

TYRANNY AND RESISTANCE

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THE MAGDEBURG CONFESSION
AND THE LUTHERAN TRADITION

DAVID M. WHITFORD

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To Laurel and Abigail

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FOREWORD

David Whitford's study addresses the perennial cliché that Martin Luther was a "toady of the princes" whose theological ethics set in motion a German-specific pathos of obedience that inevitably led to Christian passivity before National Socialism. Such nonsense has had an incredibly long shelf life, stretching from Thomas Müntzer's shrill rhetoric and the failed apocalyptic convictions of the Peasants' War through Ernst Troeltsch's arguments that Luther split public and personal morality, thus disposing Lutheranism toward political absolutism. Within academe, Troeltsch's position has been perpetuated from Reinhold Niebuhr through Max Stackhouse. These charges have been popularized—in the worst sense of the term—by William Shirer's nearly omnipresent *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and the recent "biography" of Luther by Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death*.

Whitford debunks this received tradition that pictures Luther as the poster child for quietism at best and fascism at worst. He does so by solid historical-theological analysis of the pertinent Luther writings and an extended discussion of their influence on the seminal expression of theologically grounded resistance to authority—*The Magdeburg Confession* of 1550. This *Confession* by the Lutherans of Magdeburg, taken up by their followers who struggled to defend the freedom of the church against early German absolutism, was a significant influence on the subsequent theological-political resistance movements among Calvinists.

Whitford convincingly demonstrates both theologically and historically the direct connection between Luther's theology and *The Magdeburg Confession*. Both elements—the theological and the historical—of Whitford's argumentation are crucial. He recognizes that to focus only on Luther's Law-Gospel dialectic and the "two kingdoms" doctrine leaves the discussion on the level of abstraction, whereas to focus only on the historical development of political resistance fails to recognize the crucial significance of theology for politics. Whitford's recognition of the intimate relationship of theory and praxis is a salutary reminder of the importance of both to the contemporary life of the church. Without solid

theological foundation and direction, the church will tend to take on the mores of its historical-social context; without a confession of faith, the church will have little to say in a time of crisis. On the other hand, without the Gospel-provided courage “to sin boldly,” the message will remain under a bushel. It was, therefore, no accident that, when faced by National Socialism, church leaders of resistance turned to their 16th-century roots in the Reformation and *The Magdeburg Confession*. The outstanding example of this awareness of the tradition was Hans Christoph von Hase, whose retrieval of “in casu confessionis” (“In the situation in which a confession is required or which causes scandal, nothing is an indifferent matter.”) was so significant to his cousin and confidant, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The scandal to the Confessing Church was, of course, the National Socialist co-optation of the church with the attendant subversion of the Gospel and the persecution of Jews.

Whitford’s study does not, of course, provide a road map for traversing current and future socio-political issues and crises, but it does remind us that Luther’s dialectic of Law and Gospel, as well as the Confessions of the Reformation, provide an invaluable compass for the churches’ navigation in troubled waters.

—Carter Lindberg
Boston University

PREFACE

We are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants; thanks to them, we see farther than they. Busying ourselves with the treatises written by the ancients, we take their choice thoughts, buried by age and human neglect, and we raise them, as it were from death to renewed life.—Peter of Blois (d. 1212)

When I began the search for a diamond engagement ring, I had never heard of the four C's or why they mattered. I had an amount I could spend and thought that was all that mattered. My first salesman set me straight.

There are four C's to diamonds, and they make all the difference: cut, clarity, color, and carat. Although not a C, facets make a big difference as well: The more facets, the more light refraction and the prettier—and costlier—the ring. Turning the ring, looking at different facets, is what makes a diamond sparkle. Without facets, all you have is a rock.

In this regard, people are like diamonds. If you look at only one facet of a person's life, you miss the depth, the complexity, the sparkle. For too long, people have looked at Luther's thought on political involvement from only one angle: Luther has been accused of fostering a quietist response to the government that is politically conservative at best and reactionary at worst. In this book, I examine Luther from another angle.

Luther could and, in fact, did engender an ethic of political involvement. Describing this facet of Luther gives needed depth and color to a portrait that is often drawn in sharp lines of black and white.

