

God's Prophet

LIFE IN THE MIDST OF DEATH

Born in 1483, Luther lived in a world that knew death intimately.¹ And while the terrors of finitude and human limitation were hardly unique to his time, it is nevertheless difficult for us today, with our scientific grasp of reality, to understand Luther's world. For the people of his day, one thing was clear—once born, there was no escape. This temporal life was but the tip of an eternity that promised either perfect rest or the fury of God's wrath—forever! Life in this world was hard and short, at least by our modern Western standards. For most ordinary people, this meant years of grueling hard work in the fields, eking out a living by bare subsistence. It meant a life ordered by the cycle of the seasons, and disordered by the disaster of unexplained disease and drought. It meant scrambling to keep a roof over one's head and food on the table. The death of children was a familiar occurrence. Medicine as we know it today was still a long way off; and in a world not yet knowledgeable about germs and viruses, reason could only construe illness as an evil wind blowing unpredictably through the village, mysteriously spreading plague to some homes but not to others. Viewed as an unwelcome visit by otherworldly forces, the suffering that accompanied disease and starvation was often

1. See Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 325: "The Reformation understanding of the righteousness of God and the justification of the sinner is unintelligible apart from its eschatological context. . . . Certainly, Luther's view owed much to the waning medieval period, when the universal power and presence of death was experienced and reflected on with great intensity." Lohse notes two authors behind this generalization: Hans-Jurgen Prien, *Luthers Wirtschaftsethik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), and Hans Pruss, *Die Vorstellungen vom Antichrist im späten Mittelalter, bei Luther und in der Konfessionellen Polemik: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie Luthers und zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit* (Leipzig: J. Hinrichs, 1906).

explained as divine punishment for some unacknowledged sin, or the devil's army capriciously thwarting God's creative ends.

It was by way of the institutional church, with its narrative of judgment and salvation, that people were able to make sense of their lives. Without scientific explanations, their desire to understand why and how things happened was satisfied by a deeply held belief in devils, magic, and divine providence. In that world, as in our own, the experience of death was devastating and often incomprehensible. But set within the context of the Christian story, their personal lives (and deaths) were taken up into a larger frame of meaning. This life became the opportunity for achieving something better in the next. With the vision of heaven so prominently displayed in the religious art around them, people lived their lives toward the achievement of this end,² a goal that promised perfect peace beyond the daily bumps and bruises of this world.³ But it was a heaven not easily won. A person had to live rightly in obedience, and to die rightly, formed in the virtues of faith, hope, and love.⁴

Life's purpose was derived not only from the vision of heaven that drew one forward but also from the fear of hell, which provided an equally powerful motivator.⁵ Men and women, from their birth surrounded by the formal authority of the church and the informal influence of biblical (and extrabiblical) stories, had only to observe the pictures of judgment, carved above the great cathedral doorways, to grasp the trial that awaited each human being.⁶ It was

2. From Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, in *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, ed. Denis Janz, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 4. According to Janz's introduction, "Thomas à Kempis (1380–1427) joined the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine in 1406 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1413. . . . He wrote his *Imitation of Christ* between 1420 and 1427. Written in all probability for novice monks, it soon became one of the most famous devotional books of the age, for laity and religious alike" (Janz, *Reformation Reader*, 4). The piece gives us an excellent picture of the kind of piety in which Luther was formed. Themes important to Luther included the fragility and uncertainty of life, flight from the world, divine judgment, the dualist conviction that the appetites of the body are evil and that reason is to be informed by grace in order to help discipline the will and impose virtue, life as a project focused on the incremental acquisition of virtue under the threat of purgatory and hell for those who failed. "If you remain faithful in all your doings, be sure that God will be faithful and generous in rewarding you" (Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 11). "Always keep in mind your last end, and how you will stand before the just Judge from whom nothing is hid. . . . Why do you not prepare yourself against the Day of Judgment" (*ibid.*, 10). "The more you spare yourself now, and indulge the desires of the body, the more severe will be your punishment hereafter, and the more fuel you gather for the flames" (*ibid.*).

3. *Ibid.*, 10: "Keep your heart free and lifted up to God. . . . Daily direct your prayers and longings to heaven, that at your death your soul may merit to pass joyfully into the presence of God."

4. *Ibid.*, 12: "Always remember your end, and that lost time never returns. Without care and diligence, you will never acquire virtue."

in preparation for this inevitable ordeal that Christendom taught people to order their lives.⁷ Thus life in Luther's day had meaning because it had a goal—heaven, if you lived and died righteously in the Lord, or hell, if you gave up the good fight and succumbed to the devil, who was always there, eager to confuse and corrupt.⁸ And for those who wanted to make the most of the opportunity life offered, there was also the fast track to salvation provided by the church—the monastic life, which provided spiritual training for those who were specially gifted.

It was this route that young Luther chose. In the year 1505, as he was returning to the University at Erfert to work on a law degree, Martin was caught out in the open in a great thunderstorm. Terrified by what he took to be his imminent death, and with lightning and thunder crashing all about him, Luther experienced that divine judgment he so feared. Eternity yawned before him as he stood there in the very face of God's wrath. "Saint Anne, Saint Anne," he cried. "Save me. I'll become a monk."⁹

5. Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 6. Oberman includes a woodcut from Ulm featuring a skeleton with the serpent wrapped around it is disappearing into the mouth of a monster, with flames coming from its mouth. The feet of the skeleton have already disappeared into the mouth. The woodcut is titled: *Whether master or servant, rich or poor, all the living are alike: a framework of bones, threatened by Hell, Death, and the Devil*.

6. *Ibid.*, 89. A woodcut from *Der Antichrist* portrays a picture of Jesus as a judge, sitting on the rainbow with a lily coming out of his right ear, the faithful beneath walking toward heaven with penitent, downcast eyes. The virgin Mary hovers over them in prayer. From the left ear of the Judge protrudes a sword. Beneath this there are the powerful people in Luther's world—nobility of church and world, with their crowns and miters; they are chained together and are being herded into the mouth of the monster that awaits them. The appended text reads: "Christ, Judge of the World, the Virgin Mary and St. John intercede for the imperiled faithful, To the just, the Judge is saying, 'Come,' and to the evil, 'Go'—to Hell." Also from à Kempis: "Many die suddenly and unexpectedly; for at an hour that we do not know, the Son of man will come. When your last hour strikes, you will begin to think very differently of your past life and grieve deeply that you have been so careless and remiss" (*Imitation of Christ*, 9).

7. Dietrich Kolde, *Mirror for Christians* (1470), in Janz, *Reformation Reader*, 62–63: "... When bitter death is coming, then you should say the following repeatedly: ... 'O holy God! O powerful God! O compassionate God! O strict and righteous judge, have mercy on me, a poor sinner, when I must answer to your terrifyingly strict court. ... O dear Lord Jesus, then may your holy bitter death, your precious blood and your unspeakable manifold suffering stand between you and all my sins.'" See also in Janz, *Reformation Reader*, 61, a "Deathbed Struggle," from *The Art of Good Lpywng and Good deyng* (1503). Books on the art of dying were some of the first products that appeared after Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1440. The first thing he printed was the *Poem of the Last Judgment* (1446).

8. Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 11: "If the love of God does not restrain you from sin, the fear of hell at least should restrain you." "What will the flames feed upon, but your sins? The more you spare yourself now, and indulge the desires of the body, the more sever will be your punishment hereafter, and the more fuel you gather for the flames" (*ibid.*, 10).

It's an interesting fact that Luther, in this moment of desperation, called on Saint Anne rather than on Jesus. For Luther, as for so many others, Jesus was not the loving intercessor he would in time become for the church. Instead, Jesus was the judge portrayed in chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel, separating out the good sheep from the evil goats that were bound for hell. Jesus was known by way of the familiar Apostles' Creed as that one who "will come to judge the living and the dead."¹⁰ This was a Jesus familiar to Luther and to all the people, as he was often portrayed, sitting upon a rainbow with a sword in one hand and a lily in the other.¹¹ In the face of eternity, the saints, or the Blessed Virgin Mary, offered a safer berth.

Luther was raised in modestly comfortable surroundings. His father, Hans, who came from a family of peasants, had hoped to attain greater family distinction through the education of his talented son Martin. But he was forced to relinquish this dream when Luther unexpectedly entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfert on July 17, 1505.¹² To become a monk meant that Martin would leave the world and his family behind.¹³ Hans could expect no grandchildren from a son who took vows of celibacy. Nor could he hope any longer for the prestige that Martin's successful career as a lawyer might have brought to the family. The distinction that Martin in fact eventually did achieve as a great reformer of the church would have been unimaginable to old Hans. Years later, Luther spoke of his father's anger at his sudden and decisive change

9. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation: 1483–1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 49.

10. *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 65. The Apostles' Creed arose in the early Western church as a normative statement of faith and teaching. It remains an important part of the regular worship in Christian churches that retain the Western liturgical tradition, and would have been an important part of Luther's understanding of basic Christian doctrine. Trinitarian in form, the second article of the creed, which reflects the church's understanding of Jesus as the Christ, reads as follows: "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. *He will come again to judge the living and the dead*" (emphasis added).

11. Oberman, *Luther*, 89. See also the woodcut mentioned in note 5 above. Oberman provides many pertinent illustrations throughout his book.

12. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 50.

13. Oberman, *Luther*, 124. It was a "decision for the monastery and against the world." From à Kempis: "... The further she withdraws from all the tumult of the world, the nearer she draws to her maker" (*Imitation of Christ*, 6). "Many weak and foolish people say, 'See what a good life that man enjoys! He is so rich, so great, so powerful, so distinguished!' But raise your eyes to the riches of heaven, and you will see that all the riches of this world are as nothing" (*ibid.*, 7). "For God with his holy angels will draw near to him who withdraws himself from his friends and acquaintances" (*ibid.*, 6).

in direction. "I asked my father why he was angry at me," Luther recalls. "He answered, 'Don't you know the Fourth Commandment, Honor your father and your mother?' For he wanted to encourage me to study law, and in fact I already possessed a complete *Corpus iuris* [book of the law]."¹⁴ But Luther was convinced that God had called him to the cloister; and in spite of his father's disappointment, he was determined to obey.¹⁵

Monastic life in those days was viewed as a radical break with the world—a kind of death;¹⁶ and the Augustinian order that Martin chose to enter was especially strict. The Augustinians at Erfert were among a group of monastic communities that had rededicated themselves to the ancient rule of their order precisely to avoid the dangerous distractions of this world. Many monasteries had relaxed old, outdated traditions, adapting their vows to the practical necessities of the day. But the order Luther chose had responded to this loss of rigor by devoting themselves anew to the discipline of the old rule. Among the practices they chose to revive, the Erfert Augustinians adopted an enforced silence (excluding their daily recitation of prayers); they wore uniform clothing and left the monastery grounds only with the permission of their prior, who was the head of the community. They also agreed to banish all private property among themselves, including books.¹⁷

14. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 54, *Table Talk*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 354.

15. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 50.

16. Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 9: "Dear soul, from what peril and fear you could free yourself if you lived in holy fear, mindful of your death. Apply yourself so to live now, that at the hour of death, you may be glad and unafraid. Learn now to die to the world, that you may begin to live with Christ. Learn now to despise all earthly things, that you may go freely to Christ. Discipline your body now by penance, that you may enjoy a sure hope of salvation." From Steven E. Ozment, *The Age of Reform (1250–1550): An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 85: "From Jerome to Bernard of Clairvaux, the monastic life was praised as a 'second baptism.' According to Bernard, becoming a monk so reformed the divine image in man and conformed him to Christ that he was more like an angel than like other men." From Bernard's explanation of how the monk becomes increasingly Christlike (quoted in Ozment, *Age of Reform*, 88): "At first, (1) man loves only himself and for his own sake . . . knowing nothing beyond his own desires. But when he discovers that he cannot stand by himself alone, he begins to seek and love God by faith. In this second state, (2) he loves God, not for God's sake, but for his own sake. Having been forced by his need to grasp something more permanent than himself, man begins to love and worship God . . . and gradually attain an experiential knowledge of God. Consequently, God becomes sweet to him . . . and (3) he now loves God not for his own sake only, but also for God's sake. Truly man remains a long time in this stage; in fact, I doubt that anyone perfectly reaches beyond it in this life to the point where (4) God is loved only for God's sake. Let those who have come so far assert it; for my part, I must say that it seems to me to be impossible [in this life]."

“I took the vow for the sake of my salvation,” Luther explained many years after the fact.¹⁸ The monastic community provided an opportunity to prepare oneself for the inevitable judgment that would come with death. To be with God in eternity, one had to become like God; and monasticism fostered this transformation. As athletes train their muscles and hone their skills in preparation for competition, so the monks engaged in retraining hearts, minds, and wills, in preparation for heaven. This was achieved through a process called sanctification—a program of self-cultivation by way of which one becomes increasingly holy—or “sanctified.” As athletes increase incrementally in strength and skill, so too were the monks expected to become more Christlike through spiritual exercises aimed at training their wayward wills to submit to God’s will.¹⁹ In the face of his own death, Jesus prayed, “Not my will, but thine be done” (Luke 22:42), and it was just such perfect submission that the monks aimed to emulate. Absolute obedience to one’s prior, for example, allowed one to practice, and thereby strengthen, the habit of obedience. In this disciplined, character-building process, one would be assisted and sustained by the infusion of grace provided by the church’s sacramental ministry.²⁰ This cultivation of righteousness had its roots in the theology of Thomas Aquinas.

Drawing on both Aristotle’s virtue ethics and the traditional teachings of Christianity, Aquinas created a theological synthesis that began with Aristotle’s “natural” virtues, to which he then added the “supernatural” or Christian virtues—namely, those habits of faith, hope, and love (identified by the apostle Paul with the Christian life in his first letter to the Corinthians [1 Cor. 13:13]).²¹ The capacity for the development of these supernatural virtues, Aquinas taught, was received exclusively through the special grace of Jesus Christ, sacramentally infused into the lives of the baptized by priests divinely ordained (and ontologically transformed) for this work. As in the case of the natural virtues, these supernatural virtues still had to be cultivated through the disciplined

17. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 58–59.

18. Quoted in David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 512.

19. Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 8: “You will never overcome your vices unless you discipline yourself severely.” “He rules himself with strictness and endeavors to make the body subject to the spirit in all things” (ibid., 10). “Fight most manfully to overcome whatever is most difficult and distasteful. . . . For the more completely a man overcomes and cleanses himself in spirit, the more he profits and deserves abundant grace” (ibid., 11). “Oh, if Jesus crucified would come into our hearts, how quickly and fully we should be instructed!” (ibid., 12).

20. Ozment, *Age of Reform*, 35.

21. The text from 1 Corinthians reads, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (vv. 12–13 RSV).

development of good habits (aided by grace), which incrementally increased a person's fitness for eternal life with God.²² Aquinas thereby reconceived monastic life in the shape of Aristotle's ethics, which was then extended, through the special grace of Christ, toward its true supernatural end.²³

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND ITS FAILURE TO CONSOLE

Life in a medieval monastery followed a daily rhythm of work and prayer, revolving around the monastic daily office, a series of noneucharistic worship services constructed largely on the framework of the Psalter, through which the monks carried out their prayer on behalf of the world. Though these "hours," as they are called, which varied across the different monastic communities, Luther's monastery followed a schedule of prayer that began in the middle of the night with Matins, followed by Prime, then Terce, and Sext at noon. In addition, Mass was celebrated every morning in the monastery community. Following the noon meal, the monks had an hour of rest, after which came Nones and Vespers. Finally, after the evening meal, there was Compline. These seven daily offices plus morning Mass, which all began promptly at their assigned times, were obligatory for every monk.²⁴ Luther took this monastic regimen very seriously. As with nearly everything in the monastery, the canonical hours were understood as a necessary discipline in the pursuit of saving righteousness. To neglect them was a sin; and neglect, in this context, included not only tardiness or sloppiness in execution but also a lack of authentic piety.²⁵ A monk was expected to attain both depth and sincerity; and this could be measured according to three levels of carefully distinguished performance. These were *simple* (the least effective), *rote* (which met the church's command), and *formal* observance of the prayers, when they were performed with right intention and full piety.²⁶ The problem for Luther, not surprisingly, was the difficulty of gauging the depth of his authenticity, and thus

22. What Aquinas called the "beatific vision." In the Beatitudes Jesus tells his followers, "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). Aquinas speaks of such a supernatural end—that is, an end exceeding what is possible by nature alone—as God's ultimate purpose for human beings. He describes this in his *Summa Theologica* as "the vision of the Divine Essence [which is] granted to all the blessed by a partaking of the Divine Light which is shed upon them. . . ." See the *Summa Theologica* III Q.10a.1.

23. Ozment, *Age of Reform*, 32–33.

24. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 64.

25. *Ibid.*, 68–69

26. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 136–38. See Steinmetz for discussion of Kolde's piety.

the efficacy of his prayer life. Luther had taken the vow, as he said, “for the sake of salvation”; but despite his diligence, he found little evidence that he was proceeding in the right direction.

