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The Dawn of a New Era

It is through living, indeed through dying and being damned that one becomes a theologian, not through understanding, reading, or speculation.

Martin Luther

Little did Leo X know as he was preparing to enjoy his spoils that his papacy would be the lightning rod for a reform movement unleashed by a young student terrified by a lightning bolt in 1505. The thunderstorm that prompted Martin Luther to become a monk was but a foretaste of the storm that would shake late medieval Europe to its foundations and permanently alter western Christianity. Flashes across the horizon of the late medieval sky had already indicated the energy of this coming storm, fed by the highly charged atmosphere of life on the eve of the Reformation. Now the suddenness and speed of its discharges illuminated the dawn of the Reformation. Seeded by Luther's resolution of his personal anxiety over salvation and pastoral concern for his parishioners, the clouds of crisis broke over Europe.

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

Luther came from an upwardly mobile family. His grandfather was a peasant farmer but his ambitious, determined father worked his way up in the mining industry to the position of a small employer. Luther himself was the first of his family to gain a formal education and become an academic. It is striking that other leading Reformers – Melanchthon, Zwingli, Bucer, and Calvin – came from similar backgrounds.

The poor to modest circumstances of Luther's youth were ameliorated as his father's mining ventures prospered. Indeed, as a smeltermaster, Hans Luther earned sufficient income to provide Martin with a university education. After the younger Luther's marriage, his prince gave him the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg for living quarters;

he and his family had meat, fish, and fruit to supplement the medieval staple of life, bread, and Luther's wife – by his account – made the best beer available.

The educational system Luther encountered as a youth was certainly effective, although he did not find it at all edifying. Knowledge was literally beaten into the students. Luther probably started school around the age of seven. The techniques by which he was forced to learn Latin as the basis for later studies included coercion and ridicule. Unprepared students were forced to wear an image of a jackass and addressed as an ass. A student speaking German rather than Latin in class was beaten with a rod. Even music, Luther's favorite subject, was presented in a utilitarian fashion in order to train youths for church choirs. In short, the education of children was at best dull and at worst barbaric. Luther later recalled that one morning he was caned fifteen times for not mastering the tables of Latin grammar.

Those who did master Latin could go on to more advanced education. At fourteen Luther went to Magdeburg, where he lived and studied at a school run by a pious lay religious organization, the Brethren of the Common Life. From there he went on to study in Eisenach. All the students literally sang for their suppers: after classes they roamed the streets in children's choirs to beg for food. Toward the end of his studies in the Eisenach school, Luther was fortunate to find some supportive teachers who recognized his abilities. They introduced him to the Latin classics and history, which made a life-long impression on him and gave him great pleasure. In later life, he translated Aesop's fables into German, and insisted that everyone should study the classics and history. It was a university education, however, that opened doors for commoners to careers in medicine, law, and the church. Like Calvin's father a generation later, Luther's father was eager for Martin to improve the family status and wealth by going to university and becoming a lawyer. Thus Luther attended the University of Erfurt, where he received both his Bachelor of Arts and Master's degrees.

The medieval university consisted of an arts faculty and the three professional faculties of medicine, law, and theology. The language of instruction was Latin, and the method of instruction was detailed study and commentary on texts with particular attention to *the* authority, Aristotle, and his writings on logic. Disputations, an adversarial style of presentation central to this process, not only allowed display of intellectual skill but served the search for the truth. Disputants presented the evidence for their position in the form of theses; opponents then presented alternative evidence to support their own position. Every professor was required to hold public disputations to

show how this was done, and both faculty and students were required to attend weekly disputations on selected topics. Disputations educated students in logical thinking. The teacher assigned a set of theses to a student who then defended them according to the rules of logic. This was also the form for the final examination for a degree. Today's oral examination of PhD students in our universities during which they defend their dissertation or thesis is but a pale reflection of the rigorous academic exercises common to the medieval university. The disputation is precisely the form in which Luther cast his "Ninety-Five Theses" as well as many of his other Reformation writings. In this as well as other ways, the Reformation was a movement from within the universities.

As a movement within the universities, the Reformation benefited greatly from the approach known as humanism, which strove to apply the critical intellectual recovery of ancient sources to education, the church, and society as a whole. The significance of humanism as a reforming party is conveyed by Bernd Moeller's (1982: 36) succinct phrase: "No humanism, no Reformation." The sources and norms for humanism included Scripture and the church fathers, whose writings were newly accessible through the recovery and improvement of scholarship in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. The widespread approval of Luther as "our Martin" by humanists in the years up to the edict of Worms (1521) reflected their view of him as a prominent representative of the new learning who opposed their common enemies of scholastic and ecclesiastical abuses of religion and power (Grane 1994).