To demonstrate that the portrait of Luther as a Quietist (i.e., one who believes that the government must always be obeyed, whether it is right or wrong) is reductionary at best, we must examine the relationship between Luther's understanding of "what makes a Christian" (his phrase) and his view of Christian political involvement. In Luther, there is a connection between Christian identity and community action. Although his discussion is often focused on particular political or social situations, his understanding of the Christian as a political actor is the underlying motif guiding his thought.

This conclusion requires us to examine the impact of Luther's theology of the cross on his understanding of the individual as a Christian and of that person's political involvement. Then, in reference to *The Magdeburg Confession*, we will highlight the striking degree to which the authors of that work echo and reflect Luther's central concerns and thought.

The Reformation era in Germany was a time of definition and description. Luther and his followers had to define themselves not only negatively (i.e., in opposition to Rome), but also positively (i.e., highlighting what they stood for). Luther and his followers also had to defend themselves and their positions. Were they heretics? Were they insane? Were they just troublemakers? This work of definition, description, and defense was a process.

Here we shall chart one aspect of the process of description and defense within Lutheran circles: the right to resist constituted authority by lesser magistrates. I do not argue that their defense of resistance theology was the only concern for the Lutheran reformers. No one would deny that social and political contexts affected both Luther and the Magdeburg pastors. However, in each case they wrote not as political or social commentators, they wrote as pastors. Thus the doctrines they espouse and the justifications given to support those doctrines are integral to a proper understanding of their thought and actions. The choice to focus on the intellectual and theological motifs is a conscious decision because doctrine mattered in their lives.

This is not to say that there weren't other motives that helped sway people toward Luther. However, even then doctrine was decisive. In most cases, there were easier and more prudent courses of action one could follow to assure one's goals.¹ Politically speaking, siding with Luther was never a sure bet. These facts focus our attention on the descriptions and definitions that Luther and the pastors of Magdeburg used to bolster their position that evangelical preaching must be defended and that resisting those who sought to suppress it was allowable (even honorable).

A NOTE ON SOURCES AND TRANSLATIONS

The basic source for this study is the primary political writings of Luther.² Thus, attention focuses on his "Letter to the Princes of Saxony concerning the Rebellious Spirit," the *Torgau Declaration*, many of the letters to individual noblemen, and such major tracts as *Temporal Authority* and *Dr. Martin Luther's Warning to His Dear German People*. I also consulted Luther's commentaries and sermons on significant scriptural texts that deal with political themes.

The political resistance of the city of Magdeburg in 1550 represents a continuation—a concrete application—of Luther’s thought. To advance this hypothesis, I shall undertake a complete and systematic exegesis of the Magdeburg *Bekentnis*. To date neither a critical edition nor the original texts of the Magdeburg *Bekentnis* exist. The earliest extant German edition is contained in a collection of writings associated with the German Wars of Charles V, published in 1615. The Latin text, *Si, Confessio et Apologia Pastorum et reliquorum Ministrorum Ecclesiae*, is published in *Bibliographie Reconditae* (Amsterdam: P. Schippers, 1966), no. 370. No critical or authoritative English translations of the work have been published. I have made use of Dr. A. M. Stewart’s unpublished translation, but I have felt free to edit it to reflect the original more accurately. The German edition of the text is 129 pages. For purposes of readability and style, the spelling and punctuation of early modern texts (e.g., *Bekentnis* instead of *Bekentnis*) has been modernized, except when quoting directly from the original. Whenever practical, I have used Scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Finally, the companions along the way make the road to any significant achievement easier. There are so many who have made this journey worth the trip. Dr. Carter Lindberg taught me not only about scholarship, but also about life and hope. When I began course work at Boston University, I did not intend to write on Luther. I am a United Methodist preacher’s kid who went to Presbyterian Seminary, so maybe Wesley or even Calvin. But Luther?

Carter’s appreciation for Luther is infectious, though, and after one course on Luther with him, I was hooked. I thank Carter for teaching me how to read Luther with an appreciative, yet critical, eye. Professors David Hempton, Barbara Diefendorf, and John Clayton helped me to tighten the arguments in this work through their questions and critiques. I thank them for an informative and not too horrific defense.

