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Luther's Life and Thought

Brent A. R. Hege

Our last session was focused on the late medieval context, the world into which Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Eisleben, eastern Germany, to what we would call an upper-middle-class family. His father, Hans, invested in copper mining and smelting and was a member of the city council in Mansfeld and it was his greatest desire that his son Martin would become a lawyer (there's really nothing new under the sun, is there?). Luther grew up in relative comfort and economic security, as his father's business was quite successful. He was sent to school as a youth and to university as a young man to study law. But he found his study of the law deeply unsatisfying because the question always on his mind was how he could be righteous before God. He was obsessed with this question and he felt no relief from the prescribed practices of the Church. When he was a law student at Erfurt, Luther was on his way back to school after a trip when a violent storm blocked his path home. Terrified, he threw himself into a ditch and cried out to the patron saint of miners, "Help me, St. Anne – I will become a monk!" Luther survived the storm, and, true to his word, he soon presented himself to the Augustinian chapter at the University of Erfurt to enter the novitiate. Needless to say, his father was furious at what he saw as a waste of talent and ambition in his young son.

Luther threw himself wholeheartedly into his monastic training, believing that the monastic life would finally make him worthy to stand before God as a righteous man. There are stories of him sleeping naked on the cold stone floor during the harsh German winters, fasting almost to the point of starvation, punishing himself physically and emotionally for his real and imagined sins, and obsessing about his status before God, especially during confession. Luther took a perverse pride in thinking up so many sins to confess to his confessor, but no matter how much penance he did and how much he desired to work his way into God's good graces, it was

never enough. He still saw God as a fearsome judge and Christ as his enemy. Luther himself said much later that he was the best monk in all of Christendom – no one worked harder or devoted himself more fully to prayer and good works – but nothing eased his conscience. He constantly felt the dread of death and damnation because his works never seemed to be enough to earn his salvation. He was desperate for a way out. Luther called this existential crisis his *Anfechtung*, which we can translate as temptation, test, or, better yet, a spiritual assault. He felt that he was under attack by God or the Devil, or both at once.

When his novitiate ended and it was time to be ordained a priest, his first public act was to say his first mass, which was normally a time of great joy and celebration. Luther was so nervous that he almost dropped the host in the middle of the consecration. He felt the terror of a vengeful, judgmental God waiting for him to make a mistake, and he almost quit in the middle of mass. At the celebratory dinner afterwards, so the story goes, his father was quick to point out what a mess Luther had made of his first mass. Martin had said that God had called him to the priesthood, but his father asked how he could be so sure it wasn't the Devil who had tricked him into abandoning his father's plans for his life. This exchange had a profound effect on Luther's life and thought, as from that point forward he was desperate to discover an anchor, a grip on certainty, in a life that seemed to careen dangerously out of his control.

His superior at the monastery, Johann von Staupitz, grew tired of Luther's drama and suggested that he go back to the university to earn a doctoral degree in Scripture. Staupitz thought if Luther could discover the God of the Bible, he would find some peace for his tortured conscience. And so Luther went to the new University of Wittenberg in a remote region of eastern Germany to study the Bible. One night while he was deep in study, he felt nature's call and he headed to the privy in the tower of the house. He had been studying Paul's letter to the

Romans and he was meditating on the passage in the first chapter where Paul quotes the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk: “For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith. As it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” For his whole life, Luther had assumed that God’s righteousness meant God’s wrath in judging sinners, and that for a person to be righteous meant being perfect and blameless, which we must achieve by our own efforts, our own merit. But in this moment, in this dark night in the tower of the Augustinian chapter house in Wittenberg, he had a revelation. I’ll let Luther take it from here, quoting from his recollections toward the end of his life:

But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, “Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?” This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience. I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans and anxiously wanted to know what he meant.

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: “The righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written: ‘The righteous live by faith.’” I began to understand that in this verse the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous person lives by a gift of God, that is, by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the righteousness of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive righteousness, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: “The righteous live by faith.” All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. I exalted this sweetest word of mine, “the righteousness of God,” with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise.