Luther's move from the study of law to monastic life and the study of theology occurred in the context of the piety of his day. Chapter 2 presented the late medieval period as a time of crisis and insecurity prompted not only by the physical difficulties of the time but also by the rapid social changes that called into question the values and traditional truths by which people had lived. The church exacerbated these insecurities by promoting a type of pastoral care designed to make people uncertain about their salvation and thus more dependent upon the intercessions of the church. The Christian pilgrimage toward the heavenly city was a balancing act between fear and hope. Visitors to medieval cathedrals and churches can still see representations of Christ on the throne of judgment with a sword and a lily on opposite sides of his mouth. The lily represented the resurrection to heaven, but the sword of judgment to eternal torment was more vivid in the minds of most people. A sandstone relief of this common depiction of Christ seated on a rainbow "graced" the Wittenberg parish churchyard and so terrified Luther that he refused to look at it.

Figure 3.1 Christ as judge seated on the rainbow. Sandstone relief from around 1400 at the Wittenberg parish church; in 1955 it was moved inside the church. The image of the sword refers to Isaiah 49: 2, "He made my mouth like a sharp sword," and Revelation 1: 16, "from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword."
Source: Foto Kirsch, Lutherhalle, Wittenberg.

Everywhere in everyday life the medieval person was surrounded by images serving to remind him or her of eternity and how to achieve it. As the early medieval pope, Gregory the Great (d. 604) had said, "images are the books of the laity." Medieval churches presented the

Bible and the lives of the saints in stone, stained glass, and wood. The medieval person did not compartmentalize life into sacred and secular spheres. Thus "the books of the laity" were evident at the town fountain and town hall, carved in the doorways and painted on the walls of homes and public buildings. Where people walked, worked, and gathered for news and gossip, there were religious reminders of their origin and their destination in heaven or hell.

Since hell was not the preferred option, the church and its theologians developed a whole set of practices and exercises to assist people to avoid it. The irony was that in attempting to provide security in an insecure world, the church largely mirrored the new urban and economic developments that exacerbated human insecurity. Suspended between hope and fear, the individual had to achieve his or her goal through a whole system of *quid pro quo* services that reflected the new ledger mentality of the urban burgher absorbed in the developing profit economy. Taken as a whole, Christendom at the end of the Middle Ages appeared as performance-oriented as the new business enterprises of the day.

The very effort of late medieval theology and pastoral practice to provide security only led an insecure world to more insecurity and uncertainty about salvation. One of the key scholastic ideas that led to this uncertainty about salvation was expressed in the phrase *facere quod in se est*: do what lies within you; do your very best. That is, striving to love God to the best of one's ability – however weak that may be – will prompt God to reward one's efforts with the grace to do even better. The Christian's life of pilgrimage toward the heavenly city was increasingly perceived, literally and not just theologically, as an economy of salvation. As mentioned earlier, this "mathematics of salvation" concentrated upon achieving as many good works as possible in order to merit God's reward. In religion as in early capitalism, contracted work merited reward. Individuals were responsible for their own life, society, and world on the basis and within the limits stipulated by God. Pastoral care was intended to provide an avenue to security through human participation in the process of salvation. This theology, however, enhanced the crisis because it threw people back upon their own resources. That is, no matter how grace-assisted their good works, the burden of proof for these works fell back upon the performers, the more sensitive of whom began asking how they could know if they had done their best.

Most people, however, were grateful for whatever help they could get in their quest for salvation. Saints' bones and other relics were avidly collected and venerated with the conviction this was efficacious

in reducing sentences to purgatory. Thus the Wittenberg Castle church was dedicated to All Saints; and within it Luther's prince, Frederick the Wise, housed one of the largest relic collections of the area – over 19,000 pieces, worth more than 1,900,000 days' indulgence. This pious intoxication with numbers is also evident in the celebration of masses. In 1517 at the Wittenberg Castle church of All Saints more than 9,000 masses were celebrated which consumed 40,932 candles (over 7,000 pounds of wax!) costing 1,112 gulden (Brecht 1985: 118). Frederick's relic collection included a piece of the burning bush, soot from the fiery furnace, milk from Mary, and a piece of Jesus' crib, to name but a few of his treasures acquired at great cost and lavishly displayed in expensive containers (Hillerbrand 1964: 47–9). Luther's contemporary, Cardinal Albrecht, believed his relic collection was worth 39,245,120 days' indulgence.

The extraordinary prosperity of the indulgence trade was fueled as much by the desires of believers as by the financial interests of the church. If this seems surprising, think of the similar appeal and success of modern media evangelists who promise to satisfy modern desires to control God and conquer insecurity. Late medieval Christendom has been characterized as having "an immense appetite for the divine." Scholars have sometimes puzzled over the great surge of popular piety in the late Middle Ages. No other period celebrated so many religious festivals and processions, nor threw itself so wholeheartedly into church construction. Mass pilgrimages, frequently sparked by some perceived miracle usually associated with the Lord's Supper, caught on like wildfire. The dark side of this devotion erupted in mass attacks upon Jews and persons thought to be witches. Miracles seemed to multiply everywhere in the Empire. The veneration of saints reached its peak and changed its form. Saints were depicted life-size, individualized, and garbed in contemporary dress. Saints were now aligned with the arrangement of society and made patrons for every human exigency. The practice of giving children saints' names became so widespread that the old German names all but disappeared. Insecure about salvation, people attempted to guarantee it by capturing mediators between themselves and God.