To Kenneth Wagener and the people at Concordia Publishing House I owe a great debt of gratitude. Ken’s enthusiasm for this work, his patience in guiding it through the maze that is modern publishing, and his forbearance of my many phone calls and e-mails is greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank Dr. Douglas Johnson, chairperson of the Religion and Philosophy Department at Claflin, for making my transition from parish life to academic life a joy. Finally, I owe a debt of thanks to Dr. Vermelle

Johnson (vice president of Academic Affairs) and Dr. Henry Tisdale (president of Claflin) for giving me the opportunity to be a part of the Claflin family. I have been graciously welcomed and constantly encouraged.

I am grateful to Professor Alasdair Stewart for his permission to use and edit as I saw fit his translation of *The Magdeburg Confession*. Alasdair has proven to be a faithful friend and a friendly critic. The University of South Carolina Thomas Cooper Library's John Osman Collection of Braun and Hogenberg City Views has graciously allowed me to use their copy of the *City of Magdeburg*. The portrait of Martin Luther is from the Richard Kessler Reformation Collection at Emory University's Pitt Theological Library. I appreciate their permission to include it and the work that they do on behalf of Reformation studies. The rest of the images are from Max Geisberg's *German Single Leaf Woodcuts: 1500–1550* and appear courtesy of Hacker Art Books, Inc., New York.

My parents (Rev. Dr. Charles and Ann Whitford) provided me with an environment in which to grow that nurtured the heart and the mind. In my home growing up there were three larger-than-life figures who animated my father's stories of ethics, discipleship, and responsibility (while this may seem like strange dinner table topics to some, I think most preacher's kids will understand). They were: Martin Luther King Jr., Robert F. Kennedy, and, most important, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

I was raised on the stories of the American civil rights movement, on the stories of the fight for justice, and on the admirable story of Bonhoeffer's commitment to Christ and his heroic opposition to Hitler. I owe much of my enthusiasm for theology and politics to my parents. To my mind, there is no one more interesting in both aspects than Luther. More directly, my father read every page of this work more than once. I am thankful for his encouragement and his support. He is, in part, responsible for making this work more readable; all errors remain mine.

But most important are Laurel and Abigail. Without the two of them, I could not do what I do. Laurel constantly encourages me in all that I do. I thank God each and every day for the gift of her love and her patience with me as I finished this work. Abigail fills my life with wonder and awe. She reminds me that life is a gift to be treasured. She also reminds me that playing outside is sometimes the most important thing to do in the world. Most fittingly, then, this book is dedicated to them.

—David Whitford
Orangeburg, South Carolina
Lent 2000

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND POLITICAL IDENTITY

In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself for an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; *the Word did everything*.—Martin Luther, *First Invocavit Sermon* (9 March 1522) (*emphasis added*)

PERSONAL IDENTITY IN RELATION TO WORLD-BUILDING

Most families have stories that they tell to their newest members to teach them what it means to be part of the family. The shared stories weave the tapestries of life together; children or new friends are “storied” into families. In his magisterial volume on the Reformation, Carter Lindberg intimately ties memory to personal identity and history to communal identity.¹

A central tenet of this book is that our sense of self influences how we live in the community. The stories that we have been taught and the lessons that we have learned affect our sense of self and influence how we act in the public square. Even more, religion constructs or shapes large portions of our experience. In much the same way that language shapes our experience of reality, religion, too, shapes our experience of what is real.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was one of the first to combine the study of religion and sociology. Durkheim noted that religion is “eminently social.” Beyond the intuitively obvious—that religion has a social

or communal aspect—Durkheim meant that religion helps to create and give cohesion to the social world.² Religious beliefs are the creations of the “collective effervescence” (or collective thought). Religion becomes ritualized around a totem as part of the separation of reality into two arenas: the sacred and the profane. These totems become manifestations of the collective’s sacred. They become rallying signs. Religion, thus, attaches us to our community. It is what binds the community together.