Luther’s tendency toward perfectionism generated in him a perilous lack of certainty, which in time erupted into crisis.²⁷ Because Luther’s teaching duties (which he took up in 1513) sometimes kept him away from community prayer, he was allowed to offer the monastic offices in private. He clearly worried a good deal about trying to keep up with his required allotment of these daily prayers; and he sometimes secluded himself on weekends to fast and pray.²⁸ But as time went on, he fell further and further behind. By 1520, he was not just a week or two behind. A full four months of canonical hours still awaited completion. His final exhausting attempt to fulfill his prayer obligations nearly resulted in physical collapse.

In his book *Luther in Context*, David Steinmetz summarizes Luther’s ongoing spiritual anxieties. Luther, he writes, “suffered from periods of depression and acute anxiety . . . that he referred to as *Anfechtungen*, or ‘spiritual trials.’”²⁹ These were experienced as the “fear that God had turned his back on [Luther] once and for all, had repudiated his repentance and prayers, and had abandoned him to suffer the pains of hell.” None of his prayers, Steinmetz writes, “could penetrate the wall of indifferent silence with which God had surrounded himself. Condemned by his own conscience, Luther despised himself and murmured against God.”³⁰ These *Anfechtungen* continued throughout Luther’s life, though the object of his fear shifted over time, from terror before a wrathful God to recurring doubts about the dangers associated with his teachings. In these earliest days of monasticism, however, it was his fear of God’s ultimate rejection that apparently elicited the kind of experience

27. In later years, Luther looked back on his monastic career with the following judgment. “Ask one who has most diligently observed his canonical hours of prayer, celebrated Mass and fasted daily, whether he is also sure that this is pleasing to God. He must say he does not know, that he is doing it all as a risk: ‘If it succeeds, let it succeed.’ It is impossible for anyone to say anything else. None of them can make a boast and say: ‘God gave me this cowl, He commanded me to wear it, He ordered me to celebrate this Mass.’ Until now we have all been groping in such blindness as this. We performed many works, contributed, fasted, prayed our rosaries; and yet we never dared to say: ‘This work is pleasing to God; of this I am sure, and I would be willing to die for it’” (Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999), 38.

28. Others actually paid substitutes to stand in for them, though Luther’s conscientious desire to pray earnestly and authentically apparently prohibited him from turning to this solution.

29. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 1.

30. *Ibid.*

Luther identified with his *Anfechtungen*—an experience he would later describe in 1518.

I knew a man who said that he had often suffered these pains . . . so great and infernal that “no tongue nor pen can show” nor can those believe who have not experienced [them]; . . . so that if they . . . lasted half an hour, or even the tenth part of an hour, he would utterly perish, and his bones be reduced to ashes. Then God appears horrifyingly angry and with him the whole creation. There can be no flight, no consolation, neither within nor without, but all is accusation.³¹

Luther’s focus on the work of contrition resulted in scrupulous self-examination and his regular use of confession. “Once I confessed for six hours,” he wrote.³² And though he found some solace in the act of contrition and confession, it remained for him highly problematic. Since perfect contrition was required before the official absolution could become effective (i.e., the priest’s declaration that one’s sins were forgiven), it was impossible to know when enough was enough. Luther could never be sure that his contrition met the standard required for the absolution to “take.” Were his sins in their entirety really forgiven? Was he thus saved, or was he still bound to his sins and destined for hell?

It was the teaching on sacramental efficacy that caused Luther the greatest problem; for it contradicted his own experience of persisting sin, which continued to haunt him even after his absolution had been declared. Some years later in his lectures on Romans, trying to explain his difficulty, Luther would distinguish what he called the “tinder” of sin (also called *original sin*)³³ from “active” sin (the consequences of original sin). “Either I have never understood,” he wrote, “or else the scholastic theologians have not spoken sufficiently clearly about sin and grace, for they have been under the delusion that original sin, like actual sin, is entirely removed, as if these were items that can be entirely removed in the twinkling of an eye.”³⁴ Of course, by the time Luther wrote

31. *Ibid.*, 8 (WA 1:557.33).

32. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 68.

33. “Original sin” is the church’s teaching that the failure to trust and love God faithfully is inborn in all humans. The doctrine takes its traditional form in the writings of St. Augustine, where the disobedience of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 is believed to have initiated this situation. Ultimately, Augustine teaches, the “original” sin of Eve and Adam infects the whole human race.

34. *LW* 25:261.

these words, he had established in his own mind what he took to be the church's misunderstanding on these matters of sin and grace. "In my foolishness," he recalled, "I could not understand [how] . . . I should regard myself as a sinner." For, believing that all his sins had been removed, including his inward sin, Luther still did not experience the righteousness that the sacrament promised. "Thus I was at war with myself," he complained. "I felt that [my] past sins had not been forgiven."³⁵

In later years, Luther would recall how he and his fellow monks "exhausted the confessors" with their careful enumeration of each tiny lapse of discipline. "No confessor wanted anything to do with me," Luther admitted.³⁶ Once a priest called a halt to Luther's endless list of indiscretions with the admonition that "God has commanded you to trust in his mercy." Another tried to recall him from his quest for reassurance, saying, "God is not angry with you, but it is you who are angry with God."³⁷ Johann von Staupitz, Luther's "good and reverend father in Christ,"³⁸ and his much-beloved confessor, told him to come back when he had something really sinful to confess.³⁹ But how could Luther distinguish a big sin from a little one? Both kinds separated him from God. Luther's conviction, that he was forever failing God, accosted him at every turn. No matter how disciplined or contrite he was, Brother Martin could never trust that he had done enough.

Under the papacy, Luther writes, "Christ was depicted as a grim tyrant, a furious and stern judge who demanded much of us and imposed good works as payment for our sins."⁴⁰ "I almost fasted myself to death; for again and again I went for three days without taking a drop of water or a morsel of food."⁴¹ Like so many others, Luther envisioned Christ as a divine judge and depended on Mary and the saints to intercede for him.⁴² "Oh, how many kisses we bestowed on Mary!" Luther later remarked.⁴³ She was the one who received every sinner as a generous and ever-forgiving mother. She gathered them up and then, taking her place between these penitents and her son, she pled with Jesus to accept

35. *LW* 25:261.

36. *LW* 54:94.

37. *LW* 25:69.

38. *LW* 14:283.

39. *LW* 54:94; *LW* 54:94, 133.

40. *LW* 23:57.

41. *LW* 54:339–40.

42. *LW* 22:146. "Christ in His mercy was hidden from my eyes. I wanted to become justified before God through the merits of the saints. This gave rise to the petition for the intercession of the saints."

43. *LW* 22:146. John 6:38.

them on her behalf. Given Luther's inability to find the reassurance he sought, it is no surprise that he loathed a form of prayer referred to as "the contemplation of Christ." Instead of mercy, Luther found only God's judgment addressing him from the cross. Many years later, he told a story from those early days as a monk. "I was once terrified by the sacrament which Dr. Staupitz carried in a procession in Eisleben, on the feast of Corpus Christi. Afterward I made confession to Dr. Staupitz, and he said to me, 'Your thought is not of Christ.' With this word he comforted me well. [But] this is the way we are. Christ offers himself to us, together with the forgiveness of sins, and yet we flee from his face."⁴⁴ In time, of course, Luther's Christology changed dramatically; but in these earliest days, and despite Staupitz's good counsel, this earnest young monk could not escape the divine condemnation he found at every turn.⁴⁵

Thus the traditional penitential system failed to provide Luther with the certainty he sought. And this problem was exacerbated in the context of the Mass; for priests were expected to celebrate the Mass with a clean conscience—purified through contrition, confession, penance, and finally the sacrament of absolution.⁴⁶ But since Luther understood this sacrament as dependent for its efficacy on the quality of contrition brought by the penitent, the certainty needed to enter into the mystery of the Mass was impossible for him to achieve. He celebrated his first Mass almost paralyzed with fear. "When at length I stood before the altar and was to consecrate," Luther later recalled, "I was so terrified by the words *aeterno vivo veto Deo*⁴⁷ that I thought of running away from the altar."⁴⁸ And when Luther's father, visiting on this celebratory occasion of his son's first Mass, suggested that perhaps not God but Satan had dragged young Martin away from his duty to father and mother, Luther's

44. *LW* 54:19–20.

45. "I tried to live according to the Rule with all diligence, and I used to be contrite, to confess and number off my sins, and often repeated my confession, and sedulously performed my allotted penance. And yet my conscience could never give me certainty, but I always doubted and said, 'You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.' The more I tried to remedy an uncertain, weak and afflicted conscience with the traditions of men, the more each day found it more uncertain, weaker, more troubled." Steinmetz 2, in *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies*, trans. Gordon Rupp (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953). 104. See also *WA* 40.II.15.15.

46. Brecht, 73. "A priest conscious of having committed a mortal sin, even though he considers himself to have true contrition, may not celebrate Holy Mass without first availing himself of sacramental confession; if, in the absence of a confessor and [simultaneously] in a case of necessity, and after having made a perfect act of contrition, he has indeed celebrated, he will go to sacramental confession as soon as possible" (Canon 807 of the *1917 Code of Canon Law*).

47. "To Thee, the eternal, living and true God"

48. *LW* 54:156.

despair only deepened.⁴⁹ Maybe his father was right. How could he be sure? Was it Satan or was it God who had appointed him to this monastic life and to his work as a priest? Even the certainty of his calling—a certainty he had dared until then to trust—was now fraught with doubt, making his encounter with God before the altar that much more terrifying. “As a monk,” he explained to his students many years later, “I experienced such horrors; [but] I had to experience them before I could fight them.”⁵⁰

GOD WHO IS WHOLLY OTHER: THE ABYSS BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

Luther desperately sought to appease God’s wrath by way of an authentic piety. But it was the search for confidence that he had done enough—to succeed in producing the piety he believed was demanded of him—that he had done enough to produce the piety he believed was demanded of him that drove Luther to such excess. Certainty of salvation remained the goal of Luther’s theological quest throughout this early period. But what drove Luther in particular to a desperation that set him apart from his more complacent Augustinian brothers? The answer to this, at least in part, may be found in Luther’s unusually profound eagerness for heaven (and his correlative rejection of the temporal world). It was the distance—the infinite abyss—that Luther saw as separating this sinful world from God’s righteousness that made any comforting certainty impossible. “The knowledge that there was an infinite, qualitative distance between Heaven and earth became an established principle for Luther as early as 1509,” Heiko Oberman writes.⁵¹ Getting from here to there was not therefore just a matter of being better; but it required becoming radically “other” than what the young monk Brother Martin already was.

The underlying issue for Luther was finding a foundation on which a true righteousness might be built. The tradition (called the *via moderna*⁵²) in which Luther had been theologically educated taught that human beings had within themselves a divine spark—the residue left of the *imago Dei*, the image of God.⁵³

49. When Luther assured his father that his calling was from God, his father replied, “Son, don’t you know that you ought to honor your father? Just so it wasn’t a phantom you saw!” *LW* 54:234.

50. *LW* 54:234.

51. Oberman, 160.

52. The *via moderna* refers to the “modern way” of theology, which included a philosophy known as nominalism. Nominalism challenges the existence of abstract or universal realities. This was contrasted with a *via antiqua*, or “the ancient way”—which affirmed the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics.

What was this image of God if not some likeness that provided the ground on which one might build up the perfection demanded for eternal life with God?⁵⁴ Theologians called this the *synderesis*; and it was believed to provide the ground for that critical first step, so that by working with what was already present, a person might turn themselves toward God, in preparation for God's grace that would then carry them across the infinite divide. The nominalists (the teachers of the *via moderna*) taught that one had only to "do what is in one" in order to prepare effectively for the gift of divine grace, which would then empower the spiritual growth required for salvation. The way was hard, of course. In the "fall" of Adam and Eve, all humanity and the whole creation became so distorted that the way back was fraught with difficulties and dangers; but it was not impossible. Or at least, it was not impossible in the thinking of those responsible for Luther's theological training.

In Luther's experience, however, that abyss separating him from God seemed uncrossable. He found nothing within himself that he could trust as truly righteous—nothing about which he could be certain—and therefore no way to attain the reassurance that spiritual formation should have delivered. How could he take the first step toward the God he so feared? After all, the love of God was the most crucial command of them all, that from which everything else followed. But caught in the grip of his doubt, Luther could not find within himself that impulse to love the God he so feared. Thus the traditional penitential system offered by the church only exacerbated Luther's uncertainty.

Ultimately, Luther's certainty would come from Scripture. By 1521, he could confidently assure others that there "you will find truth and security—assurance and a faith that is complete, pure, sufficient, and abiding."⁵⁵ Thus it is an important part of Luther's story that his confessor, Johann von Staupitz, was himself a biblical scholar. Early on, Staupitz had noted the scholarly potential in the young novice Martin. In an early biography of Luther, written by one of his fellow monks, we learn that "Doctor Staupitz was very much impressed, and kept a special eye on [Luther] above the others."⁵⁶ In 1506, Staupitz, who was in charge of a number of monasteries, paid a visit to the community at Erfert. There he met Brother Martin, then busily at work at some menial task of the sort usually assigned to the novices. At the time, Staupitz

53. Gen. 1:27 NRSV: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

54. Matt. 5:48 NRSV: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

55. *LW* 32:98.

56. Oberman, *Luther*, 136.

apparently convinced the prior to reassign Luther to a duty more appropriate to his talents. Brother Martin was to memorize the Scriptures, page by page, rather than scrub floors. It was a task Luther embraced with both zeal and talent.

What did Staupitz see in this young monk that moved him to request special consideration for Luther's training? It was a fateful request to be sure, for it opened a critical door into Luther's soul. Years later, Luther would be grateful for his ability to recall every word of the Bible with almost perfect accuracy. Staupitz continued to mentor Luther's spiritual and scholarly progress, and in the winter of 1508–1509, he summoned Luther to the new and, as yet, inauspicious university at Wittenberg to lecture on Aristotle's ethics. It was Staupitz who, against Luther's protestations, insisted that he take his doctorate in biblical studies, and Staupitz too who apparently stepped aside from his teaching duties in 1513 in part, it seems, to make room for Luther, who then assumed the chair of biblical theology at the University of Wittenberg.

THEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES FROM THE TRADITION

Other important voices from the tradition had an enormous effect on Luther's developing theology around this time as he continued to struggle toward a solution to his ongoing anxiety. Because of a remarkable discovery made in a German library about 120 years ago, we know today that in 1509 Luther was studying a collection of Augustine's writings.⁵⁷ Among the texts that came to light was a collection of Augustine's works, printed in 1489, with marginal notes written in Luther's hand. In his book *The City of God*, Augustine defines the gap between the righteous and the sinful in a way that resonated with Luther's own experience. Juxtaposing two cities, Augustine describes the City of God as that situation in which the faithful exist on the eternal side of the gap—that is to say, with God, as citizens of the “heavenly city.” All the others, who are blind to the invisible spiritual realities, idolatrously worship the things of this world and therefore exist on the sinful side of the abyss, in the earthly city. The two cities provided a template for Luther's own experience of that impassable boundary between this fallen world and the righteousness of God.

Sometime around 1513–1514, Luther began a new (and possibly his first) series of lectures on the Bible. He began with the Psalms, carefully working his way through each and adding his commentary alongside.⁵⁸ Idolatry, or the danger of fixing one's heart on the wrong god, is a danger that Luther

57. *Ibid.*, 158. The books were discovered at the Ratschul Library in Zwickau in 1889 and 1890.

58. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 128.

lifts up here. Most people, Luther warns, “fix [their] heart[s] on created things . . . and not on the reality, which is God alone.”⁵⁹ Luther points to those who “cannot grasp God and divine things.”⁶⁰ In these lectures, he characterizes people according to their relationships. We “subside” in that which we ultimately trust. We depend upon it, or “stand” on it, as St. Augustine writes in his *Confessions*.⁶¹ Luther likewise refers to a person’s “foothold or settled ground, on which a man can stand with his feet, so that they do not slip into the deep.”⁶² It is by way of one’s trust in that “foothold,” or ground, that one becomes the kind of person she or he is. “The rich man subsists by riches, the healthy man by health, the honored man by honor, [and] the pleasure-seekers by pleasure.” But Christ “did not have such a foothold on life that would keep him from falling altogether into death.”⁶³ Thus “the pauper, the despondent, [and] the self-afflicter are without substance [too],”⁶⁴ and like the saints are characterized by a “faith [in] the substance of things hoped for” (rather than things that already are).⁶⁵

In the spring of 1516, While Luther was lecturing on Romans, he received some sermons by John Tauler (d. 1361) from his friend Johann Lang. Luther found there a kindred spirit; in addition, he found that the theology he and his colleagues at Wittenberg studied had a German precedent.⁶⁶ His enthusiasm bubbles over the theology he and his colleagues at Wittenberg in a letter to Spalatin in mid-December 1516. If it pleases you to read “pure and solid theology, which is available in German and is of a quality closest to that of the fathers . . . then get for yourself the sermons of John Tauler. . . . I have seen no theological work in Latin or German that is more sound and more in harmony with the Gospel than this.”⁶⁷ The theology of Tauler, who was a mystic, included a process of dying to the self that resonated with Luther’s

59. *LW* 10:39.