Why did people throw themselves into such a piety of achievement? Why was the treadmill of religious performance thought to be the path to security and certainty of salvation? Perhaps because in times of crisis people tend to yearn for the "good old days," and try harder to emulate what they think they were. Hidden behind the late medieval surge in piety there "was an oppressive uncertainty about salvation together with the longing for it. By capturing the mediators between them and

God, men attempted to force a guarantee of salvation. Death seems never to have been more realistically considered than in this era, and hardly ever so anxiously feared" (Moeller 1971: 55). Even today we are still fascinated by the bizarre paintings of Hieronymous Bosch (ca. 1450–1516) with their weird, rapid-breeding hybrid creatures associated with lust and fertility but which in the end symbolize sterility and death. Artistic realism blossomed in popular manuals on the art of dying, depictions of the dance of death, and deeply moving representations of Christ's passion.

Religious and psychological anxiety appears to have been heightened by the imposition upon people of clerical standards of morality and behavior. The place where every real or imagined failure to meet clerical norms was ferreted out was the confessional. The laity were expected to go to confession frequently. There the priest pried into every aspect of their lives, especially their sexual lives. The lists of sexual sins in the confessional manuals of the day were so complete that even sexual thoughts were categorized according to the particular danger of damnation consequent on them. Whether or not sexual relations within marriage were serious sins was debated, but there was agreement that at least in principle they were sins. One catechism from 1494 listed sex for enjoyment rather than procreation as a sin. The other side of this coin was the elevation of celibacy and the cloister as the supreme form of a God-pleasing life. Marriage and family were demeaned as necessary evils for the propagation of the community. It is no wonder that the Reformers' attack upon mandatory celibacy for the clergy, and their renewed appreciation of the joy of sex in marriage, were so well received by the laity (Ozment 1992: 152–3; 1983: 12; Tentler 1977: 162–232).

Everyday life on the eve of the Reformation included elements regarded today as superstitions: belief in witches, magic, and astrology. But before we look too quickly down our collective modern nose at late medieval superstitions, we might recall that most of our daily newspapers include horoscopes, and that the "health and wealth" gospels utilizing contemporary media appeal to the same fears and desires that motivated the medieval person to seek out supernatural healers and diviners of the future.

Luther's reform movement was not initiated by the righteous and moral indignation of a Savonarola or an Erasmus directed against perceived superstitions or the corruption of the Renaissance papacy. Luther's movement was rooted in his own personal anxiety about salvation; an anxiety that, if the popular response to him is any indication, was widespread throughout Europe. This anxiety was an

effect of the crises of the late medieval period already sketched, but its root cause was the uncertainty of salvation in the message of the church.

Theological and Pastoral Responses to Insecurity

According to Thomas Aquinas, grace does not do away with nature but completes it. So the famous scholastic phrase *facere quod in se est*, "do what lies within you," means that salvation is a process that takes place *within* us as we perfect ourselves. Put another way, we become righteous before God as we do righteous acts, as we do good works. But to an anxious and insecure age, the question became: "How do I know if I have done my best?"

The answers came primarily from the parish priests, most of whom were unversed in the subtleties of academic theology. The most common answer was "try harder!" This is the clue to that great surge in popular piety mentioned earlier. When in doubt about your salvation, examine yourself to determine if you have done your best, and then put more effort into achieving the best you can. In order to encourage more effort, pastoral practice consciously stimulated anxiety and introspection by citing the church's translation of Ecclesiastes 9:1, "No one knows whether he is worthy of God's love or hate." The church's pastoral theology suspended people between hope and fear – a sort of spiritual carrot-and-stick incentive system.

Catechisms provide a clue to the religious sensibilities of the people and the lower clergy. Priests used these simplified expositions of basic theology, usually in question and answer format, in daily pastoral practice. Widely popular, these catechisms were translated from Latin into the vernaculars, and in this process reflected the spiritual needs of the people. Dietrich Kolde's *Mirror of a Christian Man* indicates the deep religious fear and anxiety of the people up to the eve of the Reformation, and thereby provides a clue for understanding Luther's reform movement.

Kolde's *Mirror* was very popular. First printed in 1470, it appeared in 19 editions before the Reformation and continued to be reprinted after it. Translated into various European vernaculars, Kolde's work was probably the most widely used Catholic catechism before and during the early years of the Reformation. The significant point of this catechism for our purposes is the author's expression of the people's

widespread lack of certitude about salvation. Kolde summed up this anxiety when he wrote: "There are three things I know to be true that frequently make my heart heavy. The first troubles my spirit, because I will have to die. The second troubles my heart more, because I do not know when. The third troubles me above all. I do not know where I will go" (Janz 1982: 182).

Luther's first steps on his own quest for certainty about his relationship to God paralleled those of many before him and countless others since: he entered a "seminary." In Luther's case it was the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. Again, not unlike countless other seminarians past and present, Luther's decision greatly upset his father. Hans Luther was by this time making a decent living. He had sent Martin to Erfurt University with the ambition that he would earn a law degree, return home to the town of Mansfeld, and perhaps eventually become mayor. But Luther had barely begun his law studies when his father's dreams were shattered by the same lightning bolt that knocked Martin to the ground as he walked to Erfurt after a visit home. In terror, Martin implored St Anne, the patron saint of miners, for help, shouting, "I will become a monk."