Building on the work of Durkheim and others, Peter Berger, in his book *The Sacred Canopy*, makes the most direct connection between religion and world-building. We are born, Berger argues, unfinished.³ To survive we must create social structures, we must create a world to live in. Religion plays a significant role in this process of world-building. It anchors that world. He writes:

It can thus be said that religion has played a strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building. Religion implies the farthest reach of man’s self-externalization, of his infusion of reality with his own meanings.⁴

The import of this theory of world-building is significant. This is especially true of the early Modern Era, during which religious conviction shaped large portions of people’s entire lives.

Luther’s theories on Christian identity and political discourse are studied not only to learn about the underlying structure of his theology in general, his theological presuppositions are studied, and should be studied, to ascertain how his theology supports or helps to create a particular worldview. In other words, how does Luther’s specific understanding of Christian anthropology affect how a Christian ought to act in the public square? How does his understanding of Christian world-building differ from other answers to similar questions?

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN LUTHER

THE SEARCH FOR A GRACIOUS GOD

First and foremost, Martin Luther was a pastor. His need to proclaim the Word of God always affected his theological formulations and led him to address the social, political, and cultural context of his hearers.

An overarching crisis of meaning or value marked the late medieval period. By the middle of the 14th century, the bubonic plague had reached its height, leaving large areas desolate. Famine nearly always follows both

wars and plagues, and this era was no exception. Urbanization and social dislocation only added more misery to the mix. One's physical existence was a torment day to day. But above the heads of the people hung a more terrible torment—eternal damnation.

The issue for Luther, then, was one of salvation. In many ways, Luther reflected the angst of his age. Sitting on the cusp of modernity, yet still closely tied to the medieval world, Luther's search for a gracious God was affected not only by the crises of the time, but also by the theological milieu in which he was raised and educated.⁵

After primary education in Magdeburg and Eisenach, Luther entered the University of Erfurt in 1501. Between 1501 and 1505, Luther studied the basic course for the master of arts degree that included grammar, logic, rhetoric, and metaphysics. The principal role that William of Ockham's theology and metaphysics held in Erfurt's curriculum was significant for Luther's theological development. Ockham challenged many of the theological assumptions developed during the preceding centuries.

Until the acid of anxiety and crisis ate away the foundations, the Christian world rested securely on the Being of God as expounded by Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). Thomas reflected both the maturity and pinnacle of scholasticism, which represented a way of thinking rather than a particular theory. Thomistic scholasticism was ordered, rational, and synthetic. The way Thomas beautifully synthesized the witness of Scripture, the tradition of the church, and the philosophy of Aristotle in syllogisms is an example of the embodiment of scholasticism in Thomas.

Grounding all of life in the mind of God, Thomas placed the world in an understandable and reassuring context. In the hierarchy of Being that establishes justice, the church was understood as the connection between the secular and divine. However, as the crises of the late Middle Ages increased, this reassurance began to erode.

Recognizing the shortcomings of Thomas's system, William of Ockham cut away most of the ontological grounding of existence. In its place, Ockham posited revelation and covenant. The world does not need to be grounded in some artificial, unknowable ladder of Being. Instead, one must rely on God's faithfulness. We are contingent upon God alone.

Without the assurance of God's covenant of grace, this contingency would be terrible and unbearable. In terms of God's absolute power (*potentia absoluta*), God can do anything. He can make a lie the truth; he can make adultery a virtue and monogamy a vice. The only limit to this power is consistency—God cannot contradict his own essence. To live in

a world ordered by whim would be terrible; one would never know if one was acting justly or unjustly. However, God has decided on a particular way of acting (*potentia ordinata*). God has covenanted with creation and committed himself to a particular way of acting.

While rejecting some of Thomas, Ockham did not reject the entire scholastic project. He, too, synthesized and depended heavily on Aristotle. This dependence becomes significant in the covenantal piety of justification. The fundamental question of justification is where does one find fellowship with God, i.e., how does one know one is accepted by God? The logic of Aristotle taught Thomas and Ockham that “like is known by like.” Thus, union or fellowship with God must take place on God’s level. How can persons attain this ascent to God? Practice.

All people are born, it was argued, with potential. Although all creation suffers under the condemnation of the fall of Adam and Eve, there remains a divine spark of potentiality, a *syntersis*. This potential must be actualized; it must be habituated. Habituation is important for both Thomas and Ockham; however, Ockham slightly modified Thomas, and that modification had important implications in Luther’s search for a gracious God.