60. *LW* 10:93.

61. “Why do you stand on yourself, and thus stand not at all? Cast yourself on him. Have no fear. He will not draw back and let you fall. Cast yourself trustfully on him: he will receive you and he will heal you” (*The Confessions of St. Augustine* [New York: Doubleday Bantam, 1960], 201).

62. *LW* 10:355.

63. *LW* 10:355.

64. *LW* 10:355.

65. *LW* 10:355.

66. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 141: “This is proof for him that the Wittenberg theology, which was already being attacked, could appeal to a significant tradition, even though it was not a university tradition. . . . Luther is critical not only of Latin scholasticism, but already there also is a mistrust of humanism brewing within him.”

67. *LW* 48:35–36.

reading of Augustine and Paul. It also allowed him to reinterpret his experience of *Anfechtungen* as a mark of God's election rather than of divine abandonment. In Tauler, the love for God results in suffering, death, and rebirth. But the work is done entirely by God (rather than through self-chosen spiritual exercises). Salvation lies in resigning oneself to God, who rejects every human work. Here God destroys in order to re-create. Steven Ozment summarizes the key point succinctly. "In medieval theology, only like could truly know like."

This was the underlying rationale of monastic practices; through rigorous physical and intellectual exercises to replace one's own false self with a God-like self. It was the precondition of mystical union. . . . Love bound together the persons of the Trinity, the soul with God, and man with his neighbor. [But] . . . as early as his first lectures on the Psalms, Luther distanced himself from this fundamental medieval belief. . . . He was . . . struck by the way the righteous man confessed his utter dissimilarity from God. . . . Recognition and confession of sin actually brought God and man together. In this sense "unlikeness" was the unitive principle in religion: To be conformed with God meant to agree with his judgment that all men are sinful and still believe his promise to save them nonetheless.⁶⁸

It is precisely in this opposition that God works. "Whoever casts one's self completely upon the will of God cannot remain outside God. . . . Whoever offers himself up for hell will not be judged by God, but God rather will free him," writes Martin Brecht, summarizing Luther's embrace of Tauler.⁶⁹ In December of 1516, Luther published an anonymous fragment of a piece, calling it simply *The German Theology*.⁷⁰ Though "only God knows who actually wrote it," Luther notes in his Introduction, "if we should try a guess, the material almost resembles the style of the illumined Doctor Tauler of the Preaching Order. Be that as it may, here we have the true solid teaching of Holy Writ."⁷¹ The parallels here with Luther's own thinking are clearly visible in his Psalms lectures and in his more fully developed lectures on Romans.

In his early lectures, Luther understands Christ's redemption as a revelation of the human predicament. Those who grasp this revelation, writes Luther, "look and point [toward Christ] as if they were saying, 'Look, He is the One who is in reality, but we are not; we are only signs.'⁷² The faithful, Luther teaches, are those who steadfastly imitate Christ, dying to the things of this

68. Ozment, *Age of Reform*, 243.

69. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 138 (Brecht cites WA, Br 12:403–5).

world that are, in reality, “nothing,” and faithfully staking their lives on God instead. Redemption thus rests on a new understanding of how things really are between God and human beings. Christ’s crucifixion was made necessary by human sin, thus demonstrating the depth of human depravity for those who have eyes to see. Redemption begins, not out of some residual inner goodness or spark that functions as the ground of similarity, but rather by acknowledging just how profoundly alienated human beings are from God. He then interprets the crucifixion as “the judgment by which God condemns and causes [us] to condemn whatever we have of ourselves, the whole old man, with his deeds.”⁷³ This “*whole old man*” leaves no opening for some divine remainder or *synderesis*.⁷⁴ A faithful piety, and (Luther hoped) an effective one, thus requires that one stand with God in the condemnation of the entire self, righteously demonstrating solidarity with God’s judgment.

David Yeago calls this Luther’s “strategy of contrariety.”⁷⁵ The death of the self requires a prior identification with God’s judgment, which in turn moves God to mercy. It is cultivated in a way that reflects Luther’s early approach to the attainment of a good contrition. On the basis of Paul’s remark “for I

70. LW 48:36. The anonymously written *German Theology* that Luther embraces and presents to the public—first by publishing a fragment of the text sent to him in 1516, and then again in its complete form in 1518—teaches a theology that emphasizes the necessary death of the self as a prerequisite to the experience of God’s inner presence, referred to as *sapientia experimentalis*, or the present knowledge (experience) of God. This phrase suggests a mystical union with others in the one body of Christ that transcends time and place, and notably, Luther includes this phrase—*sapientia experimentalis*—in his description of justification. Probably written by someone of the Friends of God movement in the mid-fourteenth century, it presents a paradoxical understanding of the mystical experience whereby the absolute otherness of God is retained even as one is drawn into friendship with God through Christ. Thus it rejects another form of mysticism contemporary with it, practiced by the Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit, who taught a form of mysticism in which the lines between what is divine and what is human are blurred. As Bengt Hagglund notes in his introduction to a modern translation of the 1518 text, this distinction can be tracked back to a difference in the mysticism of Eckart and Tauler, with Tauler’s paradoxical form being embraced by Luther via the *German Theology*. This form of mysticism practiced by the Friends of God does not adopt a dualistic tension between the spiritual and the created orders but affirms creation and the call to ethical engagement focusing on the tension between God and Satan, a form of mysticism suggested in Luther’s *Freedom of a Christian* of 1521. The call to transformation—or the crucifixion of unredeemed nature (the extinction of pride and self-will)—becomes that “death of the self” emphasized in Luther’s early theology. See the Introduction by Hagglund and the text of *German Theology* in *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther*, trans. Bengt Hoffman, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1980).

71. Ibid., 42.

72. LW 10:311.

73. LW 27:406.

could wish that I myself were accursed” (Rom. 9:3), Luther is still teaching that “to those who truly love God . . . these words are most beautiful, and testimonies of a perfect example. For such men freely offer themselves to the entire will of God, even to hell and eternal death, if that is what God wills.”⁷⁶ Under Tauler’s influence, Luther had by this time embraced the mystical death of the self. Thus he could say with some confidence that “if it should please God [I] would not desire even to be saved.” Something approaching certainty, he believed, could thereby be assured; for when a sinner can truly seek his own damnation, a person “knows whether he loves God with a pure heart.” Yet it seems an odd sort of self-defeating certainty that Luther had devised, since it rests on the denial of the very end that “certainty” originally sought to secure. And even were this a faithful model of piety, Luther’s ability to exercise it remains dubious. His declaration in the very same lecture that “it is impossible that [one who wills his own damnation] should remain in hell; [and] . . . he [who] wills what God wills therefore . . . pleases God, is loved by him, and [is thereby] . . . saved” suggests that Luther was not quite prepared to swallow the bitter medicine that he himself had concocted. Luther was, by this time, teaching that the distance between sinful humanity and the righteousness of God is one of absolute contradiction. In his gloss on Rom. 9:3, Luther writes, “What is good for us is hidden, and that so deeply that it is hidden under its opposite. [Thus] our life is hidden under death, love for ourselves under hate for ourselves, glory under ignominy, salvation under damnation, our kingship under exile, heaven under hell, wisdom under foolishness, righteousness under sin, [and] power under weakness.”⁷⁷

In March of 1545, when Luther was an old man, he recalled the scriptural breakthrough that provided a critical turning point in his theology and in his piety. However, writes Lewis Spitz, “While Luther’s account of the early years . . . is a priceless historical document it is not without chronological difficulties.”⁷⁸

74. *Synderesis*, or *synteresis*, was understood by the scholastic theologians to refer to those first principles of conscience, out of which right moral behavior can be discerned and generated through practice and habituation. This capacity was understood to be derived from the “image of God,” which, according to the Genesis account of creation, is characteristic of all human beings. (It is also the ground, or point of contact, central to Eckhart’s mysticism, which Luther rejected. See note 72 above.) Luther’s difficulty was that he could find no such reliable first principles within himself, out of which authentically righteous choice and action could be generated with any certainty. It was not that Luther had no conscience but rather that he believed it to be unreliable, given the distortions to reason imposed by sin.

75. David S. Yeago, “The Catholic Luther,” in *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 13–34.

76. *LW* 25:381.

77. *LW* 25:382f.

Thus the dating of this “event” is a matter of debate. Indeed, Luther’s critical “breakthrough” appears to have come over a period of time. Nevertheless, some particular moments clearly stand out. One of these is surely Luther’s novel, and breathtaking, reinterpretation of a text from Romans. Nevertheless, the idea gained clarity and strength in the dispute over indulgences, which provided the crucible that would form Luther’s doctrine of “justification by faith alone.”

“I felt that I was a sinner before God,” Luther recalled in 1545, as he wrote about his career in the prologue for a collection of his Latin works that was being prepared from publication.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach . . . I could not believe that [God] was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love . . . [but rather] I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners; and secretly . . . I said, “As if . . . it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity . . . without having God add pain to pain . . . threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” . . . I had already . . . been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the epistles to the Romans. But up till then . . . a single word in Chapter 1[:17] . . . stood in my way. For I hated that word “righteousness of God,” which, according to the use and custom . . . I had been taught to understand [as] . . . the formal or active righteousness . . . [by] which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

[But] . . . at last, by the mercy of God, [and by] meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed,” [understood now, in combination with another text] . . . “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” [Thus, by linking the two] I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. [This means that] . . . the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith; [for] it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.”

[Thus] I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. [In light of this new understanding] a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. [So] I ran through the Scriptures from memory [and] I

also found in other terms [a similar] analogy, as [for example], the work of God . . . is what God does in us, the power of God . . . makes us strong, the wisdom of God . . . makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.⁷⁹

Luther had discovered in Paul’s letter to the Romans a critical reversal. Instead of sinners needing to achieve a God-like righteousness in order for God to accept them, “the righteousness of God” meant that God makes sinners righteous, just as “God’s wisdom” means that God makes people wise. Instead of trying to get to God by becoming like God, God has come to those who are most unlike God—those who are characterized by sin rather than righteousness—until, by faith, the sinner receives the righteousness that God gives as a gift. It was not, Luther understood, that the actual “substance of sin” suddenly disappeared, but that sin is no longer “imputed” or counted against the sinner.

Thus Luther arrived at an understanding that holds both sin and the negation of sin together. Having abandoned the penitential system and instead embraced Paul’s theology of justification, Luther assures us that sin does not go away with confession and absolution; but in God’s mercy, sin “is not imputed as sin” to those who call upon God. This paradoxical simultaneity of sin and the nonimputation of sin he likened to a sick man who is “both sick and well at the same time”—“sick in fact, . . . [yet already] well because of the sure promise of the doctor, whom he trusts and who has reckoned him as already cured.”⁸⁰ And so, Luther explains, “This life . . . is a life of being healed from sin . . . not a life of sinlessness; . . . [and] the church [is the] . . . infirmary for those who are sick and in need of being made well.”⁸¹ But of course, a person is unlikely to call on the doctor unless that person knows she is sick. “It is not the one who regards himself as humble that is righteous,” writes Luther, “but the one who considers himself detestable and damnable in his own eyes . . . he is righteous. . . . ‘He who is dead is justified’ (Rom. 6:7).”⁸²

79. *LW* 34:336.

80. *LW* 25:262.

81. *LW* 25:262f.

82. *LW* 25:260.

THE REFORMATION BREAKTHROUGH

Though it would seem that Luther had by this time solved his central problem by integrating Tauler's mystical negation of the self (like the end of hope when one realizes he is dying from an incurable disease) with Paul's theology of justification (the totally unexpected and undeserved cure), Luther's old penitential theology continued to play a role in his thinking for some time. Even with Paul's theology of the nonimputation of sins, faith is still a requirement; and the achievement of that faith continued to prove problematic for Luther. Yeago has argued that it was between 1518 and 1519 that Luther decisively shifted his focus from the achievement of a given inner disposition (a self utterly condemned and destroyed) to a focus on the external work of God. It is in the sacraments, writes Yeago, that God's acceptance is finally made certain. During the spring of 1518, "Luther worked through (and published) three different and mutually exclusive solutions" to the question: "What is the sacrament good for, anyway?"⁸³ Eventually, focusing on Matt. 16:19 ("Whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven"), Luther settled on the sacramental act as "the concrete, external, public act of Jesus Christ in the church."⁸⁴ In his search for the true God, Yeago concludes, Luther had discovered a very Catholic solution. "When we come to the sacrament, we run into Jesus Christ."⁸⁵ Where the critical point in his earlier theology of grace is God's crucifying contradiction of sinful human nature, "here the point on which everything hinges is the authority of Christ the Savior, exercised concretely in the sacramental signs in the church."⁸⁶

Luther's new idea was to trust God rather than the quality of his own piety. If God says your sins are "loosed" (i.e., gone), then all you have to do is trust that God means what God says.⁸⁷ Luther juxtaposed this trust in the external promise with the teaching by "recent theologians" who "contribute entirely too much to this torment of conscience by treating and teaching the sacrament of penance in such a way that people learn to trust in the delusion that it is possible to have their sins cancelled by their contritions and satisfactions."⁸⁸ Luther obviously believed by then that he had left the penitential system behind. Likewise, he rejects those "certain intellectuals, [who] by their contritions, works, and confessions, endeavor to find peace for themselves but do nothing

83. Yeago, "The Catholic Luther," 25.

84. *Ibid.*, 26.

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

87. *LW* 31:100.

88. *LW* 31:103.

more than go from restlessness to restlessness because they trust in themselves and their works.”⁸⁹ Luther had grasped Paul’s theology of justification, believing that the nonimputation of sin is nothing we can achieve ourselves; but, until now, he had not found a reliable way to make this promise one that applied particularly to himself.

Yet even with his discovery of the external (and therefore reliable) promise of God in the sacrament, we still find traces of Luther’s old theology of penance at work. “One is right,” he concedes in his 1518 *Explanations of the 95 Theses*, “in asking how [the remission of sins] can take place before the infusion of grace . . . for man cannot have his guilt forgiven or the desire to seek remission without first of all having the grace of God which remits.”⁹⁰ But, he suggests, a few lines on, “If the remission of guilt takes place through the infusion of grace before the [absolution] of the priest, this infusion is . . . so hidden under the form of wrath that man is more uncertain about grace when it is present than when it was absent.”⁹¹ Even as late as 1518, faith functions as a kind of pious work, presumably requiring something of the believer; for Luther feels compelled to exhort his reader “to guard himself very carefully from any doubt.”⁹² “The remission of sin and the gift of grace are not enough,” he writes; there is still work left to be done, even after the remission of sins is received. For “when they have been strengthened by confidence and joy of heart over the compassion of Christ, [they will] . . . become contrite and make satisfaction.” Penitential contrition and satisfaction are still part of a process on the way to heaven. In the end, Luther admits that he is “still trying to understand.”

It was during the brief period between February 15 and March 28, 1518—shortly after Luther wrote the words above—that the mature theology of justification emerges in his work. Martin Brecht, in an interesting and persuasive argument, traces this theological turn, comparing a letter from February with a sermon written in March. In the letter, written by Luther to his friend George Spalatin on February 15, we discover the penitential technique required to achieve the inner self-loathing necessary for the reception of God’s mercy. “You should be your own judge,” Luther writes to Spalatin, “and with your works accuse yourself and confess that you are guilty and sinful.”⁹³ But in the sermon of March 28,⁹⁴ Luther, for the first time, *joyfully* identifies Christian

89. *LW* 31:103.

90. *LW* 31:99.

91. *LW* 31:101.

92. *LW* 31:101.

93. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 222.

94. *LW* 31:297–306.

righteousness with the self-emptying Christ who comes down from heaven for the sake of sinners. Faith is here described as a marriage that joins God's righteousness with the sinner, so that sin is covered. Referring the congregation back to a text from the Song of Solomon, Luther exuberantly describes the kind of freedom and joy that is possible as faith seals the bond of marriage. "Righteousness arises [with] the voice of the bridegroom who says to the soul, 'I am yours,' . . . [and in response] comes the voice of the bride who answers, 'I am yours.' Then the marriage is consummated; it becomes strong and complete in accordance with the *Song of Solomon* [2:16]: 'My beloved is mine and I am his.' Then the soul no longer seeks to be righteous in and for itself, but it has Christ as its righteousness and therefore seeks only the welfare of others."⁹⁵

Here grace is no longer the medicine of immortality for the healing of sins. The action engages the sinner in her entirety—a whole, rather than a partial effect. Saving faith is now a *relationship* that replicates the union between husband and wife. The two become one and thus share everything between them. This reflects Luther's notion of subsistence in the early Psalms lectures, where one is characterized by that on which one "stands" or has a "foothold." Here Christ is that foothold; and his mercy is received via his promise—the Word spoken. This Word comes to address the sinner—the bridegroom seeing his bride. It is God's word made flesh—Christ—who gives himself to the bride, even as she gives herself to the bridegroom. In the consummation of the marriage, the two become one; and Christ's righteousness now characterizes the whole. Thus the abyss was bridged, the boundary breeched. But this was only after Luther realized there was no way for him to get to God that it was possible for God to get to him. The boundary between heaven and earth is absolute; but now a gate that was hidden has appeared. It is seen only by those who are broken; and it swings open in one direction only. And it is a gate that only God can unlock.