And become a monk he did. In July 1505 he entered the Black Cloister (so-called because the monks wore black) of the Observant Augustinians in Erfurt. The Black Augustinians were known for their rigorous pursuit of spiritual benefits that more than matched in intensity the pursuit of material benefits practiced by Luther's father and other budding entrepreneurs. It was no less the business of monks to earn spiritual currency for themselves and others than it was the business of the early capitalists to earn material currency.

In the monastery, Luther threw himself wholeheartedly into efforts to achieve salvation. Between the six worship services of each day, which began at 2:00 a.m., Luther sandwiched intense prayer, meditation, and spiritual exercises. But this was just the normal routine, which Luther in his zeal to mortify his flesh and make himself acceptable to God soon surpassed. "I tortured myself with prayers, fasting, vigils, and freezing; the frost alone might have killed me" (*LW* 24: 24). It has been suggested that his long periods of fasting, self-flagellation, and sleepless nights in a stone cell without a blanket all contributed to the continual illness that plagued him for the rest of his life. Later in life, Luther remarked: "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. I was very serious about it" (*LW* 54: 339–40).

In fact, Luther was so serious about perfecting himself in order to gain God's acceptance that he soon became a burden to his fellow

monks. Monastic practice prized introspection and self-examination that probed the conscience: "Have I really done my best for God?" "Have I fully realized my God-given potential?" No sensitive person under such introspective pressure to achieve righteousness before God can answer these questions affirmatively. Luther was in a continual state of anxiety about his righteousness. He constantly sought out spiritual guidance and confessors. Years later Luther remarked about all this: "Sometimes my confessor said to me when I repeatedly discussed silly sins with him, 'You are a fool . . . God is not angry with you, but you are angry with God.' " (*LW* 54: 15). Ironically, Luther entered the monastery to overcome his uncertainty of salvation, but there was confronted by the very introspection, intensified to a fine art, that had caused his very anxiety before God.

Luther's monastic superior, Johann von Staupitz, directed him to continue his theological studies to a doctoral degree. Luther protested he was too ill, unworthy, and inadequate. Staupitz was unimpressed. In 1512, Luther became a "sworn Doctor of the Holy Scripture" and embarked on his life-long career as professor of biblical studies at Wittenberg. Later, in his controversies with the church, he appealed to his doctoral oath in which he vowed to exposit and to defend the Scriptures. He believed he had a mandate from the church, and that his efforts for reform were not just a personal crusade.

At this point a brief description of Luther's Wittenberg context is in order. This small town of about 2,500 was the capital of Electoral Saxony. The duchy of Saxony had divided in the late thirteenth century, and in 1356 the area including the town of Wittenberg was granted electoral dignity by the Golden Bull, the decree regulating imperial elections. The prince of Electoral Saxony when Luther arrived was Frederick III, known as "the Wise" (1463–1525). Frederick was not only wealthy but also politically powerful and astute. Loyal to the Habsburg line, he nevertheless opposed expansion of imperial power as well as the powers of the neighboring states of Ducal Saxony and Brandenburg. Frederick was also well traveled and personally concerned for the well-being of his people, land, church, and education. By the turn of the century, he was engaged in rebuilding the castle and the church of the All Saints Foundation and establishing the university.

The division of Saxony into Ducal and Electoral territories left Electoral Saxony without a university, since Leipzig University was in Ducal Saxony. By 1503 Frederick obtained papal confirmation for a new university for which the All Saints Foundation would serve as chief financial support. Frederick also poured his own resources into the

university and in 1508 published its statutes. The establishment in 1502 of the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg by Staupitz provided the university with many of its faculty. That is how Luther came to be in Wittenberg. At first about 200 students enrolled annually. After Luther's burst into notoriety in 1517, the enrollment mushroomed. A student saying of the time suggested that if you want an education go to Wittenberg, if you are looking for amusement go elsewhere. The university was Frederick's pride and joy; he would be reluctant to allow one of his prize professors to be burned at the stake! Besides, Frederick had invested a good sum in the promotion of Luther to the doctorate on the promise that Luther would serve in the professorship of Bible for life; it would be a poor investment to allow that life to end unnaturally soon.

Luther began lecturing at the university in the winter semester of 1513–14. The exact time-frame for his lectures is uncertain, but the sequence up to the controversy over indulgences included lectures on the Psalms (1513–15), Romans (1515–16), Galatians (1516–17), and Hebrews (1517). There is nothing quite like having to explain a text to others to intensify one's own study of the material. Luther had at his disposal a good library of biblical commentaries, various biblical translations, and, after 1516, the new edition of the Greek New Testament by Erasmus. But Luther's intellectual focus was further sharpened by his own personal religious quest for certainty of salvation, the resolution of which occurred in this academic context. His conversion experience was, in the words of Gerhard Ebeling (1970), a *Sprachereignis*, a language event.

