

Concordia Theological Monthly



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ARCHIVES

“Career of the Reformer”

By THEODORE HOYER

UNDER this subtitle four volumes of the new American edition of Luther's Works will be issued; the first one, Vol. 31, has just come from the press.¹ (The earlier volumes [1—30], four of which have appeared to date, will contain Luther's expositions of various Biblical books.) These four volumes (31—34) will contain what are usually called Luther's Reformation writings: "All the significant and representative writings of Luther which are concerned with his career as a reformer" (31, x f.). The purpose is to show in his own words why and how he became the Reformer, what he did for the reform of the church, and why. This aim, however, pertains only to the formal writings of Luther, i. e., to writings that were meant for publication—a fact that should be noted at once, to avoid misunderstanding. Much that Luther wrote (or spoke, while others wrote it for him) will follow later under different headings (Letters, Table Talk, etc.).

But—and this is the reason why it is mentioned here—much of this other material must be drawn in here if the purpose of this volume is to be attained. After all, the events mentioned in these selections are only milestones in Luther's early career; and since the selections are limited to only a few of his publications, we are shown only a few high spots in the development of the Reformer. It would make the story more complete if more of Luther's writings—many of them published later—could be introduced now. For the student of history a strictly chronological account of Luther's writings and other productions—letters, sermons, books, brochures, lectures, table talk, all arranged as they followed

¹ *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann. Vol. 31: *Career of the Reformer: I*, edited by Harold J. Grimm. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957. xxii and 416 pages. Cloth. \$5.00. This is the first of the 16 volumes of the American Edition of *Luther's Works* to be edited by Lehmann. Grimm himself furnishes a 14-page introduction to the Reformer's career, revisions of C. M. Jacobs' translation of the *Ninety-five Theses* (1517) and of W. A. Lambert's translation of the *Freedom of a Christian* (1520), and new translations of the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (1517), the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), the *Preface to the Complete Edition of "A German Theology"* (1518), the *Proceedings at Augsburg* (1518), and the *Leipzig Debate* (1519). Carl W. Folkemer supplies a translation of *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*

each other — would be a great help.^{1a} As it is, if we are to gain a true picture of the Reformer's career, much has to be supplied, first of all, as background before the first included selection; then, later, between the selected portions.

It must, of course, be remembered that Luther was theologian first and always. All that he wrote, whether exegesis or polemics or historical accounts, had only one final purpose: to further a better understanding and a better application of the divine Word. This can easily be seen in these selections too. But here we have a special purpose for collecting and presenting these writings in a few volumes: they are, besides being rich in their theological contents, historical landmarks to indicate the progress of Luther on the way of a reformer. So one object of their publication is to show the gradual development in Luther — how step by step he is led to the great dominating principles: *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola gratia*, *Sola fide*.

Not that we have here a fine, well-arranged history in his own words of the early events in the Reformer's activity. In the first place, Luther was not very systematic. He admits this in the first volume of the first edition of his Latin works. He wrote when he felt that events made it necessary, and he wrote as the thoughts came to him, without much attempt at arranging them nicely and logically. But he also remarks that many of his writings were called forth by events which were not nicely and logically arranged so as to present a perfect picture: A leading to B, B to C, etc.

And while we are on this subject, another matter should be mentioned. Opponents of Luther have always liked to say that he was not consistent, contradicted himself, called something right at one place, wrong at another. What's the answer? Granted that Luther

(1518); Lowell J. Satre a translation of *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (1519); and Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., a translation of *Why the Books of the Pope and His Disciples Were Burned by Doctor Martin Luther* (1520). Each publication has its own competently written introduction and useful annotations. Indexes of names and subjects as well as of Scripture passages cover the whole volume.

^{1a} I have in mind treatises like the three monographs published by Dr. W. H. T. Dau in 1919, 1920, and 1921 in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the events described: *The Leipzig Debate*, *The Great Renunciation* (Burning of the Papal Bull), *At the Tribunal of Caesar* (Diet of Worms) — books which now for more than 30 years have been recommended to students of Reformation history as the best help for recapturing the spirit of the times when these great things came to pass.

was not infallible; granted that he made mistakes! But in the light of what we gather from his early writings here is something to remember: When a contradiction in Luther's words is pointed out — and, mark you well, if the authenticity of the words quoted is established! — then ask: *When* did Luther say that? Luther was not born a perfect theologian; it took many years before he learned all the truth. God did not guide him into all the truth by inspiration but by long and persistent study, so that at times he had to retract what years before he had stated as truth.