THE PASTORAL BATTLE AGAINST COMPLACENCY

Given the level of Luther's education and the frequency with which Masses were said at the Augustinian monastery, it is not surprising that his superiors called the young monk into the priesthood immediately upon his completion of the probationary year.⁹⁶ Originally, Staupitz assigned Luther to preach in the monastery; but at some point, probably around 1513, Luther began preaching

95. *LW* 31:300.

96. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 71. This would probably have been sometime in early 1507.

regularly, if sporadically, at the Wittenberg church as well.⁹⁷ “[I] was chosen to preach against my will,”⁹⁸ Luther announced in the first of his sermons upon his return to Wittenberg in 1522,⁹⁹ and “I was called by the council to preach . . . in spite of my reluctance.”¹⁰⁰ While Luther might not have chosen the priesthood for himself, it is clear that he took his pastoral responsibility to heart. Scott Hendrix, for example, argues that it was Luther’s calling as a pastor that best explains his resistance to papal claims of authority.¹⁰¹ Where God’s Word was withheld from the people, Luther thought the pastoral office was not being properly exercised; and he saw it as his calling to do what he could to free God’s Word from captivity. “The first and only duty of the bishop,” he wrote to Archbishop Albrecht in 1517, “is to see that the people learn the gospel and the love of Christ.” Christ “forcefully” commanded the gospel to be preached. “What a horror, what a danger for a bishop to permit the loud noise of indulgences among his people, while the gospel is silenced. . . . For all these souls,” he warns ominously, “you have the heaviest and a constantly increasing responsibility.”¹⁰²

One of the ways Luther exercised his pastoral responsibility was through his vocation as a teacher of the Bible. In his *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther makes it clear that the theologian’s work, like the pastor’s, is to serve as a soldier in God’s battle against Satan for the salvation of sinners. This means that “a theologian of the cross [should call] the thing what it actually is.”¹⁰³ It is not the job of theologians to think about temporal questions and to indulge in “sophistical” debate. “The whole of Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light.”¹⁰⁴ Most importantly, the theologian serves God’s Word; and Luther was convinced that in his context it was God’s word of judgment that needed to be spoken without reserve. Adopting Augustine’s understanding of sin as the prideful refusal to acknowledge God as God,¹⁰⁵ Luther was devoted to breaking open this fortress of the devil, which alienated sinners from God’s mercy. Luther believed that if he faithfully preached (and taught) God’s judging and freeing

97. *Ibid.*, 151.

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.*, 150.

100. *LW* 51:73.

101. Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 16–17.

102. *LW* 48:46.

103. *LW* 31:40.

104. *LW* 31:12.

105. *LW* 31:10. *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, thesis 17, reads, “Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God.”

word, it would be set free to do its saving work. Thus Luther argued, “The law of God [is] the most salutary doctrine of life. . . . “[It] brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ”; but this “is not to be evaded” because “it is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.”¹⁰⁶ Public disputations provided public venues for the Word to be set free to do its work. Even as Luther was engaged in making sure his star student, Bernhardt, could defend the theology Luther was teaching, Luther was at the same time preparing Bernhardt to preach the saving Word of God.

WITTENBERG THEOLOGY, AND HUMANISM

Early on in its life as an institution, the University of Wittenberg integrated the teachings of humanism¹⁰⁷ into its curriculum. Prince Frederick, in appointing Staupitz to help establish the new university, had already set the stage for the adoption of the new humanist curriculum, since Staupitz, with his humanist leanings, had a considerable influence on Luther’s educational development. Both were biblical scholars, and both cared deeply about the new opportunities offered by humanism for the study of Scripture. After 1516, Luther adopted Erasmus of Rotterdam’s newly annotated Greek New Testament; he used the newly available teachings of Jerome as well; and we have already noted the central place Augustine’s theology played in Luther’s development. But Luther had more in common with the humanists than his love of the ancient texts. He also shared their rejection of scholasticism, though, as Martin Brecht reports, Luther’s “rejection of scholasticism had reasons different from that of the humanists, and his distance from them is unmistakable.”¹⁰⁸ Luther’s early concern with Erasmus’s commentary on the biblical texts, which he revealed

106. *LW* 31:39ff.

107. Humanism developed out of the discovery and study of ancient or classical texts, spawning interest in the acquisition of language skills necessary to read these in their original languages. Initially associated with the Italian Renaissance, the movement quickly spread north; and by the time Luther took up advanced studies in the early sixteenth century it had established itself within many of the German university faculties. Given Prince Fredrick’s desire that his new university at Wittenberg should look toward the future, it is not surprising that a humanist curriculum quickly began to replace the traditional scholastic approach to the teaching of theology. Staupitz, who was instrumental in shaping the fledgling institution, was himself interested in humanist ideas; under Staupitz’s direction, Luther’s interest in the Bible quickly spawned a determination to read and study it in its original languages. This meant that, added to the Latin Luther had learned as a boy, he now acquired a facility in New Testament Greek and worked hard to similarly acquire reading skills in Hebrew.

108. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 163.

to Spalatin in a letter of 1516, already heralds what would later be a public distancing between the two scholars. At stake for Luther, and ultimately the key issue that distinguished the Wittenberg theology from the humanism being taught at other universities, was the Augustinian rejection of pride that played such a central role in Luther's thought. There was also an important, and unique, pastoral component of the Wittenberg program. In their focus on the ultimate matters related to salvation, Luther and his colleagues took a dim view of the philosophy so central to the teaching of the scholastics. Luther thought not only that the enormous importance of Aristotle and Aquinas in the scholastic project missed the point, but also, and worse, that the reliance on human nature built into its teaching had the devastating effect of increasing the very human arrogance and complacency that Luther rejected. In his view, scholastic teaching only exacerbated human beings' alienation from the saving work of Christ—saving work that could only be appropriated by a faith beginning with the recognition that “we are all beggars.” Initially, some of Luther's colleagues—in particular Karlstadt, who was dean of the faculty—resisted the Augustinian influence. But after carefully reading Augustine, Karlstadt was converted to Luther's position.

Initially, Luther said, the only student interested in his theology was a man named Bernhardi; but by the time Bernhardi was ready to graduate, Luther thought the time was right for a public presentation of his new theological ideas. He decided to do this via the disputation Bernhardi was required to hold on the occasion of his completion of the degree.¹⁰⁹ The theses Bernhardi prepared, under Luther's watchful eye, were designed to challenge the semi-Pelagian¹¹⁰ views of the *via moderna*—the branch of scholasticism in which Luther had been trained. Apparently, Bernhardi did a fine job of “cit[ing] Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings in a sharp rebuttal of Gabriel Biel.”¹¹¹ It was Bernhardi's task to introduce Luther's new understanding of God's law as Luther was then teaching it in his Romans lectures; and it seems that this public debut of Luther's “theology of the cross” succeeded in effectively supplanting whatever resistance still remained among the faculty.

Almost exactly a year later, as Luther was working on a commentary of Aristotle's *Physics* “for the purpose of dethroning the god of the scholastics,”¹¹²

109. *LW* 31:5–7. Bernhardi was awarded the degree that made him a *sententiarius* on September 25, 1516.

110. Ozment, *Age of Reform*, 39–42.

111. As we learn from Bernhard Lohse, Bernhardi “bluntly presented the new, radical view of sin advocated by Luther in his Romans lectures” (Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 98). Biel was the primary authority of the *via moderna*.

he wrote a set of theses for another ceremonial disputation. Again, his aim was to both teach and deliver God's judgment against the optimistic assessment of human powers then being heralded among the scholastics. The theses of the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (September 1517),¹¹³ went well beyond the standard arguments that humanists had been bringing to bear on scholasticism. Luther's early debates reveal the growing distance between himself and the humanists with whom he, and most of the Wittenberg theological faculty, had earlier aligned themselves.

LUTHER'S ATTACK ON SCHOLASTICISM

A sinful and self-deceptive rebellion against God, Luther believed, was endemic among those scholars who delighted too much in reason—these being first and foremost the scholastic theologians who made frequent use of Aristotle's philosophy in their scholarship and teaching. The Wittenberg curricular reforms reflect this conviction. In a letter to Spalatin in March of 1519, Luther wrote, "I think that the [lectures on Aristotle's *Physics*] should be continued only until they can be abolished—and this had better be soon. . . . It is . . . unworthy of [Melanchthon's] intellect to wallow in that mire of folly."¹¹⁴ In Luther's view, the scholastic approach to revelation served only to obscure Christ. "It is better," he exclaimed, "that [Aristotle and the others] be read [poorly] and misunderstood, than that they be understood."¹¹⁵ Aristotle's writings, which were revered among scholastics, thus became a particular target of Luther's. An important book of Aristotle's, titled *Nicomachean Ethics*, had excited the interest of scholastic theologians for centuries; but under the impact of Luther's developing theology of justification, it excited in Luther only his most scathing condemnation. "Briefly," he wrote in the fiftieth proposition of the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, "the whole of Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light." The biblical stories describing Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; a last judgment; and the promise of life eternal had shaped Christian expectations for well over a millennium before Aristotelian ethics were woven into the Christian narrative. Luther's complaint was that, under Aquinas's logical and creative mind, philosophy and theology had been merged into one all-encompassing system of thought that made the Christian life into a self-improvement project

112. *LW* 31:6.

113. *LW* 31:5–6.

114. *LW* 48:112.

115. *Ibid.*

that ultimately served only to entice sinners into a demonic complacency that would lure them away from salvation in Christ.

We have already noted the importance of Augustine's writings in Luther's struggle toward a faith that provided him with certainty of salvation. Luther was convinced that Augustine's analysis of sin was correct. In Augustine's view, sin is not simply a problem of bad habits that can be overcome by reason's discipline. Rather, sin runs all the way down, permeating the whole created order in such a way that reason is itself in bondage to the disordered will, and worse, it is blind to its own rebellion against God. "Anyone's will hates it that the law should be imposed upon it," Luther argued.¹¹⁶ Indeed, reason's hostility toward God is exercised so consistently and so cleverly that it succeeds in hiding this fact even from itself. Though we pretend otherwise in our pious protestations, "what the law wants the will never wants, unless it pretends to want it out of fear or love."¹¹⁷ This sinful quest for autonomy from God ultimately defines the human predicament, according to Augustine and Luther. And, as already alluded to, it was precisely this desire for independence from God that St. Augustine identified with "original sin." Picking up on Augustine's notion of the diseased will, Luther insisted that "everyone's natural will is iniquitous and bad."¹¹⁸ How do we know this? God's "law is good," but our will is "hostile to it."¹¹⁹ Reason, Luther insisted, could not therefore be so easily wed to revelation, as Aquinas had attempted to do with his synthesis of Aristotle and Augustine. "It is an error to maintain that Aristotle's statement concerning happiness does not contradict Catholic doctrine," Luther wrote.¹²⁰ Scripture does not promise that Christians will be happy. In fact, Luther cautioned, Jesus teaches his disciples to take up their cross and follow him into death. "Whoever would save his life would lose it" (Mark 8:35). The suggestion that what pleases reason also pleases God defies both Jesus' teaching and his life. Instead, Luther argues, the faithful, with Christ, should expect to suffer and die at the hands of this world, even as Jesus suffered and died on a cross.

"Let no one think that we who are Christians shall have peace on earth."¹²¹

116. *LW* 31:15.

117. *LW* 31:14.

118. *LW* 31:15.

119. *LW* 31:15.

120. *LW* 31:12.

121. *LW* 13:259

“. . . Christendom is a small group that must submit to, suffer, and bear more than all other people whatever grief the devil and the world can inflict on it.”¹²²

“He who does not die willingly should not be called a Christian.”¹²³

Agreement with the powers of this world—worldly success—insisted Luther, indicates that one has abandoned God, not that one has triumphed over sin. The cultivation of virtue and the pride it encourages threatens to lead those most successful into the worst possible danger. Alternatively, under the received penitential system, the failure to achieve such confidence threatens a despair that is likely to drag one away from God. Either way, Luther thought, one fails to find Christ’s gift of salvation. Luther’s personal experience with this theology had, in his mind at least, proven its existential weakness. We recall that it was precisely in his earnest attempt to please God that Luther realized certainty of salvation was impossible to attain. And even if there were some point of righteousness upon which one could build, it would never be possible to know when one had built high enough. The lingering threat of damnation had led Luther inexorably to fear, and finally to hate, God. In fact, he insisted, the scholastic tradition had become over time the very antithesis of faithful theologizing. A brilliantly designed tool of reason, this program, which encouraged the faithful to engage in the acquisition of virtue, succeeded not in pleasing God but in driving those most successful straight into the arms of Satan.¹²⁴ Since the goal of theology, as Luther defined it in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, is to “call a thing what it actually is,” he pulled no punches in his assault on human pride. From the Bernhardt theses of 1516 through the disputations against indulgences and scholastic theology, and then, on into 1518 in the disputation in Heidelberg, Luther single-mindedly attacked the prevailing theological tradition of his day with prophetic zeal. Having first been assigned to the teaching of Scripture, and then having discovered there God’s judgment against human presumption, Luther was convinced that God was using him to turn things around—to recall sinners to God.

As Erasmus grasped early on, the initial reforms applauded by humanists everywhere—the replacing of Aristotle’s philosophy with the intensive study of the church fathers and a new focus on Scripture—did not exhaustively describe the Wittenberg curriculum. The program there was distinctive in its

122. *LW* 24:358

123. *LW* 29:138.

124. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 27.

theocentric focus. This was not only for the sake of “calling a thing what it actually is.”¹²⁵ The Wittenberg theologians also pastorally sought to provide a better delivery system for God’s work of redemption and salvation. They hoped to work as God’s conduits, helping the baptized to discover the saving work of Christ that was theirs already. “The issue here is the future and eternal life,” Luther insisted.¹²⁶ Bringing God’s saving Word out in the open was, for the Wittenberg theologians, a matter of infinite importance—a fact that helps to explain Luther’s absolute rejection of anything remotely linked to pride or self-love during this period of his work. For, “the proper subject of theology,” wrote Luther in his reflections on the Psalms, resides exclusively in “man [understood as] guilty of sin and condemned, and God [understood as] the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject is error and poison.”¹²⁷ Luther and his colleagues on the theological faculty at Wittenberg were aiming, not at a moral reformation of the church (as were many of the humanists), but at the rebirth of faithful Christians. Their pastoral emphasis on a theology of the cross, calculated to drive sinners to Christ, distinguished Wittenberg from other universities that had embraced humanist reforms.

THE INDULGENCE CONTROVERSY: PASTORAL CONCERNS

It was just this pastoral concern for the salvation of human beings, “guilty of sin and condemned,” together with Luther’s experience of a God who alone was the “Justifier and Savior” of sinners, that led him to propose another disputation against indulgences; and it was at this juncture that the Wittenberg theology launched a political and religious reformation that turned the face of Western Europe toward the future.

“It happened, in the year 1517, that a preaching monk called John Tetzel . . . made his appearance.” So Luther begins his story, looking back from the vantage point of 1541, eager to tell his version of events. “Tetzel,” he continues, “went around with indulgences, selling grace for money as dearly or

125. *LW* 31:40. Steinmetz expands on this: This is a theology that “deals with a God who stands in a relationship to me and who lays claim to my life, whether I acknowledge that relationship or not. Where I am not included in my reflections about God, there is no Christian theology but only philosophical speculation. Only as God reveals himself to me through his Word, only insofar as I am confronted by this God and my faith is awakened, can theology be engaged in at all. Everything which stands outside the circle of light cast by revelation is impenetrable darkness” Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 26.

126. *LW* 12:311.

127. *LW* 12:311.

as cheaply as he could.”¹²⁸ “The whole world [in those days] complained about indulgences, and particularly about Tetzel. . . . That was the beginning. Indeed, it all goes back . . . to Tetzel’s blasphemous preaching.”¹²⁹

Blasphemous or not, Tetzel, who was an experienced and effective preacher of indulgences, easily succeeded in selling his indulgences to many of Luther’s own parishioners.

Indulgences were viewed as a special “kindness” bestowed upon the faithful by the church. The practice arose in response to the church’s penitential system. As it had developed over time, this approach to sin taught that guilt could be sacramentally absolved (or removed) by the priest; but the punishment for sin still had to be paid.¹³⁰ In Luther’s day, these “satisfactions” often took the form of prayers, pilgrimages, or fasting—works assigned by the penitent’s confessor. Prescribed works that remained unfulfilled at the time of death were believed to carry over into purgatory, where imperfect souls were believed to be purged of any remaining sin before entering into eternal life with God. The piety of Luther’s day focused largely on the avoidance of these purgatorial punishments; and indulgences, issued by the church, were one way to shorten the sentence, reducing or even eliminating it. Thus many eagerly sought indulgences in a world gripped by fear of divine condemnation.