Luther's intense study of the language and grammar of the Bible, assisted by the linguistic tools provided by the Renaissance humanists, radically changed his understanding of salvation. He learned that the righteousness of God is not a demand to be met by achievement but a gift to be accepted by faith. Luther's conversion experience set medieval piety on its head. He came to see that salvation is no longer the goal of life but rather its foundation. On the basis of this discovery the theology faculty at the University of Wittenberg instituted a curriculum reform that replaced scholastic theology by biblical studies. In the spring of 1517, Luther wrote to a friend in Erfurt: "Our theology and St Augustine are progressing well, and with God's help rule at our University. Aristotle is gradually falling from his throne, and his final doom is only a matter of time. . . . Indeed no one can expect to have any students if he does not want to teach this theology, that is, lecture on the Bible or on St Augustine or another teacher of ecclesiastical

eminence" (*LW* 48: 42). The authority of Aristotle was displaced by the authority of the Bible.

What Luther discovered, and what so moved his faculty colleagues and students, was an understanding of God and salvation that overthrew the anxiety-ridden catechetical teachings of priests like Kolde. Luther's biblical study led him to the conviction that the crisis of human life is not overcome by striving to achieve security by what we do, but by the certainty of God's acceptance of us in spite of what we do. The gospel, Luther argued, repudiates "the wicked idea of the entire kingdom of the pope, the teaching that a Christian man must be uncertain about the grace of God toward him. If this opinion stands, then Christ is completely useless. . . . Therefore the papacy is a veritable torture chamber of consciences and the very kingdom of the devil." Luther now never tired of proclaiming that the burden of proof for salvation rests not upon a person's deeds but upon God's action. This conviction delivered Luther from what he called "the monster of uncertainty" that left consciences in doubt of their salvation. For Luther theology is certain when "it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive" (*LW* 26: 386–7).

Medieval theology and pastoral care had attempted to provide religious security by what we may call a covenantal theology which said that if we do our best then God will not deny us grace. Although theologians employed numerous and subtle qualifications, the gist of the universal theme *facere quod in se est* ("do your best") was that people could at least initiate their salvation. That is, if you strive to love God to the best of your ability, weak as that may be, God will reward you with the grace to do even better. God, the medieval theologians claimed, has made a covenant to be our contractual partner in creation and salvation. In religion, as in the rest of life, work merited reward. Individuals were to be responsible for their own life, society, and world on the basis and within the limits of the covenant God stipulated. The theological and pastoral concern here was to provide an avenue of security through participation in the process of salvation. The consequence of this theology, however, was to enhance insecurity and uncertainty because it threw individuals back on their own resources.

Perhaps an analogy will help clarify this covenant theology. Parents are often reluctant to make absolute demands on their children. After all, popular literature warns against asking so much that children become stifled and "uptight." Parents are supposed to help children

"realize themselves." On the other hand, parents also recognize that without any limits and expectations everyone's life will be frustrating. So, one common course parents follow is to tell their child: "We do not expect you to excel in everything. Just do the best you can, and we will love you even though you do not get straight As, become class president, star athlete, or prom queen." The intention is to provide guidelines without excessive pressure. For some people such an approach may work just fine. But such a relativization of expectations throws the burden of proof for achievement back on the person. The introspective question is: "How do I know when I have done my best?" No matter what is accomplished, one may think more could have been achieved with just some more effort. Whether you are an A student or an F student you can always do more. "Do what lies within you," "do the best you can." This approach is not uniquely medieval or Aristotelian; it is equally modern, certainly American. Realize your own potential; anyone can be a success if he or she only tries hard enough; you can better yourself. But how did this idea enter medieval theology and worship?

The concept came from Aristotle. If we look briefly at how medieval theologians applied just two of Aristotle's ideas, we can see how influential he was. In logic Aristotle posited that like is known by like. Applied to theology, this meant that fellowship with God can only take place when the sinner is raised to likeness with God. The sinner must become holy because God is holy and does not associate with the unholy. To the question of where fellowship with God may be achieved, the answer could only be: on God's level. The sinner must become "like" God, that is, perfected and raised to where God is. Hence the popularity of ladder imagery in medieval theology.

The widespread imagery of a ladder to heaven graphically depicted the idea that salvation requires ascent to God. Thus the twelfth-century *Hortus deliciarum* ("Garden of Delights") includes the picture of the "ladder of virtues" leading from earth to heaven. The top of the ladder enters a cloud from which the hand of God extends offering the crown of life to the climber who reaches the top. The rungs of the ladder correspond to the virtues the climber must acquire. At the foot and side of the ladder are demons who try to hinder human ascent. Angels with swords fight these demons. The persons on the rungs represent various social and religious roles: a soldier and a laywoman, a cleric, a nun and a mendicant monk, a monk from an enclosed cloister, a hermit, and, at the top, "charity," who alone reaches the goal. All the others fall off the ladder as they reach for their respective temptations below them. The

hermit is attracted by his garden, the monk by his bed, the mendicant and nun by money, the cleric by food and friends, the soldier and laywoman by the goods of the world. On the ladder itself is inscribed: "Whoever falls can start climbing again thanks to the remedy of penance."