From Thomas’s perspective, the divine spark is infused with God’s grace, giving one the power to be contrite (*contritio*) and cooperate with God. This cooperation with God’s grace merits God’s reward (*meritum de condign*). However, Ockham asked an important question: If the process begins with God’s infusion of grace, can it truly merit anything? His answer was a resounding no! Therefore, you should do the best *you* can. Doing your best, minimal as it is, will merit (*meritum de congruo*) an infusion of grace: *facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam* (God will not deny his grace to anyone who does what lies within him). Doing one’s best meant rejecting evil and doing good.

Despite being plagued by temptations or deep-seated angst (*Anfechtungen*),⁶ Luther threw himself into the work of doing good and rejecting evil. On July 17, 1505, Luther joined the Augustinian monastery of Erfurt.⁷ The rigors of monastic life, he believed, would assuage his anxiety. The hardships would cleanse him from evil, and the regimen would open him up to doing good works.⁸

Yet the rigors proved empty and the regimen fruitless. Luther remained as convinced as ever that he was a miserable worm. No matter what his confessor and advisor, Johann von Staupitz, advised, nothing seemed to work. Luther was left unconvinced. Each avenue of hope only

provided another road to despair. Confession would sooth the soul with the hope of absolution, but not for Luther. He was obsessed with whether he had met the necessary threshold of contrition. Yes, he was contrite, but was he contrite enough? Concerning this period in his life, Luther later wrote:

When I was a monk, I made great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins, but always with prior contrition; I went to confession frequently, and I performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: "You could have done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession."⁹

Nothing seemed to work—not the sacraments, not the saints, not the mystics. Assurance eluded Luther. Hope was nowhere to be found. Out of frustration one day, Staupitz told Luther, "Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive—parricide, blasphemy, adultery—instead of all these peccadilloes."¹⁰

Staupitz pointed Luther to Christ. He told the young man to study the wounds of Christ, and in those wounds he might finally find his hope. Although any breakthrough still lay in the distant future, Staupitz had planted a seed that would eventually bear fruit in Luther's life and theology. Luther, himself, appreciated Staupitz's contribution:

If I didn't praise Staupitz, I should be a damnable, ungrateful, papistical ass . . . for he bore me in Christ. If Staupitz had not helped me out, I should have been swallowed up and left in hell.¹¹

Although the seed had been planted, the road remained dim, foreboding, and long.

The road took Luther to Wittenberg, first as a student and then (after a brief trip to Rome) as a professor of theology. In 1513, he began his first lectures in what would become his life's central academic work—the Old Testament. From 1513 to 1515, Luther lectured on the Psalms. It is in these lectures that we see the first fruits of the new spirit planted by Staupitz some eight to 10 years earlier. These lectures start Luther on the long road to "Damascus."¹²

Luther's choice of the Psalms is significant because in his day it was common to consider the Psalms as the poetic words of Christ. For Luther, Christ was the hermeneutical key that unlocked the meaning of

the Psalter. As early as the preface to his lectures, Luther states that the Psalms are a “foreword of Jesus Christ.”¹³

If Christ did indeed speak through the Psalms, then in the development of what would become Luther’s theology of the cross, Psalm 22 plays a pivotal and important role. Psalm 22 is a hymn of lament and anguish. In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew,¹⁴ Christ’s last words from the cross quote its first line: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹⁵ The import of this was critical for Luther. Christ himself cried out from the cross words of abandonment and angst. Christ himself suffered *Anfechtungen!* The question that then confronted Luther, and continues to confront Christians today, is how could this be? How could the Son of God suffer alienation? How could the perfect and sinless Christ be abandoned? The answer is found in the atonement.