The Career of the Reformer — this title refers not only to the period of his life after he had become the Reformer. Chiefly these volumes (31—34) speak of his work as Reformer and therefore of the time after he had come to the conclusion that he must and would work for the reformation of the church. But so much had gone before. The documents in this first volume lead us from the time when Luther realized that reform of the church was necessary to the time when he consciously became the Reformer. They show his emergence as a reformer.

But even that is not the beginning. Many years of bitter experience had gone by until Luther could say (*Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, Thesis 18): "To love God above all things by nature is a fictitious term, a chimera, as it were." Thesis 40: "We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds, but having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds." Thesis 56: "God cannot accept man without His justifying grace" (pp. 10, 12, 13 of Vol. 31). It began with his early concern — as it must be the concern of every Christian and should be the concern of every man — the salvation of his own soul; the right and always sufficient answer to the question: *Wie kriege ich einen gnädigen Gott?* That he needed not only a just and righteous God but a *gnädigen Gott* is a conviction that bothered him more and more. It finally drove him into the monastery, for a thousand years proclaimed by the church the best place where to foster a holy, God-pleasing life. To his father, Luther wrote: "I did not gladly or willingly become a monk, much less to fill my belly, but when I was surrounded by fear and terror of death, I vowed an urgent and enforced oath."²

² W 8, p. 573.

Preserved Smith gives an account of the causes that finally precipitated this vow and its fulfillment: The strict discipline of a stern and pious home; the terrible vision of the begging Prince William of Anhalt-Zerbst in Magdeburg; the priestly circle of friends in Eisenach; ecclesiastical influences in Erfurt ("Little Rome"); as a result of this a torturing sense of sin and a longing for reconciliation with God; then the terrible spring and summer of 1505, when the plague came to Erfurt; most of the students left in a panic; two of them died, one a classmate of Luther; and he asked himself: If you had been one of them, where would you be now? And finally, on his return from his parents' home, the thunderclap and the lightning striking a tree beside him, moving him on his knees to vow to St. Anne, the miners' saint, that he would become a monk.³ With all this in the background, the act of a 22-year-old youth moved by a storm to take such a vow becomes less surprising.

But the monastic life brought no solution for Luther's troubles. At first, after his reception as an Augustinian (September 1506), his doubts are quieted. Did he not receive the monk's baptism?⁴ But this theory did not work out in practice; it failed to give him what he sought: peace with God, assurance of his salvation. The formula of absolution said: "May the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merits of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the Saints, *what good you have done* or what evil you have suffered be to you for the remission of sins, growth in grace and the reward of everlasting life, Amen."⁵ So he worked harder, made his life a "martyrdom," exceeded the prescribed devotions and ascetic routine. After thorough investigation Mackinnon concludes that "martyrdom" is not exaggeration in describing the physical, mental, and psychic strain under which he labored. There are other witnesses for this. Flacius reports in 1543 that one of Luther's fellow monks had given him the same picture of Luther's life in the monastery.⁶

Then the next step. His conscience said: What value have all

³ *Life and Letters of Martin Luther*, pp. 8 f.

⁴ "Mir ward also gluck gewundscht, da ich die profession gethan hatte, vom Prior, Convent und Beichtvater, das ich nu were als ein unschuldig kind, das itzt rein aus der Tauffe keme" (W. A. 38, 147).

⁵ *Cath. Encyc.*, I, 65.