This moment, this flash of lightning in his dark night of the soul, was the moment of Luther’s breakthrough, when everything shifted, everything took on a new light, a new key, a new perspective on life. God’s righteousness is a gift, not a curse, a blessing, not a condemnation, a

pronouncement, not a demand. This moment is our entrée into Luther's theology, the lynchpin for understanding everything about Luther's life, work, and influence.

What Luther discovered in his tower experience was a new way of understanding God, Christ, himself, the church, and the world – a total reorientation of the Christian life. And it was made possible by his immersion in the Scriptures. Thanks in large part to this episode, Luther developed a shorthand phrase that has become a watchword of Reformation Christianity: *sola scriptura*, “scripture alone.” That phrase can mean many different things, of course, but for Luther the meaning is quite simple: whatever is necessary for salvation, whatever is right and good for our living as Christians, can be found in Holy Scripture. This is not a requirement for biblical literalism, nor is it a refusal to engage additional sources of insight and wisdom. Rather, for Luther, we will never go wrong if we ground our theology and our Christian living in the wisdom of Scripture, the witness to the Word of God, the “manger in which we find the Christ child,” as Luther himself so memorably put it. The Bible itself is not the Word of God, as that would make the Bible itself divine. Rather, the Bible is the *testimony* to the Word, the “swaddling clothes,” the “manger” in which we find Christ, in which we discover God's saving and life-giving word for us and for our salvation. From this point on, Luther would insist that anything worth committing ourselves to as Christians must have some foundation in Scripture, always read through this particular lens of the gospel, whatever “preaches Christ”: God's gracious forgiveness and justification of sinners.

Around this same time, during his doctoral studies at Wittenberg, Luther was applying this fresh insight to other issues of the day. If Scripture is the treasure chest of grace and hope for desperate sinners, if we can find comfort and confidence in the promise of the gospel, then what other doctrines and practices might need to be rethought in light of the gospel?

As a German monk, priest, and theologian, Luther was well aware of the church-political issues of his day, and none was so pressing as the issue of indulgences. The Church had declared that anyone who attended what we in America might call a “revival” and purchased an indulgence could guarantee that their loved ones would be spared time in purgatory. Luther saw many of his fellow Germans spending what little money they had in the hopes of freeing their deceased loved ones from the pain of purgatory, but none of that wealth was being invested in their own communities to improve their own lives; all of it was going back to Rome to build St. Peter’s. Luther searched the Scriptures and saw no support for indulgences or for purgatory, for that matter. He questioned the legitimacy of the practice of selling indulgences, especially in light of his newfound emphasis on God’s free grace in forgiving and saving sinners for the sake of Christ.

In 1517 Luther had been thinking about these questions and he determined to do something about it. It was common practice for universities to host academic debates on church festival days, often on the occasion of a student completing their master’s or doctoral degree, open to the public and celebrated throughout the town. All Saint’s Day, November 1st, was just such a day in the college town of Wittenberg, so Luther decided to mark this day with his own declaration. As was the custom, he prepared a list of theses to be debated in an open forum, written in Latin for the university community. He chose the topic of indulgences, the hot topic of the day in the Holy Roman Empire. He prepared 95 theses for debate and, as was also the custom of the day, on October 31st he posted them on the main door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, which also served as the university’s “bulletin board,” and he sent a copy to Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz, who was instrumental in encouraging the current indulgence in Germany.

To Luther's surprise, no one took him up on the invitation to debate the practice of selling and buying indulgences. But soon he got word that his theses had been translated into German and had made their way around the Empire. Suddenly, Luther was famous. What's more, he had succeeded in getting the attention of the authorities in Rome, who were quick to send emissaries to rein in this "wild boar in the vineyard."

But Luther was convinced by his reading of Scripture and his own conscience that he was right and that the Church was wrong. He set off on a period of frantic writing that lasted several years, all geared toward clarifying his thinking about the priority of God's grace and the faith that gratefully accepts God's gift of salvation won in Jesus Christ. He found the essence of the gospel in Paul's letters, especially Romans and Galatians, that we are saved entirely by God's grace as a gift, that it is God who makes us righteous for the sake of Christ, that our works can do nothing on their own to save us, that all our works are rightly done only in gratitude for what God has already done for us. He called this "justification by grace through faith" and it became the motto of Luther's movement.