Luther modifies slightly yet profoundly Thomas Aquinas’s reinterpretation of Anselm’s satisfaction theory of the atonement.¹⁶ In Anselm, sin is either punished or satisfaction is made. Aquinas combines the ancient ransom theory with Anselm’s and holds that satisfaction for sin is made in the punishment of Christ—thus the penal substitutionary theory. Luther, like nearly all theologians after Thomas, accepted this combination. However, in Thomas, Christ remains an innocent man.¹⁷ Luther modified this theory, noting that Christ, as humanity’s substitute, died on the cross a sinner.¹⁸

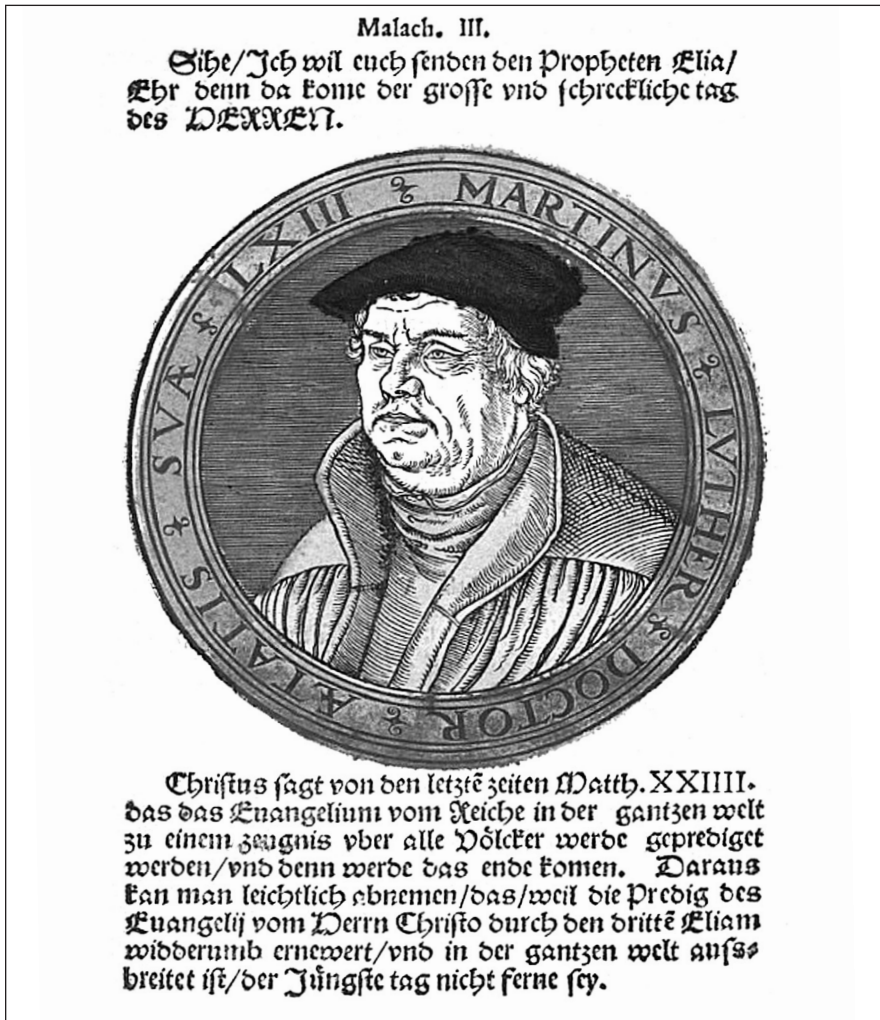
For years, Luther was haunted by an image of Christ sitting on a rainbow, judging creation with his “terrible swift sword.” Here in the lectures on the Psalms, a new picture comes into focus. As Bainton notes:

Where, then, is the judge, sitting on the rainbow and condemning sinners? He is still the judge. He must judge, as truth judges error and light darkness; but in judging he suffers with those whom he must condemn and feels with them subject to condemnation. The judge upon the rainbow has become the derelict upon the cross.¹⁹

The focus on Christ’s dereliction on the cross marks the beginning of Luther’s emerging theology of the cross. Luther looked at other major themes in the Psalms throughout his lectures; however, the emphasis remained on salvation and damnation. Here at last, it seems, Luther’s search for a gracious God begins to bear fruit. Christ is no longer wielding the sword of terror; instead, he is the suffering servant.