⁶ On this conflict see James Mackinnon, *Luther and the Reformation*, I, 98—120.

the works you do if you do them unwillingly, if you must force yourself to do them? You must do them gladly. So he tried to change his heart—without success. He was reminded that the church provided help for worried consciences in the sacraments, especially in penance. So he ran to confession, magnifying every trifling breach of monastic regulation into grave sin, until his father confessor told him to cease confessing until he had real sins to confess. John Staupitz, vicar-general of the Augustinian Order in Germany, was the greatest help to him. "Has not God commanded us to believe in a forgiveness of sin?" he was told. But his heart, instructed by the church, said: You must make yourself worthy of that forgiveness before you can trust in it! And he was back where he started. There always remained the question—as it persists for every man who mingles meritorious works with the way of justification—the question: Have I done enough? Is what I have done good enough to pass God's judgment? And then came the last step. Since even the sacraments could not help him in his dilemma, was not this a sure sign that God had rejected him, making the sacraments ineffective? And he felt as if he were already damned.

Luther was not born a reformer. Someone has said: There had to be a reformation in Luther before there could be a reformation by Luther. The first great, the essential, change for Luther came when Staupitz, newly appointed dean of the theological faculty at Wittenberg by Elector Frederick of Saxony, sent Luther there to teach philosophy and, after a brief return to Erfurt, back again to teach theology. It was, of course, the scholastic theology as he had learned it well in Erfurt University and later in the *studium generale* in the monastery. Scholasticism, to state it briefly, had for its object to prove that Christian religious truth can be proved by rational, reasonable argumentation and deduction. Beginning in the 12th century, it had gradually conquered the teaching in the schools (therefore "scholasticism"), adopting the methods of the old pagan philosophers, especially of Aristotle. The scholastics did not help Luther much in solving his own difficulties; but studying the Scriptures in preparing for his lectures, he learned to know well a man who had fought through the same battles he himself was fighting and had come out victorious. Chiefly from St. Paul's letters (Rom. 1:17; 3:28) he learned, to put it briefly, that God justifies the

sinner by imputing to him, through faith, the perfect righteousness which Christ earned with His life, work, suffering, and death, irrespective of man's own works; good works are not a cause, but a fruit of justification; justification always brings forth such fruits; but in justifying a sinner God does not consider his works, either good or bad, but only the merits of Christ.

This was "Luther's spiritual landing place."⁷ And no man who has to any degree shared Luther's previous experiences will think it extravagant when later on he wrote that it was as if the gates of Paradise were opening to him when this truth of the justification of a sinner before God became clear to him. That was the beginning of the "reformation in Luther" — the beginning:

Luther developed slowly, not by leaps and bounds. He knew that himself. . . . Even when Luther had admitted a new experience or understanding, he was not thereby at once rid of the old. "How true the old proverb is," he says of himself, *Difficile est consueta relinquere et consuetudo est altera natura*, ["It is difficult to abandon old customary things, and custom is a second nature"]. Views fight each other, moving to and fro, more even (in him) than in other great men and rich natures. In a certain sense his spirit remains "the battlefield of two eras"⁸

And now, since he believed, he had to speak (Ps. 116:10), and thus follows the reformation by Luther. Naturally, he would in his class lectures begin to question the arguments of scholastics and reject the conclusions reached. Above all, he protested, often in rough terms, because Aristotle stood higher in the estimation of acknowledged teachers of the church than Scripture. An opportunity for a more public discussion of the matter was offered when, under Luther's guidance and as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Holy Scripture, a student offered to defend a set of theses prepared for him by Luther as dean of the faculty of theology and directed against the scholastic theology. But while some spoke very highly of these theses, it cannot be said that they caused much excitement, though the language is very plain in attacking the official teaching of the church. No doubt most of those who heard of them dismissed the occasion as "another aca-

⁷ Gordon Rupp in *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms*.

⁸ H. v. Schubert, *Luthers Frühentwicklung*, p. 8.

demic disputation"; and, as it was, scholasticism was on the decline under the influence of Occam and Biel. But "the theses are a clear call to the theologians of the age to break with the untenable principles of a misguided past."⁹