Luther was so convinced of this truth that he felt compelled to add just a little bit to the Scripture that had so transformed his life. Where Paul in Romans 3:28 says, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law," Luther added one little word: "a person is justified by faith *alone*," in Latin, *sola fide*. The late medieval Catholic Church also taught that we receive salvation by grace through faith, but our good works are needed too. God meets us half-way, so to speak: we do our best and God does the rest. But to Luther this was all wrong. He had tried to meet God half-way and he never felt that anything he did would earn God's favor. When he read the Bible, he noticed that salvation is always God's initiative, always God's work in Christ. All we can do is accept it as a gift, through faith alone.

Then, and only then, can we do good works out of gratitude for what God has already done for us. In this one move, which he vigorously insisted was true to the spirit, if not the letter, of Paul's text, Luther undercut much of late medieval Catholic theology and practice. All that was needed was God's extravagant grace, freely given through Christ and gratefully accepted by faith alone.

Despite his profound disagreement with some medieval Catholic doctrines and practices, and especially with the institution of the papacy and the sale of indulgences, Luther did not reject Catholicism wholesale. Far from it. He retained many features of Catholic thought and piety, but with his own "evangelical" interpretation. For example, Luther retained a strong sacramental theology, but he reduced the number of sacraments from seven to two, a practice that continues in the Protestant churches to this day. For Luther, any ritual practice must meet two criteria in order to be considered a sacrament: it had to be instituted by Christ in the gospels, and it must combine a verbal promise with a material element. The only rites that meet these two criteria are Baptism and the Eucharist, both commanded by Christ and both adding a verbal promise of grace to material elements of water, bread, and wine. The power of the sacraments, for Luther, is the power of Christ's own promise of forgiveness of sins in the waters of baptism and in the body and blood of Christ himself in the Eucharist, not the proper performance of the ritual by a priest.

In the medieval Church, it was relatively rare for lay Christians to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist, and when they did they only received the bread; the wine was reserved for the clergy. Luther attacked this hierarchy of clergy and laity and insisted that every Christian should receive the real presence of Christ in, with, and under both bread and wine in the Eucharist, and as often as possible. He also insisted that the sacraments be celebrated in the native language of the people so that all could hear and understand what was happening, the promise of grace and forgiveness that was being offered to them. And if the sacraments, then why not the entire

liturgy? Luther composed a mass in German so that all could hear and understand the good news of their salvation. He composed hymns and prayers in German and encouraged regular preaching in German to reinforce Christian teaching in the hearts and minds of the common people. The rhythms of Word and Sacrament proved so central for Luther that even today Lutherans understand the Church to be that community of believers where the Word is purely preached and the Sacraments rightly administered. No longer would hierarchy define the Church; now it was Christ's presence in Word and Sacrament through the power of the Holy Spirit that created and sustained the Church as the priesthood of all believers. Luther retained much of the outward ritual and symbolism of the Catholic mass, but he infused it with a different emphasis; everything in the liturgy centered on God's promises in the Word, Christ's gifts in the Sacraments, and the people's glad and grateful response in prayer, song, and sermon. Ritual had its place and Luther encouraged such things as making the sign of the cross, chanting, and vestments, but only if they served to edify the people and focus devotion entirely on God's promises and Christ's gifts revealed in the Word.

The importance of the Word in Luther's thought can't be overstated. Toward the end of his life, he was asked what he did to reform the Church. Luther scoffed at the very idea that he did anything. He insisted that all he did was preach and teach the Word and then, while he drank beer with his friends, the Word reformed the church. And because the Word was so central to Luther's thinking about the Church and the Christian life, it was vitally important that it be accessible to every man, woman, and child. After Luther's famous appearance before the Emperor at the Diet of Worms in 1521, when Luther was officially declared an outlaw with a price on his head, he was "kidnapped" by his prince protector and hidden away in the Wartburg Castle. His first order of business was to translate the Bible into German so that it would be

accessible to everyone. Just translating the Bible could bring a death sentence at the time, so this in itself was a revolutionary act. Luther threw himself into the project and would often sneak away in disguise to walk among the townspeople, listening to their speech patterns and rhythms, so that God's Word would speak to them in their own plain German.