But how is the sinner to accomplish this feat? Aristotle's other idea comes into play at this point. Aristotle spoke of self-improvement in terms of what he called a *habitus*, a personal modification through habitual activity, through practice. People acquire skills through practice. A person becomes a guitarist by practicing the guitar, a good citizen by practicing civic virtues, ethical by practicing moral virtues, and so on. Through such habits or practices ethics becomes a kind of second nature.

Medieval theologians took this basically commonsense idea and applied it to achieving righteousness before God. They "baptized" Aristotle's philosophy by saying that God through the sacraments infuses a supernatural "habit" in us. On the basis of this habitual grace, we are responsible to actualize it; to do what now lies within us. In so far as we perfect the gifts God has given us, we merit more grace. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) stated that grace does not do away with nature but perfects it. Thus, the famous scholastic phrase "do what lies within you" means that salvation is a process that occurs *within* us as we perfect ourselves. Put another way, we become righteous before God as we do righteous acts, as we do good works. But again the question becomes: "How do I know if I have done enough good works to merit salvation?"

Luther could not believe that God was placated by his efforts to do his best for his salvation. Toward the end of his life Luther reflected on his struggles with this covenantal theology. He wrote: "Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. . . . I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners . . . Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St Paul wanted" (*LW* 34: 336–7).

"That place" is the passage in Romans 1: 17, "For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' " Up to this point Luther, like so many of his contemporaries, had heard the gospel as the threat of God's righteous wrath because medieval theology and pastoral care presented the righteousness of God as the standard that sinners had to meet in order to achieve salvation. Luther now came to

realize that we are not to think of the righteousness of God in the active sense (that we must become righteous like God) but rather in the passive sense (that God gives us his righteousness). The good news, Luther discovered, is that justification is not what the sinner achieves but what the sinner receives. That is, it is not the sinner who is changed, but rather the sinner's situation before God. In short, the term "to be justified" means that God considers the sinner righteous (*LW* 34: 167). "God does not want to redeem us through our own, but through external, righteousness and wisdom, not through one that comes from us and grows in us, but through one that comes from outside; not through one that originates here on earth, but through one that comes from heaven. Therefore, we must be taught a righteousness that comes from the outside and is foreign" (*LW* 25: 136).

So Luther turned the medieval piety of achievement on its head. We do not do good works in order to become accceptable to God; rather, because God accepts us we do good works. Justification by grace alone through faith alone thus is a metatheological proclamation. That is, it changes the language of theology from an "if . . . then" structure to a "because . . . therefore" structure; from a language of conditions to be fulfilled in order to receive whatever is promised, to a language of unconditional promise (Gritsch and Jenson 1976: 42).

This radical shift is clearly expressed by Luther's move from a theology of covenant and contract to a theology of testament, as in a person's last will and testament. If a person is named in a will as an heir then the only condition necessary for inheritance is the death of the one who made the will. In his discussion of Hebrews 9:17, Luther wrote: "You would have to spend a long time polishing your shoes, preening and primping to attain an inheritance, if you had no letter and seal with which you could prove your right to it. But if you have a letter and seal, and believe, desire, and seek it, it must be given to you, even though you were scaly, scabby, and most filthy" (*LW* 35: 88; see Hagen 1974).

The language of testament is unconditional promise. God has named us in his will, and with his death on the cross the will is in effect. The "language event" of Luther's biblical study presented "a totally other face of the Scriptures" to him. "Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God" (*LW* 34: 337).

Theological Implications

I have belabored Luther's understanding of the sinner's righteousness before God because it is at the heart of everything Luther said and did after his conversion. At this point we need to take a moment to sketch the difference this made in other areas of Luther's theology.

The Reformation is sometimes described in terms of the watchwords "grace alone," "Scripture alone," and "faith alone." We have already seen what Luther meant by grace alone. But what did he mean by the other two *solas*? He did not mean by these battle cries what some modern Protestants mean by them. According to Luther, the Word of God is primarily Christ. Secondarily, the Word of God is the preached or spoken Word. He was fond of emphasizing that faith comes by hearing the promise of God because he was aware that we can look away from written words but have more difficulty closing our ears to spoken words. Only on a third level did Luther relate the Word of God to the written words of the Bible. The Bible is rather "the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies . . . Simple and lowly are these swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them" (*LW* 35: 236).

Faith is trust and confidence in God's promise of acceptance in spite of being unacceptable. Faith is not belief in particular doctrines. Faith is a relationship with God based on trust in God. The tendency among Protestants to speak of "salvation by faith alone" can lead to the misunderstanding that faith itself is an achievement. The confusion of faith with intellectual belief in particular doctrines or in biblical stories may lead to a kind of "can you top this" contest in which the person who believes the most unbelievable things is considered the most Christian. Then faith becomes the intellectual or psychological equivalent of medieval good works. This is far afield from Luther's understanding. "Faith is not a paltry and petty matter . . . ; but it is a heartfelt confidence in God through Christ that Christ's suffering and death pertain to you and should belong to you" (*LW* 22: 869).