128. *LW* 41:231. In 1506, Pope Julius II proclaimed what was called a *plenary indulgence*—that is, a general indulgence, covering the penance of sins committed and even those not yet committed. Originally conceived as a reward for Crusaders, plenary indulgences, in Luther’s day, were often instituted for specific purposes. In 1515, Pope Leo X renewed Julius’s indulgence for the purpose of raising money to help pay for the Church of St. Peter in Rome. Archbishop Albrecht, who was to get a cut of the money raised, in order to help fund his new ecclesiastical position (which he had to purchase from Rome), enlisted a man named John Tetzel, an experienced indulgence preacher. It was Tetzel’s job to set things up and make sure the indulgences were sold. The reason these were not being sold in Wittenberg appears to be because Prince Frederick, who owned an enormous collection of relics, did not want any competition. Viewing the relics of saints (for a fee) also provided a way to increase one’s accumulated merits and thereby decrease one’s expected time of suffering in purgatory. Tetzel came as close to Wittenberg as he could, however—close enough so that the people of Wittenberg could easily cross the border to purchase the indulgences. Albrecht, eager for the sales to successfully raise the money he needed, and being no theologian, prepared a book of instructions for the preachers who would be selling the indulgences. They were these instructions that most infuriated Luther; for they exaggerated even the claims made by Rome. See also Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 24–25.

129. *LW* 41:234.

130. Before the rise of private confession, sinners were absolved of their sin and restored to fellowship with the community only after they made their sorrow visible by way of prescribed penitential acts. After the introduction of private confession, the priest’s absolution normally preceded the works of penance that were prescribed after the sin had been forgiven.

How was it that the church could issue such pardons on behalf of God? Patterned after the banking system, the church's "treasury of merits"¹³¹ provided a kind of account upon which the pope could draw.¹³² Merits, which accumulated as the consequence of good works, could be used to satisfy sin, thereby replacing assigned punishments. The accumulated unused merits of Christ and the saints (unnecessary for those already perfected) provided the official tender of this treasury. But cash also played a role, since the sale of indulgences transferred these merits from the church's treasury to those individuals able to pay for them. By 1517, when Luther posted his infamous Ninety-Five Theses, the church was regularly turning to the sale of indulgences to fund its many political and ecclesiastical projects.¹³³

Given the important role indulgences played in sixteenth-century Christian piety, it is not surprising that Luther feared his parishioners would confuse the power of papal indulgences with God's gracious work in Christ. The remission of purgatorial punishment (from an experiential standpoint) was closely related to the remission of sin and death associated with Christ's crucifixion; and when preachers like Tetzel embellished the benefits of indulgences, they encouraged the laity to trust the pope's promises more than the promises of God. In addition, Christ called on his followers to bear their crosses faithfully, whereas indulgences seemed to provide a way to avoid Christian suffering.¹³⁴ In fact, indulgences eliminated the punishment that Luther believed was necessary, both for the perfection of souls and as a sign of unity with Christ. Like many of his monastic brothers, Luther thought that suffering was to be piously sought rather than avoided. For Luther, who in 1517 was still struggling himself to make peace with God, righteousness seemed possible only by way of a self-condemnation that demonstrated solidarity with God's judgment;¹³⁵ but the vast majority of the population, Luther knew,

131. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 24–25. Also see Janz, *Reformation Reader*, 57.

132. It was not until the scholastics codified these procedures during the High Middle Ages that control of indulgences was linked with the papacy. The treasury of merits was under the control of the pope because, as the heir of St. Peter, Catholics believe he is to be the earthly head of the church universal.

133. Luther did not know at the time when he wrote his Ninety-Five Theses that the money raised was to be divided—one half going for the announced work on St. Peter's and the other half to Archbishop Albrecht himself. The later discovery that this was the case only infuriated Luther all the more. Archbishop Albrecht had been granted a special dispensation from Rome that permitted him to hold several bishoprics simultaneously—a practice normally not allowed. See note 123 above.

134. Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 59; see also *LW* 31:28. "They who teach that contrition is not necessary on the part of those who intend to buy souls out of purgatory or to buy confessional privileges preach unchristian doctrine."

preferred a free pass if they could arrange it. “Indulgences teach people to fear and flee and dread the penalty of sins,” Luther wrote, “but not the sins themselves.”¹³⁶ Trusting in indulgences rather than in Christ, he thought, would lead his parishioners not to heaven but instead straight to hell.¹³⁷ As the pastor of these souls, Luther felt the weight of their eternal well-being on his conscience. “Many thousands [have] died,” he later recalled, by “relying on [indulgences] as though they were God’s grace.”¹³⁸ Remembering the early days of the indulgence controversy, Luther wrote in 1541, “I was a preacher here in the monastery and a fledgling doctor fervent and enthusiastic for Holy Scripture. . . . When many people from Wittenberg went to Jutterbock and Zerbst for indulgences . . . I began to preach very gently that one could probably do something better and more reliable than acquiring indulgences.”¹³⁹ As early as February 1517, on the occasion of St. Matthew’s Day (and a full eight months before his Ninety-Five Theses was posted), Luther preached on the need to take up one’s cross. “They are slaves,” he said; “they hate, not the sin, but the penalty.”¹⁴⁰ Indulgences, he argued, teach us to dread the cross.¹⁴¹

Indulgences were available to people in a number of ways. The papal indulgence that Tetzel was selling was particularly popular because of the extensive—and, as Luther believed, wholly excessive—promises associated with it; but there were other ways that indulgences could be procured. Penitential prayers in the presence of saintly relics provided another way to satisfy the debt of sin. Luther’s prince, Frederick the Wise, had gathered a great collection of such relics in Wittenberg, hoping to attract visitors to his territory (and one supposes, the revenue generated by their piety). Perhaps, on that particular All Saints’ Day in 1517, Luther was inspired to release his Ninety-Five Theses as he gazed out at the gathering of people who had come to Wittenberg in order to escape purgatorial suffering by viewing the prince’s relics.

Luther was not the only one concerned about the sale of indulgences. “The whole world [in those days] complained about indulgences,” Luther reports.¹⁴² Late medieval developments had caused many theologians to worry about the

135. The crucifixion of Christ is understood by the church to be God’s way of atoning for the sin of all people, thereby freeing human beings from the sin that separates them from God.

136. *LW* 51:31.

137. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 27.

138. *LW* 41:237.

139. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*. 26

140. *LW* 51:30.

141. *LW* 51:31

142. *LW* 41:231–36.

enlarged claims associated with these pieces of paper, so eagerly sought by the laity. A practice that had begun as a special kindness, limited in scope to the relaxation of particular, assigned penances, had expanded to include the plenary indulgence of the sort being sold by Tetzel.¹⁴³ This amounted to a free pass, covering all temporal punishment and forgiving all sin, including even those sins not yet committed. Luther, along with others, worried about the effects of such claims on Christian piety. The extension of indulgences to cover those souls already in purgatory was especially problematic. Given these concerns, and in the absence of official papal teaching,¹⁴⁴ Luther's call for a formal debate on the topic was wholly in line with his responsibilities as a teacher of the church.¹⁴⁵ Besides, Luther was eager to learn more. Though the character of his language in the theses on indulgences is undeniably bold, Luther repeatedly claimed that he wanted to understand the indulgence practice better. In 1541, he recalled, "I did not know what indulgences were, as in fact no one knew . . . [and] I did not want the fame."¹⁴⁶

Quite clear, however, about what indulgences were not, Luther did not mince words in his letter to Albrecht Archbishop of Mainz on that All Souls' Day of 1517. Luther held the archbishop responsible for the exaggerated promises that Tetzel was preaching to Luther's parishioners; for it was Archbishop Albrecht who had provided the instructions for Tetzel's sale of indulgences. "I bewail the gross misunderstanding among the people which comes from these preachers and which they spread everywhere among common men," Luther began.¹⁴⁷ He then went on to challenge the claims that

143. Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 58–59. Quotations from the *Instructions* issued by Archbishop Albrecht and used by Tetzel: "In the confessional the following concessions are made for those who pay for it: the right to choose . . . a suitable confessor . . . [who] can absolve them once in the course of their lives and also in *articulao mortis* from certain of the gravest of sins as often as death threatens, even if the threat does not materialize. . . . The fourth principal grace is the plenary remission of all sins for the souls that exist in purgatory, which the pope grants and concedes by means of intercessions, so that a contribution placed by the living in the repository on their behalf counts as one which a man might make or give for himself. There is no need for the contributors to be of contrite heart or to make oral confession. . . ."

144. Though there had been a number of statements from Rome on the matter of indulgences, no formal declaration, or "bull," had yet been issued. Toward the end of 1518, Pope Leo would release such a bull, apparently in response to the widening controversy that followed on the heels of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses.

145. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 127: "Precisely at Luther's time, expert scholars were beginning to claim an independent, rival authority over against those who possessed ecclesiastical and secular power. The doctor's degree and his professorship were a binding commission and a sworn obligation for Luther."

146. *LW* 41:231–232.

147. *LW* 48:46.

Albert's instructions authorized. "Evidently the poor souls believe that when they have bought indulgence letters they are then assured of their salvation. They are likewise convinced that souls escape from purgatory as soon as they have placed a contribution into the chest. Further, they assume that the grace obtained through these indulgences is so completely effective that there is no sin of such magnitude that it cannot be forgiven."¹⁴⁸

THE NINETY-FIVE THESES

The theses themselves,¹⁴⁹ proposed for the sake of debate, were provisional, as were all theses presented for public disputation. Though stated as a matter of fact, they were formulated as claims precisely so they might be challenged. Nevertheless, these 1517 theses on indulgences still reveal a good deal about Luther's real concerns at that time. Beyond that, and of particular interest here, is the fact that in and through his sense of pastoral responsibility, Luther's two-kingdom distinction was beginning to emerge. This key insight draws a boundary between the limited, temporal reach of human works on one hand and the power of God on the other. As Luther begins his list of debating points, this idea quickly emerges. In thesis 5, for example, he argues that "the pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons."¹⁵⁰ After all, he continues in 34, "the traces of [papal] indulgences are concerned only with the penalties. . . . established by man."¹⁵¹ Luther thereby eliminates the suffering in purgatory (a penalty established by God) from those things over which the pope has control. At the same time, the pope can and should act as a kind of mask for God's work, making visible what God has already made real. "The pope [himself] cannot remit any guilt," Luther writes; but he does affect the outcome "by declaring and showing that it has been remitted by God."¹⁵² Thus Luther is careful to limit the pope's effective authority to the lifting of punishments imposed by the institutional church on earth. When the pope uses the words "plenary remission of all penalties," Luther concludes, he "does not actually mean all penalties, but only those imposed by himself."¹⁵³ The domain of the pope is restricted to penultimate judgments having to do with this life; ultimate judgments belong

148. *LW* 48:46.

149. *LW* 31:17.

150. *LW* 31:26.

151. *LW* 31:28.

152. *LW* 31:26.

153. *LW* 31:27.

to God alone. The distinction between the penultimate limit on human efficacy and the ultimate or infinite reach of God is crucial.

Though Luther is often accused of attacking the authority of the pope in these theses, his goal was not so much to diminish the power of the temporal church as to reassert the ultimate authority of God. Once again, we see Luther attempting to remap the theological landscape; his pastoral objective in these theses was to restore a proper “fear of God.”¹⁵⁴ This pastoral concern is at the fore as he offers a series of theses (42–51) that begin, “Christians are to be taught . . .” For instance, in thesis 49, he writes, “Christians are to be taught that papal indulgences are useful only if they do not put their trust in them, but very harmful if they lose their fear of God because of them.” And again, pointing to God’s majesty, Luther speaks of the “inestimable gift of God by which man is reconciled to him.” The celebration of the gospel, Luther argues, should be one hundred times as impressive as the celebration of indulgences; for ultimately the “true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God” (thesis 62).

Luther’s growing theological clarity on the distinction between realms was forged historically in the context of his challenge to indulgences, providing a foundation for the faith that he was experientially still struggling to articulate. This much was already clear—that true faith begins with a recognition of the living God, whose power and righteousness is beyond all human manipulation. Luther’s emphasis on the inability of human beings to influence the spiritual domain of God would quickly come to function theologically from the opposite direction as well. If human beings have no jurisdiction over God’s judgments, neither do they have any effective power over God’s saving grace. The agency in such spiritual matters is all God’s. The same distinction between the realms that works here to limit papal intervention in divine judgment would also come to protect salvation from the dangers of human interference.¹⁵⁵

The pastoral concern Luther demonstrates in his Ninety-Five Theses was directed toward the church for the sake of the laity. Just as faithful Christians

154. *LW* 31:206. From his *Explanations* (for thesis 49): “I have said that indulgences are most harmful if people rejoice over such liberty without fear of God” (see also 205). Luther quotes from Job 9:28: “Blessed is the man who fears the Lord,” and from Ps. 112:1: “Blessed is the man who fears the Lord always.” “A saint is afraid that he might work less or suffer less than he should. Where does that put the sinner who has his sin remitted when he does less than he could do?” (*LW* 31:206).

155. *LW* 32:94. “Those who are involved in sins are not free but prisoners of the devil. . . . It is neither right nor good to play tricks with words in matters of such great importance. A simple man is easily deceived by such tricks and teachers of this kind.” Also, from *LW* 33:35, “If I am ignorant of what, how far, and how much I can and may do in relation to God, it will be equally uncertain and unknown to me, what, how far, and how much God can and may do in me. . . .”

should expect the sting of purgation from sin, so too Luther thought a faithful church would welcome the challenges his theses offered. It is notable that Luther did not hold Pope Leo responsible for the false and dangerous promises he associated with the sale of indulgences. These impious practices were simply the work of charlatans, Luther thought—people ignorant of the associated dangers, and in need of correction. As a loyal member of Christ's church, and as one ordained and appointed to teach, Luther presented his theses against indulgences in the spirit of loyal service, confident that he stood alongside those in authority. "If the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers," Luther declared confidently, "he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep" (thesis 50). Thus Luther's Ninety-Five Theses reflected theological opinions he thought were widely shared throughout the church. Convinced that most theologians, and certainly Pope Leo, would agree that Tetzel's preaching was both incorrect and dangerous, Luther expected the pope, once informed, to quickly silence Tezel and other overzealous indulgence preachers. Thus it was for the sake of the people, for the honor of the papacy, and for the good of the whole church that Luther felt himself called to invite his colleagues to a disputation on indulgences. The dispute he provoked exceeded his wildest expectations.

THE CHURCH'S RECEPTION OF LUTHER'S PROPOSAL

No one was more shocked than Luther when he discovered what a hornet's nest he had stirred up. The "theses against Tetzel's articles," he recalled in 1541, "went throughout the whole of Germany in a fortnight."¹⁵⁶ Still, on the day they were posted, Luther had not an inkling of the controversy they would incite; and as the dispute spread rapidly, he assumed that the matter was but another manifestation of tensions already existing between the humanists and traditionalists at competing universities.¹⁵⁷

156. *LW* 41:234.

157. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 37. "[Luther] was aware that he was contradicting the teaching of Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians, but there was no reason for him to equate this theological disagreement with an attack on the papacy. . . . The entire program of curricular reform at the University of Wittenberg was shaped around the replacement of an Aristotelian-based theology with the study of the Bible, biblical languages, and the church fathers. This reform had been underway for some time in Wittenberg and no one had thought to challenge it as an attack on the papacy. . . . Luther regarded the issue as another encounter between the theology of the schoolmen on the one side and the Wittenberg theology of Scripture and the church fathers on the other."

Initially the controversy was limited to those scholars and churchmen already known to Luther. Archbishop Albrecht sent Luther's theses on to the faculty at the University of Mainz for their opinion. The theologians there refused to comment; interpreting Luther's theses as a challenge to papal authority, they reminded Albrecht that canon law forbade disputation on such questions. They suggested he refer the matter to Rome. Albrecht had, in fact, already done just that, including with the theses a warning that this Augustinian monk from Wittenberg was "spreading new teachings."¹⁵⁸ Tetzel, the indulgence preacher who had so offended Luther, is reported to have announced, "In three weeks I will throw the heretic into the fire."¹⁵⁹ Instead, in late January, he debated a set of theses that countered Luther's, claiming for the papacy all the authority Luther had rejected.¹⁶⁰

With the aid of the newly invented printing press, the news of Luther's theses continued to spread rapidly.¹⁶¹ Tetzel's published reply to Luther reached the Wittenberg bookseller in early March. Only four and a half months had elapsed since Luther had released the theses, and the dispute had already become so public that students loyal to Luther seized and burned some eight hundred copies of Tetzel's booklet. In an effort to quiet things down, Luther published *A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* several days later, which he wrote in German rather than Latin. Luther's decision to address the wider public in a language they could understand suggests the considerable impact his theses were having on public opinion. Over the following two years, Luther's *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* was reprinted at least twenty times; apparently, he had a message people were eager to hear.¹⁶²

Posted at the end of October, the theses had been in the hands of the curia since January. Initially Pope Leo chose to handle the matter gently, requesting Luther's superiors to persuade him to withdraw his objections. When this produced no result, the curia, in early June of 1518, began to prepare for a heresy trial against Luther. On August 7, Luther received the official summons, requesting his presence for a hearing in Rome in just sixty days.

