here you see in my own case how difficult it is to be freed from errors which have become established, constant usage, have become second nature. . . . At that time I had already for seven years read and taught the Holy Scriptures with great diligence both privately and publicly. I knew most of the Scriptures by heart and, furthermore, had eaten the first fruits of the knowledge of, and faith in, Christ, namely, that we are justified not by works, but by faith in Christ (*primitias cognitionis et fidei Christi hauseram, scilicet, non operibus, sed fide Christi nos iustos et salvos fieri*). Finally – and of that I now speak – I already defended publicly the opinion that the Pope is not the head of the Church by divine right. . . .”⁸⁷

Subsequently Luther writes of his negotiations with Karl von Miltitz (January, 1519), his disputation with Johann Eck at Leipzig (end of June and beginning of July, 1519), and the miserable death of Tetzel in the same year. He then goes on to say:

Summary and Conclusion

AFTER his entrance into the monastery, Luther experienced two great crises. The first was his conversion, or his coming to a personal faith in the forgiveness of sins in Christ. This occurred in the year 1512, probably toward the end of October or in November. The central issue in this crisis was how to attain the certainty of the forgiveness of God, that is, how to be assured that God truly forgave his sins when absolution was proclaimed to him. His false conception of repentance, absolution, and predestination were great obstacles in his path at this point. A further stumbling block was the traditional unevangelical form of absolution which was in use in the monastic order. Through the counsels of Staupitz, Luther gained the right understanding of these questions, and so was able to appropriate the assurance of forgiveness of sins pronounced by Staupitz. And so "the light of the Gospel began to shine" into his heart, and he "ate the first fruits of faith and the knowledge of Christ," as he later related. Inseparably associated with the influence of Staupitz was that of Augustine, Bernhard, and Mysticism. Staupitz himself was greatly influenced by these.

Though Luther possessed a saving faith already in 1512, his conception of justification was not that of his mature period. He understood justification as a gradual process of religious and moral renewal, or healing of the human nature from the corruption of sin. Non-imputation of sins, that is, non-reckoning of sins that remain, for the sake of Christ, was but a temporary supplement to this process of healing. True, Luther at times said, following Augustine, that this non-imputation formed the greater portion of justification, since the actual righteousness of the believer was a mere beginning in this earthly life.

This time, between the late fall of 1512 and the summer of 1518,