Yet the question of the appropriation of this graciousness to the sinner continued to plague Luther. God may indeed be gracious, but how do I, as a sinner, know God’s grace is applicable to me? Luther would finally find the answer to that question in the next two series of lectures he gave

in Wittenberg. From 1515 to 1517, he focused on Paul, and it was in Paul that Luther would discover the *sine qua non* of his life and his life's work: *sola gratia*—we are justified by grace through faith alone.



Cover of pamphlet published in Magdeburg in 1549, which calls Luther the “Third Elijah.” *Translation*: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5). Christ spoke concerning the last days in Matthew 24 that the “good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to the nations; and then the end come.” Therefore, it is easy to understand that because the preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ has been renewed and has been spread throughout the whole world by the Third Elijah that Judgment Day is not far off.

THEOLOGIA CRUCIS AND JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Man between God and the Devil

While Luther's *theologia crucis* certainly developed during these formative years, we must not underestimate the drama and importance of Luther's "tower" experience. Similar to the experience of the thunderstorm, the tower was a confirming and energizing moment in the life of Luther. In the tower, Luther discovered the righteousness of God, a gift, in Luther's words, of the Holy Spirit.²⁰

The tower discovery overturned much of what Luther had been taught. His experience undermined much of the theology and piety of the late medieval period. It obliterated a theology of glory and began the dramatic move to a theology of the cross. Heiko Oberman rightly notes the drama of the moment:

Must the trail of the Reformation be followed this far? There is a dignified way out: by cloaca Luther did not mean the toilet, but the study up in the tower above it. That, however, would be to miss the point of Luther's provocative statement. The cloaca is not just a privy, it is the most degrading place for man and the devil's favorite habitat. Medieval monks already knew this, but the Reformer knows even more now: it is right here that we have Christ, the mighty helper on our side. No spot is unholy for the Holy Ghost; this is the very place to express contempt for the adversary through trust in Christ crucified.²¹

The cloaca is a vivid representation of the revolution of the theology of the cross. God will not be placed in a box by mortal human beings. God is often revealed in the places one least expects to find him.

What was the revelation Luther discovered? In his "autobiography" written in 1545 (as the preface to his collected works in Latin), Luther writes:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" *There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith.* And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the Gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the scripture showed

itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy as, the work of God, that is, *what God does in us*, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.²²

Luther had not yet completely discovered “justification by faith alone,” but he had unearthed it from its tomb of false assurances and vacuous indulgences. Philip Watson likens its significance to Copernicus’s revolution. As much as Copernicus challenged contemporary thought regarding a geocentric world,²³ Martin Luther challenged the prevalent anthropocentric soteriology.²⁴ Instead of storehouses of merit, indulgences, habituation, and “doing what is within one,” God accepts the sinner despite the sin. Acceptance is based on who one is in Christ rather than what one does. Justification is bestowed rather than achieved. Justification is not based on human righteousness, but on God’s righteousness—revealed and confirmed in Christ.

In St. Paul, Luther finally found a word of hope and assurance; he discovered the graciousness of God. The discovery of God’s graciousness *pro me* (for me) revolutionized all aspects of Luther’s life and thought. From now on, Luther’s response to the trials of his life and the crises of the late medieval period was to be certain of God but never to be dependent on human society. A tautology of Luther’s theology becomes: One must always “let God be God.” This frees human beings to be human. We do not have to achieve salvation; rather, it is a gift to be received. Thus, salvation is the presupposition of the life of the Christian and not its goal. This belief engendered Luther’s rejection of indulgences and his movement to a *theologia crucis*.²⁵

For Luther, the *theologia crucis* meant a judgment against all preconceived notions of God. It meant that theology was *fides quaerens intellectum* and never the reverse.²⁶ This conclusion led Luther to reject Aristotle as theological prolegomena because it is never possible to begin with human wisdom and arrive at God.²⁷ The only way to God is in God’s own self-revelation. That step led Luther to become a theologian of the Word of God. *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum*²⁸

Luther’s theology of the Word can be summed up in the short phrase, “Scripture holds Christ like a cradle.” In his “Preface to the Old Testament,” Luther states that in Scripture

you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds. Simple and lowly

are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.²⁹

Luther's hermeneutic of the Word is a hermeneutic of Christ-centeredness. Because Luther is primarily concerned with proclaiming the testament of God's graciousness, he most clearly sets forth as the center of Scripture those texts that announce God's redemption of humanity.