The summons to Rome, which arrived in Wittenberg on August 7, must have come as a shock to Luther, given his confident expectation that Leo

158. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 206.

159. *Ibid.*

160. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 34–35. Hendrix's book provides a thorough discussion of the controversy over indulgences. See also Brecht, *Martin Luther*.

161. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 208.

162. *Ibid.* "Without the new medium of the printing press," Brecht adds, "Luther's thoughts would never have achieved such a rapid and wide distribution."

would agree with and support him.¹⁶³ Despite the local firestorm that his theses had ignited, and since the curricular reforms at Wittenberg had not been challenged, Luther did not initially believe himself to be in any serious trouble. In Luther's view, his theses on indulgences were simply a particular application of the same theology that had been openly taught for some time at Wittenberg. Why, he reasoned, would the church allow the Wittenberg professors to challenge scholasticism (with its reliance on papal authority) and at the same time deny Luther the freedom to question that authority in relation to the narrower issue of indulgences? With the arrival of the summons, however, it became clear that the church was treating the indulgence dispute as a serious challenge to its authority. Luther's anxiety in the face of the papal summons is revealed in his immediate attempt to forestall the dangerous journey he was being required to make to Rome.

LUTHER'S HEARING BEFORE CARDINAL CAJETAN

Prince Frederick, who wielded significant political power, was able to negotiate a change in venue. Rather than Rome, Luther was to be "heard" by Cardinal Cajetan, a theologian of repute, who was already in Germany to represent Rome at the Diet of Augsburg. Having secured Cajetan's agreement to treat Luther gently, and having made all other arrangements for Luther's safety as he could, Frederick summoned Luther to Augsburg sometime in mid-September. On October 7, he arrived in Augsburg; and by Tuesday October 12, Luther was finally ushered into the presence of the cardinal, where he dropped to the floor in an act of obeisance as he had been instructed to do. Though Cajetan began in a gentle manner, his promise to treat Luther "in a fatherly way" faltered once their differences became apparent.¹⁶⁴ Luther had come expecting to engage in a real debate; but Cajetan had been instructed by Rome to refrain from all discussion with Luther. Apparently he was to offer Luther nothing more than the opportunity to retract his errors and refrain from further provocation. Thus the meeting was not only difficult but also decisive, as each hardened his position in reaction to the other.

163. *LW* 41:235: "I [had] hoped the pope would protect me," he later recalled, "because I had so secured and armed my disputation with Scripture and papal decretals that I was sure the pope would damn Tetzel and bless me."

164. "Both sides entered the discussion with completely different expectations and objectives. [In addition] they did not like each other very much. . . . Under these conditions the proceedings were bound to be difficult" (Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 253).

Cajetan would neither allow Luther to reply to the allegations against him in a public disputation, nor, Luther lamented, “did he want to debate with me in private.” Frustrated, Luther complained to his friend that Cajetan had only one thing to say; and he apparently said it over and over. “Recant, acknowledge that you are wrong; [for] that is the way the Pope wants it.”¹⁶⁵ In fact, despite Luther’s frustration, Cajetan did respond to some real issues in Luther’s argument. First, with regard to the indulgences, Cajetan focused on Luther’s refusal to acknowledge the critical link between Christ’s merits, the pope’s treasury, and the effective power of papal indulgences.¹⁶⁶ Since, according to church teaching, the forgiveness promised in the pope’s indulgences was ultimately guaranteed by Christ’s work, the claim that Christ’s merits were the exclusive property of the pope to distribute as he saw fit was a key element in the logic of indulgences. But this suggested to Luther that the pope was presuming to control God’s judgments. Indulgences, thus understood, obligated God to honor human decisions as to who should be forgiven—a situation that seemed to turn things upside down. And worse, Luther thought, was the fact that these human tickets into heaven were being sold to the highest bidders in order to fill the coffers of the church at Rome. The availability of the necessary funds for the purchase of an indulgence rather than the character of one’s righteousness thus seemed to determine a person’s ultimate destiny. Faith, good works, and the obligation to honor God set forth in the First Commandment were, in Luther’s view, dangerously overturned in the exorbitant claims being made by the sale of indulgences.

But even more difficult from Luther’s perspective was Cajetan’s rejection of Luther’s teaching that faith rested on the certainty of God’s truthfulness. Such a certainty of salvation, insisted the cardinal, is a teaching both “new and erroneous.”¹⁶⁷ But having only just begun to escape his own paralyzing fear of God on the basis of this newfound confidence, Luther could hardly relinquish the very heart of his new theology. For Luther, the question of certainty was

165. *LW* 48:84.

166. Written by Clement VI in 1343, it was also called *Extravagante* because it was published only as an appendix to canon law. (See n3, *LW* 31:260.) Luther’s dispute with (and ultimate rejection of) the *Extravagante* is summarized in his *Proceedings at Augsburg*: “If [indulgences] convey an actual gift, they do so not as a treasury of indulgences but as a treasure of life-giving grace. Then they are given formally, actually, directly, without the office of the keys, without indulgences, alone by the Holy Spirit” (*LW* 31:269). Note that if these words are taken literally (and out of context), the church, as the conduit of God’s grace, appears to become redundant—presumably a legitimate matter of concern to Cardinal Cajetan.

167. *LW* 31:270.

no longer a debatable point; and complicating things still further was Luther's conviction that it is the devil who tries to tear the faithful away from their confidence in God's truthfulness. "With your doubt you make of Christ a liar," he told the cardinal.¹⁶⁸

Cajetan's insistence that human beings are, at least in part, responsible for their own salvation threatened to pry open the door that Luther had with such difficulty finally closed.¹⁶⁹ As suggested earlier, Luther's Ninety-Five Theses drew an absolute boundary between the efficacy of human and divine activity—a distinction clearly related to Luther's experience of the abyss and his appreciation of Augustine's two cities, and ultimately central to his belief that salvation is entirely a free gift of God. Luther had carefully substantiated these claims with biblical texts. Now Cajetan's assault on this assertion made it impossible for Luther to acquiesce. "I beg your most reverend highness to . . . have compassion," Luther pleaded, "and not to compel me to revoke those things which I must believe according to the testimony of my conscience. As long as these Scripture passages stand, I cannot do otherwise, for I know that one must obey God rather than man."¹⁷⁰ "Show me," Luther begged, "how I may understand the doctrine differently."¹⁷¹

But, for Luther, to be "shown" meant that Cajetan would have to demonstrate Luther's errors with a convincing argument from Scripture. It was a predictable demand from Luther, but impossible for Cajetan to honor. To give such priority to the scriptural evidence, Cajetan would have had to abandon the very foundation upon which his arguments rested—namely, that the pope's

168. Luther had by now discovered that his faith could rest with certainty on God's promise rather than on his own state of contrition—a subjective foundation that was inherently unreliable. "With your doubt," Luther now taught, "you make of Christ a liar, which is a horrible sin. . . . Thus it is clearly necessary that a man must believe with firm faith that he is justified and in no way doubt that he will obtain grace" (*LW* 31:271). It was God's word revealed in the reliable writings of the Bible that finally provided the certainty (and the peace with God) that Luther had so desperately sought. And it was just this certainty that the cardinal rejected.

169. In the written statement Luther had prepared for Cajetan, Luther appended to his biblical argument supporting texts from both St. Augustine and St. Bernard, thus demonstrating his use of a "consensus of sources." Augustine writes, "When the Word is coupled with the element, it becomes a sacrament, but because it is believed." Cited in *LW* 31:274. See note 24: In *Joannis evangelium*, tract. 80, cap. 3 (Migne 35, 1840). From Bernard, "You must above all believe that you cannot have forgiveness of sins except through the mercy of God." And Luther continues, "Add to this that you must believe that your sins are forgiven by God" (*LW* 31:274). The term "consensus of sources" is helpful in describing Luther's epistemology. It is a term introduced and defended by Scott Hendrix in his book, *Luther and the Papacy*, 41.

170. *LW* 31:274.

171. *LW* 31:274.

interpretation of Scripture was absolute. For Cajetan, faith meant submission to the authority of the church; for Luther, it was the authority of Scripture that determined whether the church was being faithful to God.¹⁷² Given this basic difference in their theological method, there was simply no way for them to move ahead toward agreement.

The third and final day of Luther's hearing at Augsburg offered no new possibilities. Luther's written response to Cajetan began by rejecting any claim to papal authority that does not conform to Scripture. Then, arguing again for the necessity of certainty in the reception of the sacrament as well as in the reception of Christ's "justifying" presence, Luther insisted that he could not, nor should he be asked to, recant what he believed to be true on the basis of Scripture. The cardinal finally dismissed Luther, shouting "Go, and do not come back to me, unless you want to recant." "When I heard this," Luther later wrote in his report to Spalatin, "and realized that he was firm in his position and would not consider the Scripture passages, and since I had also determined not to retract, I left with no hope of returning."¹⁷³ In a dramatic gesture at once prudent and poignant, Staupitz (who had come along to support his protégé) absolved Luther from his vows as an Augustinian monk, thereby freeing himself from any responsibility to imprison or silence Luther should the pope press him to do so. Much later, Luther spoke of this as his first "excommunication."

Luther slipped out of Augsburg by night, on a borrowed horse, arriving in Nuremberg exhausted and ill on October 22. It was there, for the first time, that Luther was faced with the hard evidence of Pope Leo's opposition to his Ninety-Five Theses, though at the time Luther refused to believe it. While he was resting in Nuremberg, Luther received a copy of a letter that had been addressed to Cardinal Cajetan from Pope Leo. Sent in late August, the letter bore instructions regarding Luther's scheduled hearing. It directed the cardinal to simply seize Luther and hold him until he could be brought to Rome for a trial. Should Luther not appear, Leo instructed Cajetan to declare Luther a heretic, to summarily excommunicate him from the church, and to place Luther under the ban.¹⁷⁴ Every civil and ecclesial institution was to be informed that harboring Luther would result in similar excommunication from the church.

Luther read the letter with shock and disbelief, and then declared it a forgery. It suggested a pope so different from the Leo that Luther thought he knew—the Leo he had for so long defended—that he simply would not, could not, believe that this harsh judgment came from Leo's hand. "It is unbelievable,"

172. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 253.

173. *LW* 31:275. See also *LW* 48:90–91.

174. *LW* 31:286–89. For information on the ban, see Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 287.

he wrote to Spalatin, “that such a monstrosity should have been released by a pope, especially by Leo X.”

Luther believed that the cardinal was somehow behind this “forgery,” and while this was not the case, Cajetan did want Luther silenced, and for good reasons. The cardinal’s grasp of the underlying implications of Luther’s theology was astute; and Cardinal Cajetan was guarding church dogma with the same zeal Luther brought to the protection of Scripture. Not only was he assiduous in his refusal to succumb to Luther’s insistence on a debate of the scriptural arguments, but ultimately it was Cajetan who probably authored the bull excommunicating Luther from the church. If there was a defender of the Roman Church who is to be celebrated in this historical contest, it is surely Cardinal Cajetan. And, true to form, even before Luther had arrived back in Wittenberg, Cajetan had sent Prince Frederick his report of the hearing. Assuring the prince that he had treated Luther in a “fatherly way,” the cardinal went on to soundly denounce Luther’s teachings as heretical, demanding that Frederick arrest Luther and send him to Rome immediately, or at least expel him from Saxony.¹⁷⁵

Things were not looking good for Luther in the wake of his Augsburg hearing; but he continued to trust that God would use him in defense of the gospel, even if this entailed a heretic’s death. Luther was prepared to follow where God led him. As with the *Anfechtungen*, Luther now saw God’s hand hidden behind the growing dangers. “I daily expect the condemnation from the city of Rome,” Luther wrote to Spalatin; “therefore I am setting things in order and arranging everything so that if it comes I am prepared and girded to go, as Abraham, not knowing where, yet most sure of my way, because God is everywhere.”¹⁷⁶ Luther assured his friend that he would “of course leave a farewell letter.” “See to it,” he cautioned, “that you have the courage to read the letter of a man who is condemned and excommunicated. Farewell for now,” he concluded, “and pray for me.”¹⁷⁷ Luther also bid his congregation farewell; and on the evening of December 1, 1518, having made up his mind to leave, he gathered with friends for a small celebration.

It was in the midst of this gathering that a last-minute reprieve arrived—instructions from the prince informing Luther that he should not leave Wittenberg. Thus the immediate crisis was resolved.

175. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 66

176. LW 48:94.

177. LW 48:94.

FROM DOUBT TO OPEN REBELLION

Luther's confidence in Pope Leo was soon dealt another blow. On November 9, the pope issued an official teaching on indulgences reaffirming, point by point, Cajetan's presentation of the matter at Augsburg. The document made no attempt to meet the biblical arguments Luther had raised in opposition.¹⁷⁸ Now Luther could no longer argue that he brought a responsible and legitimate challenge to church practices in the absence of any official doctrine.

In Luther's report of the *Proceedings at Augsburg*, which he published in late November, we see him putting a new distance between himself and the church as his anger spills over into a clear denunciation of Rome. "It has long been believed that whatever the Roman church says, damns, or wants, all people must eventually say, damn, or want, and that no other reason need be given than that the Apostolic See and the Roman church hold that opinion." The indiscretion of flatterers, he was convinced, had succeeded in replacing the sacred Scripture with the words of mere men, so that the church was no longer being fed with the word of Christ. Thus Luther concluded, "We have come to this in our great misfortune, that the people [in Rome] begin to force [Christians] to renounce the Christian faith and deny Holy Scripture."¹⁷⁹ Having thus framed the matter, it was clear to Luther what God was calling him to do. Whether or not Pope Leo was responsible, Luther now believed that power in Rome had been usurped by those who would prioritize human words above God's. "Divine truth is master also over the pope," Luther wrote, and so, in this situation, "I do not await the judgment of man when I have learned the judgment of God."¹⁸⁰

Given the widening controversy over Luther's theses, Staupitz was eager to give Luther a chance to publicly present his new theology, and arranged for a disputation before the order as they gathered at Heidelberg for their regular meeting.¹⁸¹ In this disputation at Heidelberg, which "made a great impression

178. Hendrix, *Luther and the papacy*, 76–77.

179. *LW* 31:276.

180. *LW* 31:277.

181. There is disagreement about the details regarding the reasons for Luther's participation in this disputation. In his introduction to the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Harold Grimm writes, "More important for the course of the Reformation, was the fact that Staupitz asked Luther and Beir to participate in a disputation at the Augustinian monastery on April 26 to acquaint the brothers with the new evangelical theology. To avoid arousing animosity against Luther, Staupitz asked him not to debate controversial subjects but to prepare theses concerning sin, free will, and grace. . . ." (*LW* 31:37). However, Martin Brecht is less confident of the historical details. "Whether Staupitz's hand was at work here, or whether Luther was given the task of presiding because he was the director of the most important *Ordensstudium*, is not known" (Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 215).

on its hearers,”¹⁸² Luther argued again against the scholastic theology, which focused on the acquisition of virtue. As long as persons act “as they are able to do, in themselves,” Luther claimed, their acts, no matter how attractive they might appear, are, before God, still entirely evil.¹⁸³ It was a strong claim, and one that would eventually distance Luther irretrievably from Rome. Nevertheless, Luther’s attack on scholastic optimism was warmly received among his Augustinian brothers. Many of the younger monks were impressed with Luther’s emphasis on faith, his Augustinian refocusing on God, and his ability as a scriptural scholar to ground his arguments in the biblical texts. Some of these young men eventually became Luther’s staunchest defenders, devoting their lives to this theological reformation of the church then still in its infancy.¹⁸⁴ Thus, even as Luther’s case was daily growing more serious in Rome, the new “Wittenberg theology” was enjoying a friendly reception in Germany among friends and colleagues.

LEIPZIG

As Rome continued to prepare its case against Luther, the growing interest in the new Wittenberg theology back in Germany culminated in another important disputation. During the summer of 1519, a disputation in Leipzig was widely advertised, and there were many who were eager to hear Luther defend his writings. The recently invented printing press played an important role in gathering the audience at Leipzig. A major new edition of Luther’s Latin Works had by this time been read, studied, and debated by scholars throughout Germany and as far away as Switzerland, Denmark, and even England.¹⁸⁵ Word of the Heidelberg Disputation had also aroused a good deal of interest. In addition, Luther had translated a number of his pieces from scholarly Latin into the German language of the people, hoping to correct misunderstandings that might be brewing. In light of the wide dissatisfaction with the church so prevalent in Germany, Luther’s writings had been eagerly embraced by many who simply appreciated his bold stance in relation to Rome. Quite apart from the prophetic responsibility he felt to protect the biblical word of God, Luther was also a man of the people. He, like so many others, felt that the wealth of Germany was being drained away by papal taxes and schemes such as the sale

182. Lohse, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 107.

183. *Ibid.*, 106–7.

184. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 216.

185. *Ibid.*, 284 Brecht refers here to the Froben edition of Luther’s collected works that was published in Basel.

of indulgences. But other factors also seem to have influenced the extraordinary interest around the Leipzig debate—in particular, Luther’s increasingly open challenge to the claim of papal jurisdiction. Quite apart from the theological arguments Luther was raising, there were many who would have been intensely interested in the political ramifications of Luther’s attack on Roman authority.

The initial impetus for the Leipzig debate came not from Luther but in response to a series of theses that had been published by Andreas Karlstadt.¹⁸⁶ Karlstadt had originally written in support of Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, which Johann Eck publicly challenged. Eck, piqued by Karlstadt’s reply, sought to engage Karlstadt in a public disputation to settle the matter. In fact, while Luther was still in Augsburg,¹⁸⁷ he and Eck had worked out the details for this meeting at Leipzig, where Karlstadt and Eck were to face off. But that was before Luther saw Eck’s theses, which turned out to include a direct attack on Luther. It was clear to Luther that Eck was using Karlstadt as a way to engage Luther publicly. Eck’s unusual and unexpected attack on Luther could only be taken as a provocation; and such a bold gesture could not go unchallenged in a world where academic prowess was measured by a man’s ability to rhetorically defend himself. With the reputation of the university at stake, Luther explained to Frederick that he had no choice but to respond. Late-medieval academic etiquette, while distinctive to its time and place, was surely no less important nor the fragility of scholarly egos any less volatile than they are today.

The fanfare surrounding the Leipzig Disputation in July of 1519 was extraordinary.¹⁸⁸ Not only were the spectators interested in the competitive events—in this case the ten days of public debates—but there was also popular interest in the contenders themselves. Comparisons were made about their reception, their accommodations, and their lives. On June 24, the Wittenbergers arrived en masse. Karlstadt, leading the way as dean of the theological faculty, rode into Leipzig in the first wagon, piled high with books. Apparently the fact that one of the wheels fell off his wagon as he paraded into town did nothing to diminish the festival atmosphere. Karlstadt was followed by Luther, Melancthon, the rector of the university at Wittenberg, and the Duke of Pomerania in wagon number two. Alongside walked a crowd of students and other professors from Wittenberg. They had all come to support their colleagues. All told, the delegation from Wittenberg who had come to support

186. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 80. See also Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 302.

187. Luther had come to Augsburg for the hearing before Cardinal Cajetan the previous summer.

188. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 310–22. Brecht provides a close description of the Leipzig disputation and the many related events surrounding it. See also *LW* 31:310–11.

their colleagues numbered nearly two hundred men. Eck's supporters quickly closed ranks in order to organize a similar escort of honor.

The disputants were wined and dined, especially Eck, whom Luther believed was widely favored at Leipzig. It is true that Eck's lodgings were provided, while Luther and Karlstadt had to find their own arrangements. But Duke George invited all three disputants to dinner, and the city honored the debaters with gifts. Martin Brecht reports that Eck was given a stag, Karlstadt a doe, and Luther nothing except the required gift of wine—apparently the minimum that etiquette required. Luther felt slighted, and he complained that “the citizens of Leipzig neither greeted nor called on us but treated us as though we were their bitterest enemies. Eck, they followed around town . . . clung to [him], banqueted, entertained, and finally presented [him] with a robe. . . . In short,” Luther complained, “they did whatever they could to insult us.”¹⁸⁹ Eck, however, reported that most of the citizens were Lutherans. Partisanship was clearly rampant. The accusation of heresy hung over Luther like a cloud, delighting some and distancing others. “The Dominicans were already treating Luther like a heretic,” writes Martin Brecht. “When he entered their church while masses were being celebrated, the monks quickly took the monstrance off into a safe place.”¹⁹⁰

It was at Leipzig that Luther, for the first time, publicly revealed a new—and from Rome's perspective, distinctly dangerous—ecclesiology. Luther's proposal included, among other things, a radically reinterpreted understanding of papal authority—one which made it clear to everyone that he had moved well beyond the traditional teaching of the church. But the notoriety associated with this exposure did not come about by accident. Eck apparently intended to challenge Luther publicly on this matter, and he succeeded brilliantly, seizing the opportunity presented at Leipzig to draw Luther out into the open on the question of Rome's claim to exclusive oversight of the church universal.

Luther's revolutionary new understanding of the church, like so many of his ideas, was derived from his underlying distinction between the two

189. *LW* 31:323.

190. The monstrance is a receptacle, often silver or gold, that holds consecrated bread from the Eucharist celebration. In Roman Catholic teaching, the consecrated bread is understood to be the body of Christ; thus the monstrance holds Christ's bodily presence in the midst of the people. Heretics are banned from participation in the Communion meal; thus the Dominican monks were “treating Luther like a heretic” by removing the monstrance from Luther's presence. Thomas Aquinas was a Dominican, and Aquinas's teachings form the core of scholastic theology. Thus, according to Brecht, the Dominicans were on the side of Eck and against Luther in this controversy. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 311.

realms—between the realm of the old Adam (this fallen world) and the spiritual realm of the new Adam (Christ’s kingdom). In this world, Luther conceded, the pope has real authority that should be honored. The fact that Rome had enjoyed jurisdiction over other local churches for centuries argued for God’s intentionality. But Rome had been given this authority only for the sake of ordering the institutional church. The inner, spiritual, or “true church”—the ultimate expression of Christian unity in Christ—was, in Luther’s view, rightly understood as distinct from the Roman Church, even as the spiritual realm is distinct from the temporal. Not Peter, but Christ, Luther insisted, is the universal head of the one true spiritual church. This view of the church had critical implications for Luther himself.¹⁹¹ Redefined as a penultimate, human institution, the Roman Church, like all things human, would be susceptible to sin and error. Thus, Luther reasoned, Rome’s official condemnation of his teaching did not necessarily represent God’s judgment. The threat of excommunication from the Roman Church, therefore, and the imposition of the ban (forbidding participation in the sacraments), no longer terrified Luther as they once had. “In this matter,” he could now declare, “I fear neither the pope nor the name of the pope. . . . One thing only am I concerned about, namely, that the despoiling of my Christian name does not bring with it the loss of the most holy doctrine of Christ. In this matter I do not want anyone to expect patience of me. . . . Let them terrify someone else.”¹⁹²

Luther had by now found a secure “foothold”—place to stand beyond the reach of Rome. God’s word, and not the official Roman Church, provided for Luther the only reliable point of contact between heaven and earth; and it was on this ground that Luther was now prepared to stake everything.

While his developing ecclesiology, with its challenge to papal precedence, was a novel addition to the Wittenberg program, Luther’s radical rejection of the Aristotelian anthropology was not. In the case of each capacity—free will, salvific cooperation, and virtuous works—God’s agency is highlighted while human participation is diminished to a vanishing point. Did Luther really mean to deny every human capacity that we associate with responsible choosing and willing and doing? As noted earlier in the chapter, this does not seem to be the case; for despite his adamant public denunciation of these capacities as “nothing,” Luther, in safer contexts, did admit to the existence of human agency, which he publicly repudiated. In a letter written the following spring to his friend Spalatin, for example, we find Luther explaining his position on these matters. In the Gospel of John, writes Luther, Jesus says, “Without me you

191. *Ibid.*, 317–22.

192. *LW* 31:316.

can do nothing” (John 15:5). Here, Luther explains, “Christ totally rejects . . . the ‘general influence,’ or the ‘natural existence . . . , because nature cannot but seek that which is its own and [thus] abuse the gifts of God. Christ,” he insisted, “declares simply and without distinction that without the ‘specific . . . influence’ or grace of God—nothing can be done *that in the eyes of God* is not worthy of fire” (emphasis added).¹⁹³ But he adds quickly, “Who can deny that a fornicator, adulterer, murderer, or blasphemer does his deed with the help of the ‘general influence’? And how can he do these things, unless he possesses being and activity [in the realm] of nature?”¹⁹⁴ Luther makes it clear that he is bypassing the distinction between “natural” and “acquired” freedom intentionally; and this is not because the capacity does not exist, but because, without Christ, it can accomplish, as Jesus says, “nothing” of value from God’s perspective. It was not that Luther thought these natural capacities do not exist, but that they do not exist apart from God; and, from the perspective of eternity, they are, in their fallen state, ultimately worth “nothing.”

Recalling his own personal struggle to find peace with God, Luther recognized the practical utility of faithfully acknowledging a divine power and eternal presence, in the light of which all human striving is reduced to “nothing.” And from personal experience, Luther knew that only when all the doors were closed could God “make a way where there is no way.”¹⁹⁵ Thus no one was spared Luther’s zealous attack on that self-satisfied pride (and the complacency that attends it) which separates itself from God. Luther was

193. Luther continues, “Christ declares simply and without *distinction* that without . . . the grace of God—nothing can be done that in the eyes of God is not worthy [only] of fire. And so [Christ] goes on to say, ‘Whoever does not abide in me will be thrown away like a branch and will wither and people will gather it up and throw it into the fire and it will burn.’ Now see, the branch which is not in Christ not only does not grow and bring fruit, but it also withers (that is, weakens and perishes); not only does it weaken and wither, but it is also taken and cut off from the vine and thrown into the fire, etc. In this way he who is only supported by the ‘general influence’ and the strength of nature continuously gets worse and farther away from Christ; he is being prepared for the fire, no matter how much he outwardly appears to be moral and do good. Here we should realize that we cannot do anything without Christ, whether through a ‘general’ or a ‘specific influence.’ [We should see that] whatever is done only on the basis of the ‘general influence,’ however outstanding it may be, is rather against Christ than for Christ. . . . At this point you could say that the gift bestowed by God is good, but that its use cannot be good unless those who use it have been healed by grace. The ‘general influence’ (this dangerous term), which is being and activity [in the realm] of nature, if used by anyone who does not remain as a branch in Christ, is misused and of no avail. . . . Who can deny that a fornicator, adulterer, murderer, or blasphemer does his deed with the help of the ‘general influence’? How can he do these things unless he possesses being and activity [in the realm] of nature?” (*LW* 48:157–59).

194. *LW* 48:159.

195. Martin Luther King Jr.

convinced that, by applying God's judgment to human pretensions, "it comes about that, if not all, some and indeed many are saved, whereas by the power of free choice none at all would be saved, but all would perish together."¹⁹⁶

COURAGEOUS FAITH

Luther later described the Leipzig disputation as "a tragedy";¹⁹⁷ and tensions escalated in the months immediately following, as each side was left to draw its own conclusions. Clearly Luther had come away believing he had not been given the opportunity to fully make his case, and many in Leipzig believed Eck was the winner.¹⁹⁸ Thus the disputation, which had officially ended in July of 1519, continued at a distance, as first one side and then the other published attacks, rebuttals, and counterattacks. As Luther waited for matters to take their course, he remained busier than ever. Apparently he "was keeping three printing presses busy with his writings alone, and still they could not keep up with him."¹⁹⁹ Luther used this time, in part, to produce a series of writings on penance, baptism, Eucharist, and good works, thus integrating his prophetic and pastoral aims. Together, this set of writings describes the whole Christian life, from death to faith to loving service. Moved by the Spirit and sustained by Christ's promise and presence at the table, the Christian life as described in these writings is a dynamic interplay of forces let loose by God. Working through the law's imperative and the gospel's promise, God acts to redeem and release sinners from the devil's clutches. Thus God penetrates the boundary separating the spiritual realm from the earthly as the Spirit moves through the lives of faithful Christians acting in God's name for the sake of the world.

During this difficult time, Luther appears to have been almost exuberant in that Spirit he describes—experiencing himself as both divinely driven and yet free. He was working with a vigor and enthusiasm that exceeded even his usual output. "God has given me a joyful and fearless spirit," he wrote.²⁰⁰ The arrival of the bull in Wittenberg did nothing to stifle Luther's jubilant mood. If anything, it seemed to prove to Luther that his assumptions about Rome were correct. "Already I am much freer," he wrote upon seeing the bull, "certain at last that the pope is the antichrist."²⁰¹ Luther was fully convinced

196. *LW* 33:288.

197. *LW* 31:325.

198. *LW* 31:324.

199. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 413.

200. *Ibid.*, 346

201. *Ibid.*, 404 See also: Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 116.

that he was being used by God to serve a much larger plan. His conviction that the words he spoke were effectively functioning as a sword in God's hand perhaps intensified and focused his writing even more sharply, thus adding to the amperage. Luther's breach with Rome appears to have been spiritually complete long before it was fully regularized through the church's official excommunication of Luther from Rome, and Luther's unofficial "excommunication" of Rome from the spiritual church of Christ.²⁰²

Sometime between mid-June, when the bull²⁰³ was released by the Church of Rome, and October 10, when it was posted in Wittenberg, Luther finished work on his *To the German Nobility*. It appears that he was encouraged to issue this call for action (and assisted in its preparation) by those with a stake in its possible political consequences. Notably, this piece was aimed at the secular authorities rather than the ecclesial—a shift that reflects an important development around this time in Luther's understanding of God's work in the civil/temporal realm.²⁰⁴ This plea to the German nobility is a passionate condemnation of the Roman church, in which Luther calls on the temporal authorities to act on their Christian faith in the defense of God's word. Rome's claim, Luther writes, "that only the pope may interpret Scripture is an outrageous fancied fable. They cannot produce a single letter [of Scripture] to maintain that the interpretation of Scripture or the confirmation of its interpretation belongs to the pope alone. They themselves have usurped this power."²⁰⁵ Then, calling on the princes to convene a council challenging Rome's claim to authority, Luther adds,

When necessity demands it, and the pope is an offense to Christendom, the first man who is able should, as a true member of the whole body [of Christ], do what he can to bring about a truly free council. No one can do this so well as the temporal authorities, especially since they are also fellow-Christians, fellow-priests, fellow-members of the spiritual estate, fellow-lords over all

202. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 424–26. Not everyone was as confident as Luther, however. It is interesting that, given the added threats to his colleagues, some 150 students left the university at Wittenberg out of fear that they too would be subject to the ban (*ibid.*, 414).

203. This was not the bull of excommunication, but one that preceded it by sixty days, giving Luther another chance to recant before being officially and absolutely severed from the Roman Catholic Church.

204. The two-kingdom thinking we have observed in this period of Luther's development represents an early version of a model that would grow considerably more complex in the context of changing historical circumstances.

205. *LW* 44:134.

things. Whenever it is necessary or profitable they ought to exercise the office and work which they have received from God over everyone.²⁰⁶

Luther, convinced God was using him for God's own purposes, prophetically framed the controversy for the secular rulers in such a way as to draw them into the cosmic battle, which so profoundly shaped Luther's perspective during this period.

It is intolerable that in canon law so much importance is attached to the freedom, life, and property of the clergy, as though the laity were not also as spiritual and as good Christians as they, or did not also belong to the church. . . . It can be no good spirit which has invented such exceptions and granted sin such license and impunity. For if it is our duty to strive against the words and works of the devil and to drive him out in whatever way we can, as both Christ and his apostles command us, how have we gotten into such a state that we have to do nothing and say nothing when the pope or his cohorts undertake devilish words and works? Ought we merely out of regard for these people allow the suppression of divine commandments and truth, which we have sworn in baptism to support with life and limb?²⁰⁷

Then, revealing again his ever-present sense of pastoral responsibility, Luther ends with a familiar warning: Should we fail to act, he cautions, "we should have to answer for all the souls that would thereby be abandoned and led astray!"²⁰⁸

Within two weeks of its appearance in August of 1520, Luther's *To the Christian Nobility*, with its unusually large edition of four thousand copies, had already sold out. Ulrich von Hutten (one of a group of knights who had offered Luther protection) summoned Prince Frederick to take up arms against Roman tyranny. "Let us avenge the common freedom," he wrote; "let

206. *LW* 44:137. Also, "Consider for a moment how Christian is the decree which says that the temporal power is not above the 'spiritual estate' and has no right to punish it. That is as much as to say that the hand shall not help the eye when it suffers pain. . . . Since the temporal power is ordained of God to punish the wicked and protect the good, it should be left free to perform its office in the whole body of Christendom without restriction and without respect to persons, whether it affects pope, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, or anyone else" (*LW* 44:130).

207. *LW* 44:132.