Luther's radical understanding of justification brought with it a radical understanding of the person before God. Luther departed from all religious anthropologies that divide the person, whether it be into body and soul; body, soul, and spirit; flesh and spirit; or inner and outer. For Luther, the person is always the whole person. Luther could use traditional terminology, but he redefined it. Thus the distinction between flesh and spirit is no longer dualistic and anthropological but

biblical and theological. Flesh and spirit do not designate parts of the person but refer to the whole person's relationship to God. Living according to the flesh means the whole person in rebellion against God. Living according to the spirit means the whole person in confidence in God's grace. "Flesh and spirit you must not understand as though flesh is only that which has to do with unchastity and spirit is only that which has to do with what is inwardly in the heart. . . . Thus you should learn to call him 'fleshly' too who thinks, teaches, and talks a great deal about lofty spiritual matters, yet does so without grace" (*LW* 35: 371–2).

Human beings have no intrinsic capacity that entitles them to a relationship with God. The whole person, not just some "lower" aspect, is a sinner. Luther understood sin theologically rather than ethically. Sin is not doing bad things but rather it is not trusting God. "Unbelief is the root, the sap, and the chief power of all sin" (*LW* 35: 369). In other words, the serpent's question to Eve is whispered in everyone's ears. Sin is the egocentric compulsion to assert self-righteousness against God; it is the refusal to allow God to be God.

Acknowledgement of sin and the acceptance of God's judgment enable the sinner to live as righteous in spite of sin. By "letting God be God," that is by ceasing one's efforts to be like God, the sinner is allowed to be what he or she is intended to be – human. The sinner is not called to deny his or her humanity and to seek "likeness" to God. Rather, the forgiveness of sin occurs in the midst of life. The Christian before God is therefore at one and the same time both sinner and righteous; "a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God that He will continue to deliver him from sin until He has completely cured him. And thus he is entirely healthy in hope, but in fact he is still a sinner" (*LW* 25: 260).

The theological motif that relates justification and anthropology is the dialectical distinction of law and gospel. To Luther this is the essential nerve of theological thinking; it is what makes a theologian a theologian. "Nearly the entire Scripture and the knowledge of all theology depends upon the correct understanding of law and gospel" (*WA* 7: 502). Throughout his career Luther never tired of emphasizing the distinction between law and gospel as the key to correct theology. He believed that without this distinction the Word of God will be confused with human judgment.

The distinction between law and gospel is the distinction between two fundamental kinds of speech. The law is the communication of demands and conditions; it is the language of covenant. The law imposes an "if . . . then" structure on life. All law-type communication

presents a future contingent upon human achievement: "If you hold up your end of the bargain, then I will hold up mine." The gospel however is the communication of promise. It is the language of testament with the pattern of "because . . . therefore." "Because I love you I will commit myself to you." But even in the best of human relationships this analogy breaks down. There are all sorts of contingencies over which we have no control. Death is the clearest example. We may be committed to our children but death may take us away just when they need us the most. But Luther's point is that we are not the gospel. The gospel is the unconditional promise of God. It is unconditional because God has already satisfied all conditions, including death. In this sense, then, justification is not just a particular doctrine among others. Rather, justification is *the* language that is always unconditional promise.

Indulgences: The Purchase of Paradise

At the same time as Luther was reaching a radical theological reversal of his received tradition in the context of his biblical lectures, he was also carrying out pastoral responsibilities in the Wittenberg parishes. It is important to remember that while the form of the "Ninety-Five Theses" was that of an academic disputation, the context of this disputation was pastoral. Luther was propelled into the public arena by concern for his parishioners, who believed they could purchase paradise if they bought letters of indulgence. "I am," Luther later wrote, "a sworn doctor of Holy Scripture, and beyond that a preacher each weekday whose duty it is on account of his name, station, oath, and office, to destroy or at least ward off false, corrupt, unchristian doctrine" (*LW* 31: 383).

Indulgences grew from the sacrament of penance. Baptism incorporated a person into the pilgrim community of the church which was always in process of traveling to its true home with God in the heavenly city, and the eucharist nourished the pilgrims during their trip. However, pilgrims continually faced the danger of shipwreck on earthly delights. The church's response to this danger was to offer what the early church called the "second plank after shipwreck," the sacrament of penance.

The sacrament of penance was the subjective side of the objective sacrament of the mass. Through the sacrament of penance, the church provided not only the absolution of guilt but also the means for satisfying the socially disruptive and religiously offensive actions of persons. It has been suggested that the idea of atoning for crimes by

rendering commensurate satisfaction has Germanic and feudal roots. Secular penal practice allowed the "redemption" of a punishment for money. Applied to religious practice this meant that a fast could be replaced by the cost of the meal or a pilgrimage by the cost of the journey.

The significance of penance for medieval life and religion cannot be overrated. The term itself derives from the Latin *poena*, which means not only punishment but also compensation, satisfaction, expiation, and penalty. St Augustine had spoken of the necessity of punishment for sin that will be satisfied either here through human acts or hereafter by God. From this perspective there developed the doctrine of purgatory and its purifying fire, the pastoral and disciplinary life of the church, and the indulgence system for commuting penitential impositions too severe for completion outside the monastic regimen. Thus when the austere eleventh-century reformer, Cardinal Peter Damian (1007–72) imposed a 100-year penance on the archbishop of Milan for simony, he also indicated how much money would commute each year of penance. Although the intent of the indulgence system was to adjust satisfaction for sins to changing social conditions (a developing urban environment made certain penances difficult), by the late Middle Ages it was becoming an abused instrument for clerical social control and revenue raising.