Another forward step in his career as a reformer came with a new "accidental" change in his activity. Luther did not "set out" to be a reformer. Later on, when someone introduced him as the "Reformer of Germany," he answered: "Yes; but like a blind horse." He was led into this career, usually by actions of his opponents. It was a remarkable succession of events which actually pushed him into the work which in the beginning was far from his intention and desire. The "accident" this time (1515) was that the regular pastor of the *Stadtkirche* in Wittenberg, Simon Heyns of Brueck, fell ill and Luther was asked to substitute for him. Acting in this capacity, he heard confessions and found that many of the parishioners believed that indulgences were a sufficient substitute for true repentance. When he demanded that they show true fruits of repentance, they flashed in his face the indulgence letters which they had procured from Tetzel, who was at this time holding forth at Jüterbog, just outside Saxony. This convinced him that the people were being taught a false way of salvation. He preached on the topic on July 27, 1516, on October 31, 1516, and again on February 24, 1517.¹⁰ But opinions about indulgence were so nebulous and conflicting, and there were so many obscurities even in the doctrine of the church, not to speak at all of the conceptions held by the people, that Luther felt it necessary to establish with certainty what was the truth. For this purpose he decided to use one of the regular disputations held in open forums for faculty and students of the university and whoever else chose to attend. And for this purpose of discussing the pros and cons of the doctrine of the indulgences, and for this purpose alone, he composed and posted his *Ninety-five Theses*.

All know what resulted. The disputation was never held; no one offered to discuss the matter — to Luther's great disappointment, as we see in his *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*. To

⁹ W. H. T. Dau, *The Leipzig Debate*, p. 11.

¹⁰ Luther's sermons in W 1, pp. 63, 94, 138.

Thesis 5 (p. 89 in the present volume) he says: "I discuss this thesis and humbly seek instruction. . . . If there is anyone who can instruct me, let him offer me a helping hand." P. 93: "Unless I am taught otherwise." P. 98: "Once more I will confess my ignorance if anyone thinks it worthwhile to enlighten me and to make this matter clearer." Everywhere we seem to hear the refrain: Why does not someone come forward and offer to dispute? I am still disputing with myself.

But in another respect the result of the *Ninety-five Theses* was altogether different from that of the former theses against the scholastic theology. In 14 days they were read in all Germany, and in less than six weeks they were in the hands of the pope, who at once requested the officials of Luther's order to silence the heretic and thus to quiet the storm that had arisen. Why this quick reaction? Erasmus is quoted as saying that Luther made the mistake of attacking the pope's crown and the monks' bellies. Financial returns from the sale of indulgences at once decreased rapidly. Dr. Dau points out the curious coincidence that on the Roman side everyone who studied Luther's theses was struck chiefly not with their strictures upon the indulgence traffic but with the attack on the pope's power that was implied in them; and just this had been an objective utterly foreign to Luther's mind.¹¹

In April 1518 the Augustinians held their regular triennial meeting in Heidelberg. Luther attended, and on the request of Staupitz led a disputation on 28 theological and 12 philosophical theses which he had prepared for the occasion. While it cannot be said that he convinced all the attendants, he gained many friends and future co-workers, especially among the younger members of the order. The statement which he attached to the Heidelberg Disputation shows that he had advanced another step. He had held that the sophists did not understand Aristotle; now he took the position that even if you understand Aristotle rightly, he is of no help to you. At the same time he had promised Staupitz that he would finish his *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses* and send them to the pope. He did this, and we find that he can still say, "I am positive that there is a purgatory." But he finds it difficult to harmonize

¹¹ *The Great Renunciation*, p. 24.

it with his newly found conviction of perfect justification by faith (pp. 125 f.). He still explicitly acknowledged the supremacy of the pope (p. 270), though he stated: The pope is a mere human being, and papal decrees are occasionally erroneous. (Pp. 265—266)

It is often said that the papacy was very slow in dealing with Luther. Leo X is cited as saying: A drunken monk has written the *Ninety-five Theses*; when he sobers up, he will change his mind! But already in June 1518 Leo had appointed a court to start proceedings against Luther, and by August 7 Luther had in hand their citation to come to Rome within 60 days to defend himself. By August 23 instructions came to the papal legate at the Diet of Augsburg, Cardinal Cajetan, to arrest Luther if he did not recant, to keep him in confinement, to invoke the secular arm to help him. On the same date a letter is sent to the Elector of Saxony against "that son of iniquity who, as if fortified by his protection, obtrudes himself upon the church of God" — an ill-veiled threat! Two days later the Augustinian general Gerhard Hicker received orders from the pope commanding the "arrest and detention of Luther, chained hand and foot, under penalty of excommunication and interdict against all acting to the contrary." All this within little more than nine months after the first posting of the theses. Pretty fast work!