Learning the Bible was important, but so was learning Christian doctrine. At the same time he was working on his translation of the Bible, Luther also set about writing handbooks on Christian teaching, which he called catechisms. He wrote the Large Catechism for pastors and the Small Catechism for use in the home, so that every Christian would understand the basic teachings of the Church for themselves. In order to make good use of the Bible and the catechisms, it was important that the people knew how to read, so Luther encouraged the establishment of schools, including schools for girls, which was itself another revolutionary act. Literacy rates in Lutheran Germany skyrocketed, thanks in no small part to Luther's insistence that Christians be educated in order to read God's Word for themselves, in their own language.

In addition to educational reforms, Luther sought to encourage lay Christians to put their faith into practice in their daily lives. In the medieval Church, laypeople were encouraged to attend mass, go on pilgrimages, view relics, pray to the saints, and buy indulgences, but these were usually special activities only peripherally related to their workaday lives. Those who wanted to live a devout and dedicated Christian life were encouraged to renounce the world and become monks, nuns, and priests. The laypeople could then rely on these men and women religious to pray for them and intercede with God on their behalf. Luther rejected this separation of "religious" and "secular" Christians in no uncertain terms.

The medieval Church considered a vocation to be a calling out of the world for ascetic religious pursuits. Luther flipped this on its head by defining a vocation as a calling into the

world to love and serve God and neighbor wherever one happens to find oneself. One's station in life is unimportant; it is what one *does* in that station and *how* one does it that matters. A tailor who makes the best clothes he can for the sake of his neighbor, a mother changing a dirty diaper out of genuine love for her family – these are honest, godly callings. What mattered most, for Luther, was to do one's work in genuine gratitude to God and in profound love for the neighbor, no matter what that work happens to be.

In one of his most popular books, *The Freedom of a Christian*, written in 1520 at the height of his conflict with Rome, Luther laid out his vision for the Christian life. The Christian, he said, is perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. At the same time, though, the Christian is perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. As a justified sinner bold to stand before God, clothed in Christ's righteousness, the Christian is a lord or lady in bondage to no earthly power. But precisely because it is Christ's work and not ours that justifies us before God, we are set free from anxiety about our status before God and we no longer have to work for our own salvation. We are free to love and serve our neighbors as Christ serves us. Luther even goes so far as to say that we should be Christ to our neighbors! And the German word for "Christian" still reflects this insight of Luther's. To be a Christian, in German, is to be *ein Christ*, a Christ. We are called to be Christ for the world, loving and serving others, just as Christ loved and served us.

Luther himself lived out this teaching in his own life, first as a professor, then as a preacher and pastor and administrator, and finally as a husband and father. This latter vocation certainly came as a surprise to Luther! Even though he had advocated for years for the dissolution of the monasteries and an end to mandatory clerical celibacy, he himself refused to marry because he was too engrossed in his work. Several friends urged him to practice what he had been preaching and find a wife, and finally he did, marrying the runaway nun Katharina von

Bora, whom he lovingly called “Herr Käthe,” and with whom he had several children. Family life suited Luther and he was a devoted husband and father for the rest of his days. Some of the most touching and poignant moments in Luther’s life are found in his letters to his wife and children and in the hymns he composed for them. He, Katie, and the children moved into the old Augustinian chapter house in Wittenberg where he began his journey toward reform decades earlier, welcoming students and guests in their home, feeding and housing them, offering guidance and support, and providing a surrogate family to homesick students. Some of these students took notes on the conversations shared over dinner at the Luther home, later compiled into the *Table Talk*, a collection of Luther’s wit and wisdom.

Luther continued to travel, preaching and teaching and adjudicating disputes in parishes and territories where his reforms had taken hold. In 1546, even though hobbled by age and sickness, he agreed to travel to his hometown of Eisleben to arbitrate a dispute between two local rulers. He fell ill and it soon became clear that he would not survive. Friends and colleagues sped to his side to be with Luther in his last hours. After confessing his sins and declaring his trust and confidence in his savior, Luther died in his hometown. After his death, a scrap of paper was found at his bedside on which Luther had scribbled his last words: “We are beggars, this is true.” In this is summarized the entirety of Luther’s theology. All we are, all we have, is God’s gracious gift to us, which we accept in humble gratitude with open hands and glad hearts.