By the twelfth century, the norm was a private penance before a priest that consisted of contrition (a heartfelt repentance), confession, and satisfaction. By the eve of the Reformation some wags spoke of contrition, confession, and compensation! A development that eased the sacrament of penance substituted attrition (fear of punishment) for contrition. Theoretical justification for remission of the ecclesiastical satisfaction imposed on the penitent rested on the thirteenth-century theological development of the treasury of grace available to the church. This treasury of the church contained the accumulated merits of Christ and the saints (mainly the works of monastics) which, since they were superfluous for those who originally achieved them, were available for ordinary sinners in the church. Here again, we see a ledger mentality, a calculating frame of mind concerned with "the account books of the beyond." An indulgence, then, drew on the treasure of the church to pay off the debt of the penitent sinner who would otherwise be obliged to pay off the penance by works of satisfaction. The possibility of a capitalist interpretation of this system may be seen in the story of the nobleman who decided to invest in futures. The story goes that after Tetzel made a large sum of money from indulgences in Leipzig, a nobleman approached him and asked if he could buy an

indulgence for a future sin. Tetzel agreed upon the basis of an immediate payment. When Tetzel departed from Leipzig, the nobleman attacked and robbed him with the comment that this was the future sin he had in mind (Hillerbrand 1964: 44–5).

The popular mind, abetted by some preachers, twisted the meaning of indulgence from that of the church's remission of a temporal penalty imposed because of sin to that of a ticket to heaven. The hard-sell medieval indulgence sellers such as Tetzel, whom Luther attacked, offered direct access to heaven even for those who were already dead and in purgatory. One of Tetzel's sales jingles was, "As soon as the coin into the box rings, a soul from purgatory to heaven springs." Would you buy a used car from this man? Well, crowds of anxious contemporaries believed they could buy salvation from him. He was good at his job, but then he was also rewarded handsomely.

Tetzel's routine would have been the envy of Madison Avenue, had it existed. His advance men announced his arrival some weeks before he came to town. They also compiled a special directory of the town that listed the financial resources of its citizens so they would know how much they could charge. Tetzel's entrance into the town was accompanied by a fanfare of trumpets and drums and a procession complete with the flags and symbols of the papacy. After a vivid sermon on hell and its terrors in the town square, he proceeded to the largest church and gave an equally vivid sermon on purgatory and the sufferings not only awaiting the audience but presently endured by their dead relatives and loved ones. "Do you not hear the voices of your dead parents and other people, screaming and saying: 'Have pity on me, have pity on me . . . for the hand of God hath touched me' [Job 19: 21]? We are suffering severe punishments and pain, from which you could rescue us with a few alms, if only you would.' Open your ears, because the father is calling to the son and the mother to the daughter" (Oberman 1989b: 188). After the next sermon picturing heaven, his audience was sufficiently prepared and eager to buy indulgences. There was always something for everyone because he had a sliding scale of prices depending upon the person's financial resources.

Tetzel was not allowed in Wittenberg because Frederick the Wise did not want competition for his own relic collection with its associated indulgences. But Luther's parishioners overcame this inconvenience by going out to Tetzel. Luther was appalled when they returned and said they no longer needed confession, penance, and the mass because now they had tickets to heaven. Indeed, it was said that a papal indulgence "could absolve a man even if he had done the impossible and had violated the mother of God" (*LW* 31: 32). As a priest responsible before

God for his parishioners, Luther had to warn them against spiritual pitfalls.

This is the immediate context for the "Ninety-Five Theses" of 31 October 1517, the traditional date of the beginning of the Reformation. But that was not Luther's first criticism of current indulgence practice. As early as 1514 Luther had denounced the abuse of indulgences and in sermons in 1516 had criticized his own prince's relic collection. Frederick was not amused. Luther was not only questioning his prince's devout piety but also undermining a source of revenue for his own university: indulgences, "the bingo of the sixteenth century" (Bainton 1957: 54), were a source of revenue for construction projects ranging from bridges to cathedrals.

The "Ninety-Five Theses" were a typical academic proposition for a university debate. They were written in Latin, and most Wittenbergers could not even read German. Thus the popular image of Luther the angry young man pounding incendiary theses to the church door is far more romantic fiction than reality. In fact there has been intensive historical discussion about whether they were posted or posted, i.e. nailed or mailed (Iserloh 1968; Aland 1965). How, then, did this document for debate cause such an uproar? Luther sent it to Tetzel's superior, Albrecht, the archbishop of Mainz, with the naïve thought that Albrecht did not know that his hireling was abusing the authority of the church. The document was then sent on to Rome. The result was an explosion that startled and frightened Luther as much as anyone else. Luther had unknowingly touched some very sensitive nerves concerning papal authority and far-reaching political and ecclesiastical intrigue.