208. *LW* 44:132.

us free the long-oppressed fatherland.”²⁰⁹ The enormous interest stirred up by Luther’s *To the German Nobility* suggests there was, by this time, strong secular support was aligned Luther against Rome. And this was not only the case among the powerful aristocracy; the general public, too, was caught up in the growing turmoil. Publicists on both sides were busily managing some of the first campaigns ever waged in print. As the papal bull threatening Luther with excommunication was posted in one German town after another, there were book burnings, riots, and threats of revolt. Luther argued against any use of force. God’s Word alone, Luther insisted, ought to be allowed to do God’s work “without [the addition of human] hands.”²¹⁰

As the rift between the “Romanists” and the “Lutherans” grew, there were others who, though in essential agreement with Luther’s call for reform, sought to find middle ground. Legitimately fearful of the political and cultural upheaval threatened by what appeared ever more likely to be a schism with Rome, they realized that once Luther’s excommunication was finalized (marking him as a heretic and an outlaw), any opportunity for rapprochement that might still exist would be irretrievably lost.²¹¹ The seriousness of this threat to political stability is evidenced by Erasmus’s decision to get involved. As the most respected humanist of his day, Erasmus’s opinion carried a great deal of weight. In early November, he met with Prince Frederick with a proposal designed to highlight what was good on each side while repudiating all that was, in his view, irrationally extreme or polemical. Luther’s writings should be judged by an impartial group of academics, argued Erasmus, appointed by the secular (rather than the ecclesial) powers. Such a gathering of scholars might save the best of Luther’s writings from the fire. Perhaps even more importantly, Luther might be admonished by his peers rather than labeled a “heretic” and an “outlaw” by

209. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 369–70; Hutten published a copy of the bull with his own notes appended in which he demanded action against Rome. “Through the hands of his own,” Hutten wrote, “God will punish Rome.”

210. “In this matter we are not dealing with men, but with the princes of hell. These princes could fill the world with war and bloodshed, but war and bloodshed do not overcome them. We must tackle this job by renouncing trust in physical force and trusting humbly in God. . . . The more force we use, the greater our disaster if we do not act humbly and in the fear of God” (*LW* 44:125–26). Luther argued that Hutten’s eager recourse to violence was inappropriate on the basis of Dan. 8:23–25, which reads, “At the later end of their rule, when the transgressors have reached their full measure, a king of bold countenance . . . shall arise. His power shall be great, and he shall cause fearful destruction, and shall succeed in what he does, and destroy mighty men and the people of the saints. . . . In his own mind he shall magnify himself. Without warning he shall destroy many; and he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes; but, by no human hand, he shall be broken” (Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 420, emphasis added).

211. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 405. Miltitz wrote, “If the bull goes into effect, a schism will result.”

the church.²¹² While Erasmus's proposal never materialized, something like it—a secular hearing—was arranged, which by its very reevaluation of Luther's work (already condemned by Rome) manifestly challenged the church's authority. Prince Frederick was instructed to bring Luther to the diet meeting at Worms where Luther would be judged by fair and reliable scholars; and he would be justly treated. In the interim, Luther was to do nothing that might complicate the situation further.

WORMS

Even before the emperor's letter arrived, Luther, who had never been a slave to political expediency, did in fact complicate things to a considerable degree. At a book-burning ceremony of his own, Luther, along with colleagues and students, ritually excommunicated the Roman Church. In his most prophetic mode, Luther consigned to the flames books of canon law and monastic piety; and then with "trembling and prayer,"²¹³ he stepped forward and dropped the papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*, into the flames. It was sixty days exactly from the posting of the bull; and clearly no refutation from Luther would be forthcoming. On January 3, the church issued a document officially excommunicating Luther,²¹⁴ in response to which Luther, having composed his own document, written in a style that mimics *Exsurge Domine*, "excommunicated" Rome. Their unwillingness to engage and counter any challenges, and the pope's claim to inerrancy—these summed up for him all that was wrong with the church. "I am moved most by the fact that the pope has never once refuted with Scripture or reason anyone who has spoken, written, or acted against him. . . . Nor has he ever been willing to submit to a court of justice or judgment, but at all times bawled that he was above Scripture, judgment, and authority."²¹⁵

212. Ibid., 417. Note that Luther was particularly incensed at being labeled a heretic by the church (Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 338–41). It appears that Erasmus was also eager to solicit Frederick's support to use force against Luther should he refuse to accept the judgments of this panel. Erasmus's notes of this meeting also reveal his criticism of the church, something he would have preferred to keep quiet; thus he was unhappy to discover that Spalatin had published a copy of the notes entrusted to him.

213. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 424.

214. The bull excommunicating Luther is called *Decet Romanum Pontificem*.

215. *LW* 31:394–95. Luther comments on this "main article," "These and similar articles which are without number—all of them aim at exalting the pope above God and man." "Even his disciples say he is an extraordinary creature . . . perhaps [he is] the devil himself."

Luther was convinced that Scripture was no longer normatively informing the church at Rome; rather, Rome was holding Scripture hostage. “Truth and righteousness do not shun judgment,” Luther insisted. Rather they “gladly permit themselves to be examined and tried.”²¹⁶ Thus, in Luther’s view, everything pointed to the conclusion that Rome, which once was the bearer of Christ, had become now the seat of the “antichrist.” “The greatest evil,” Luther insisted, “has always come from the best.”²¹⁷ “The son of God was killed nowhere else but in the holy city of Jerusalem. . . . God has also blessed no city on earth with so much grace and so many saints as Rome Therefore she, too, like Jerusalem, in gratitude to God, must do the greatest harm and give the world the true and most destructive Antichrist.”²¹⁸

Luther’s unequivocal denunciation of the papacy left no room for further negotiation. Luther was ready for what he believed would be his inevitable martyrdom. “I hope the time has come,” he wrote, “for the cause to move forward in [God’s] name without me.”²¹⁹

Initially the emperor had acted in agreement with Prince Frederick’s plan, summoning Luther to appear at the diet for what Luther and Frederick hoped would be a real debate. Somewhat abruptly, however, the summons was rescinded. Perhaps he was put off by Luther’s public repudiation of Rome; perhaps, on the advice of papal representatives, he was reluctant to allow the laity to retry a case already decided by the church. Whatever had caused Charles to reconsider Luther’s appearance before the diet left Luther wondering what would come next. At Worms, the various parties wrangled over what was to be done. In the end, a compromise resulted and an imperial mandate was issued requiring the sequestration of Luther’s books. Luther took this as a sign that the emperor now leaned toward Rome and away from Frederick. If Luther were called to Worms only to recant (as had happened at Augsburg), he saw no reason to make the trip. He would make himself ready, instead, for a summons to his own execution. He began to worry now about how his death might affect the young emperor’s ability to rule, should he begin his reign with Luther’s blood on his hands.

But these worries were all for naught. Luther was not summoned to his execution; he was in fact summoned to Worms. The negotiations between the various parties, each with something to gain in relation to Luther’s case, had finally resulted in the opportunity for him to appear.²²⁰ Many wondered

216. *LW* 31:395.

217. *LW* 31:393.

218. *LW* 31:394.

219. *LW* 31:394.

whether he would go at all, given the significant danger. But as Luther was certain God had called him into this conflict as a pawn in a much larger battle, he had no fear about what might transpire.

The trip from Wittenberg to Worms was not an easy one. Luther was so ill that he had to be bled at one of the towns along the way.²²¹ Nevertheless, he rallied and even preached. As Luther, with his considerable traveling party, made his way toward Worms, he was wined and dined and made much of. Trumpets announced his arrival as he and his friends rode into Worms through the city gates on the morning of April 16, 1521. Despite attempts by those eager

220. Brecht, Martin Luther, 416. "Taking Luther out of the library is easy, removing him from men's hearts . . . is difficult." At Worms, Rome wanted the requirements of the bull excommunicating Luther enforced. In Germany, this was not easy to accomplish given the rising public sentiment in Luther's favor. In order to force the issue, Rome asked the emperor for an imperial mandate against Luther that would add the force of civil law to the ban already issued by the church. Though the emperor could have issued such a mandate without outside support, he would not do so. As he initiated his reign, it was imperative that he find favor with both the church and with the secular princes; thus he would not issue the imperial mandate without the support of the secular princes. The princes used their leverage to drive a bargain; they would support a compromise version of the mandate against Luther under certain conditions. It appears that these included sequestering his books rather than burning them (until after a judgment had been reached at Worms). Luther was to be summoned to appear, but not for debate. He was to renounce those articles that were against traditional church teaching—especially the more radical statements he had made about the church since the church's bull of excommunication. If he renounced these, there might be discussion on other points. All of this would be done under secular rather than ecclesial rule. The aim here was to preserve those works of Luther's that were widely regarded as good and useful for the faith of the church. The princes were also hoping to keep the peace and to get their complaints in the *Gravamina* addressed—a point they could win, by refusing to support the imperial mandate against Luther, unless their conditions were met. (The *Gravamina* was a list of reforms that the princes had been requesting from Rome for a long time). Thus the church was caught. Without the imperial mandate to bolster the force of their ban, they could not turn the tide of public support for Luther. Without the support of the secular princes, the emperor would not issue the mandate; since without the promise to address the complaints against Roman "tyranny" in the *Gravamina*, the territorial princes would not support it. Thus it seems that, without the leverage offered by the *Gravamina*, Luther might well have never had his moment at Worms. The summons Luther did eventually receive did not clearly spell out what was to be done with him at Worms. He was only informed that he was being summoned for an examination of his books. In the meantime, the mandate was issued, which made it clear to those in Wittenberg that Luther had in essence already been condemned by the emperor (given the new imperial mandate against him with the requirement that his books be sequestered). Though he had been granted an imperial safe passage, this might not hold if a decision were made to apply the punishments already imposed by the church. Thus there was considerable danger for Luther if he went to Worms. It seems likely that those already at the diet did not expect him to appear, in which case he would be condemned and the case could be closed. Given the agreement of the princes, the emperor and the church could (theoretically at least) count on their support. This of course never came to pass, as Luther did in fact appear.

to turn the tide of public support, Luther's fame outpaced their efforts. It was reported that some two thousand curious onlookers came out into the streets to greet him, hoping to catch a glimpse of the famous Dr. Luther.²²²

Called before the diet the following day, Luther was asked first to identify a pile of books that had been placed on a table as his own. Then, in a single question, Luther was asked whether he was prepared to retract anything (in these books) that he had written. The general nature of the question apparently took Luther off guard. He had, once again, been hoping for a debate, or at least a list of specific articles that he could respond to individually. His bearing on this first day surprised many. They had expected to hear the bold rhetoric from Luther that his writings and reputation promised. Instead, he appeared nervous, and asked for time to consider the question he had been asked. Luther was eventually told he would be allowed time to think further. Then, with a curt reprimand that he should have been prepared already, Luther was instructed to return the following day ready to respond. Though he had given

221. In late medieval Europe, bloodletting was used to treat a wide variety of maladies, including plague, smallpox, epilepsy, and gout. With a history spanning at least two thousand years, no medical practice has been more trusted or more widely utilized. It was a therapy originally based on the ancient theory that good health requires a perfect balance of the four "humors" (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile); but the practice continued to receive robust support from many physicians in the West even after the rise of science, and well into the late nineteenth century. In Luther's day, the procedure was as widely trusted and commonly used as aspirin is today. For Luther, bloodletting would have probably involved making a small diagonal cut in a vein that had been tied off, collecting the tainted blood in a bowl, all the while carefully measuring the correct amount according to detailed charts drawn up to treat specific disorders. Luther suffered from ill health throughout his life; and though it worsened considerably in his later years, he was by no means free from pain even while he was still relatively young. Luther frequently reports digestive disorders and kidney stones in his letters; and he seems to have suffered in later years from heart ailments and cataracts as well. Some attribute Luther's general ill health to an early and overly zealous ascetic lifestyle during his years as a monk.

222. Oberman, *Luther*, 198–99. Oberman provides an eyewitness account of Luther's arrival in Worms, written by the papal legate Aleander: "I had already concluded my letter when I gathered from various reports as well as the hasty running of the people that the great master of heretics was making his entrance. I sent one of my people out, and he told me that about a hundred mounted soldiers, probably Sickingen's, had escorted him to the gate of the city; sitting in a coach with three comrades, he entered the city [at ten in the morning], surrounded by some eight horsemen and found lodgings near his Saxon prince. When he left the coach, a priest embraced him and touched his habit three times, and shouted with joy, as if he had had a relic of the greatest saint in his hands. I suspect that he will soon be said to work miracles. This Luther, as he climbed from the coach, looked around in the circle with his demonic eyes and said: 'God will be with me.' Then he stepped into an inn, where he was visited by many men, ten or twelve of which he ate with, and after the meal, all the world ran there to see him." Oberman adds his comment, "It was neither a triumphant victor, nor a demon or miracle worker who had come to Worms; the monk who stepped down from that coach was a sorely tested man."

a disappointing first performance, Luther seemed not to worry but greeted visitors and friends that evening with a good spirit. He was reassured by his supporters that he was under their protection should there be a move to imprison him. On the second day, Luther was ushered into a room filled to capacity. It was late in the afternoon, and the torches were lit; it was a theatrical staging for what would become one of the most famous “scenes” in Western history. Luther appeared considerably more assured; and he spoke now with his usual skill,

He began by dividing his books into three categories—those widely accepted as good and useful for the piety of the people, those that were critical of the church’s practices, and those aimed at individuals, which, Luther conceded, were regrettably written in a rhetorical style unbecoming to a monk and a doctor of theology. However, taking the position that in speaking on behalf of God such a tone might be warranted, these too he could not retract. Having spoken his piece first in German, he went through it a second time in Latin. Ultimately, Luther refused to retract anything, and when pressed by the officer in charge to speak plainly, Luther concluded his speech with the following well known words:

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.²²³

Luther and those around him believed that, in this situation where everything was at stake, he had spoken well. Prince Frederick was especially pleased with the Latin version of the speech; and Luther was clearly pleased too. He had not failed God’s Word, or his calling as God’s prophet. Luther had demonstrated by his courage that he really was “captive to the Word of God,” rather than a prisoner of his own fear. He had stood his ground. Many expected him to be arrested on the spot; but his promised “safe conduct” was still in effect, and Luther was reassured that he was in no immediate danger. Carried along by a throng of people to his quarters, he was prepared now to celebrate. Throwing his hands over his head, Luther shouted joyfully, “I’ve come through. I’ve come through!”²²⁴

223. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 460.

No one would have been quicker than Luther to credit God with this triumph. Yet, in this moment of jubilation it was clear that Luther—the one who had succeeded in “coming through”—was prepared to acknowledge his part in this accomplishment. Luther’s celebratory gesture and language suggest that he never doubted his own role as an effective agent in the achievement of this goal. Clearly it was a goal he believed God had assigned to him; but it was a goal that that he himself had fully embraced and enacted.²²⁵ But what would happen now? Luther had already been excommunicated by the church; and there could be no doubt that, in his absolute refusal to retract anything, he had sealed whatever fragile opening might have still existed. There would be no question that the force of the imperial mandate would now be added to the church’s ban against him. Not only had he been branded a heretic, but now he would also be identified as an outlaw. The two greatest powers in the land—the pope and the emperor—both had (or would) issue their respective condemnations. Would he be allowed to return to Wittenberg at all? As Luther pondered these questions back in his lodgings with his counselors, colleagues, and friends, the lawyers who represented the various interests mounted a hasty final attempt at negotiation. For two more days, they tried to find a way out of the impasse. Luther continued to hold his ground. Then, with no apparent compromise forthcoming, Luther was, somewhat surprisingly, allowed to leave. The emperor honored the safe passage he had promised.²²⁶ How long this would be the case was anyone’s guess. Thus there was no great surprise (though a good deal of weeping) when word arrived back in Wittenberg that Luther’s traveling party had been attacked along the way, and Luther kidnapped. Several in the party had managed to get away with their lives to ride into town with the news of this calamity, which now spread like wildfire.

But of course Luther was not in fact dead; he was only in hiding. This part of Luther’s story is so familiar as to need no retelling. Prince Frederick had, once again, come through for Luther—carrying him away to a hidden place of safety until the immediate danger had passed. What is not so well known is the fact that, as Luther’s traveling party proceeded on their way toward Wittenberg, their numbers dwindled. Luther first dismissed the imperial herald with instructions to carry a letter back to Spalatin; and then, as the rest of the party neared Eisenach, he sent others on ahead so that he could visit some

224. *Ibid.*, 461.

225. In light of Luther’s frequent refusal to acknowledge effective human agency, his demonstration of joyful self-congratulation is noteworthy.

226. It is reported that the nobility supporting Luther, including the knights, sent an escort of twenty horsemen to accompany Luther out of the city with great honor.

relatives. Thus, when Luther and his two remaining companions were suddenly surrounded, there was no one left to protect them. It is also the case that neither the guard, who would have been under oath to protect Luther with his life, nor his other traveling companions, who might well have been willing to die in order to save Luther, perished in the confrontation.²²⁷ Without his guards, Luther was defenseless; and with bows drawn against him, he submitted, while his two remaining companions (apparently in on the plan) ran off into the woods. At first, his captors made Luther run alongside the horses; but once out of sight they pulled up, so that Luther could also be mounted. Then, riding in a long and circuitous route through the forest, they came at last to the Wartburg Castle, where Luther was safely delivered up to his new home—at least for the time being. Dark, and nearly deserted, Luther would remain here in hiding—left to face the devil’s onslaughts as he struggled to come to terms with his new situation. Having imagined that he would not live to see the results of his work, Luther must have wondered where all this was leading. As he would discover, there was still much to be done, and a critical role still left for him to play.

227. The imperial guards would have been under oath to protect Luther with their lives.