This incarnational framework also undergirds Luther's understanding of preaching. Christ is the incarnate Word, the incarnation of proclamation. For the salvation of humanity it is more important to proclaim the Word than simply to read the Word. This is the idea that lies behind the reformation dictum, *fides ex auditu* (faith comes through hearing). When reading, the reader can remain separate from the words being read; there is a distance. This is far less possible in proclamation. In conversation it is very difficult to remain distant; when someone is speaking to you, it is difficult to ignore him or her. While one may look away, it is harder to "hear away."

For Luther, a proper theology of proclamation was not possible without the *theologia crucis*. Luther's theology of the Word of God affects both his anthropology and his political theology because it is based not in speculation or philosophical principles, but in revelation. Unlike scholastics who saw continuity between revelation and perception, Luther notes that revelation must be indirect and concealed.

Because of humanity's fallen condition, one can neither understand the redemptive word nor see God face-to-face. Here Luther's exposition on thesis 20 of his "Heidelberg Disputation" is important. He alludes to Exodus 33, where Moses seeks to see the glory of the Lord but instead sees only the backside. No one can see God face-to-face and live, so God reveals himself on the backside, that is to say, where it seems he should not be. For Luther this meant the human nature of Christ, in his weakness, his suffering, and his foolishness.³⁰

Thus revelation is seen in the suffering of Christ rather than in moral activity or political constructs. It is addressed to faith, "which alone recognizes it as a revelation of God."³¹ This is, in brief, Luther's doctrine of the *Deus absconditus*. The revelation of redemption in Jesus Christ is both a hiddenness in revelation and a revelation in hiddenness.

Luther's concern was with subjective anthropocentric speculative theology that began with humanity as the *a priori*. In philosophy, moral law, or history, humanity was the starting point for thinking about God. Luther absolutely rejected this. Biblical and evangelical theology must operate

from above to below, that is to say, from God's self-revelation to us, not from us to God. This, in other words, was Luther's complete rejection of a *theologia gloriae*.

Theologia Gloriam

As a preacher and pastor now convinced of God's graciousness and the need to preach that gracious gift in Christ, Luther confronted one of the first trials of his tower experience in the fall of 1517. Johann Tetzel of Leipzig, the most famous and most successful indulgence evangelist of the day, appeared near Wittenberg. Indulgences were a manifestation, Luther believed, of everything that was wrong with the church. They embodied the *theologia gloriae* and all human efforts to earn salvation.³²

Indulgences began in much the same manner as did Luther's reformation. They were initiated as a pastoral care response to soothe the consciences of people uncertain of their salvation. Theologically, their justification rested in Anselmian atonement theory. Indulgences were meant to satisfy the rigors of penance. As a sinner, one must first be contrite in coming before God and his priest. Then the sinner must honestly confess the sin. These two acts remove the guilt or stain from the sinner's heart. But what about God's justice? In his righteousness, God has been offended by this sin; his righteousness demands satisfaction. It is penance that satisfies God's righteousness and commutes the penalty.

Why did Luther reject indulgences? Instead of fostering dependence on God, indulgences placed "salvation" in the hands of traveling salesmen who hawked forgiveness like snake oil. Luther rejected all types of theology that were based in models of covenant. Indulgences, in a real sense, promoted a *do ut des* (I give that you may give) approach to God's mercy.

Luther's tower experience, his break with the *via moderna*, and his repudiation of indulgences all pointed away from theologies of covenant. Covenant theologies, he recognized, attempt to put God in a box. They are rooted in "if then" language. If I do *x*, then you must do *y*.³³ Luther rejected this type of legalism. Second, the presence of "If I" in models of covenant places the onus of salvation on the subject, largely excluding God from the discussion.

The import of the tower experience was the discovery that God's righteousness is a gift received passively by humankind and that evangelical theology affirms God's testament in Christ. From the author of Hebrews,³⁴ Luther took an understanding of Jesus Christ as the last will and testament of God.³⁵ God has written humanity in the will as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. The import of testament, though, is that the