Politics intervened. The election of a new emperor was impending, and Leo X wanted the Elector of Saxony to use his influence for the pope's candidate. So Cajetan agreed to "deal fatherly" with Luther! Karl von Miltitz persuaded Luther to keep silent, "if his opponents kept silent," until a German bishop could examine the matter. And then another event brought about a great turning point in Luther's career. Andreas Bodenstein of Karlstadt, a colleague of Luther, butted in and challenged Dr. Johann Eck of Ingolstadt University, who had attacked Luther, to a debate. Eck forced Luther into the debate; in his theses written for the discussion he practically ignored Karlstadt's theses and attacked Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*; and Luther held rightly that his bargain with Miltitz had been broken. In the debate (held at Leipzig) Eck argued with Karlstadt on various points; but the chief matter under discussion, by Eck's own manipulation, was the divine primacy of the pope. In his preparation for the debate Luther's eyes were

opened to see the vast gap between the church of Christ and the apostles and the Roman Church at his time; he saw the absolute need of basic reform in the church; and he consciously and deliberately set out to lead that reform.

When you travel westward and get your first full view of the Rockies, a few peaks command attention: Longs Peak in the north, Mount Evans in the center, Pikes Peak in the south. But, you know, to reach them you must first climb the foothills; in fact, you begin climbing at the Mississippi. So there are peaks in Luther's career that command prime attention: the man with the hammer and the scroll at the Castle Church in Wittenberg; the professor at the Elstertor in Wittenberg throwing a papal bull into the fire; the haggard monk facing the lords temporal and spiritual in Worms: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me! Amen"; the first united group of Lutherans in Augsburg with their *Confessio Augustana*. The Leipzig Debate, so interesting that at noontime a man had to make the rounds and wake the sleepers lest they miss their lunch, seems to disappear in the dust. Yet you cannot reach Worms without climbing this foothill! Who won the debate? By agreement the records were submitted to the universities of Erfurt and Paris—two definitely papal institutions. Erfurt refused to decide; Paris, after long deliberations, had much to say in criticism of Luther, but did not even mention the Leipzig Debate! Significant?

Luther now, in the fall of 1520, issued three books which, historically speaking, belong to the most important of his works: *The Address to the German Nobility*, in which he calls on the Christian laity—since the clergy refuses to take a hand in the matter—to introduce a reform of the church by virtue of the universal priesthood of believers; *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in which he demolishes the sacramental system of the Roman Church, by which, culminating in the interdict, the hierarchy controlled church and state. These two books do not appear in this volume; they will come later. The third, *The Freedom of a Christian*, Kolde called the pearl of Luther's writings. It shows that Luther has reached the ultimate heights in viewing the life of a Christian. In his own words: "A small book, and yet, if its sense be under-

stood, it comprises the sum of the Christian life." And Koestlin sums up:

These three treatises together are the chief reformatory writings of Luther. According to their contents, they have most important relation to one another. In the first, Luther calls Christendom, in general, to the battle against the outward abuses of the pope and of the estate that boasted of being the only one possessing a spiritual and priestly character. In the second he exposes and breaks the spiritual bond, whereby this estate, through its means of grace, kept souls in bondage. In the third he reaches the most profound and important question concerning the relation of the Christian soul to its God and Redeemer, and the way and nature of salvation.

This last document was written, by request of Miltitz, for the pope in a last attempt to conciliate him, together with a personal letter to Leo X. It is not known whether he ever received it. He would not have enjoyed it! His answer to all this was the bull *Exsurge, Domine*, threatening Luther with excommunication if he did not recant in 60 days. It also included the demand that Luther's books be burned. This was done in Rome, in Louvain, in Cologne, and Mainz, at the instigation of Aleander, the papal legate on the way to the Diet of Worms. And Luther, who knew that the open break with the papacy had to come, picked the time when the 60 days stipulated in the pope's bull had expired to make a final and public declaration. The bull had reached him in the first week in October 1520. On December 10 a notice prepared by Melancthon appeared on the bulletin board: "All friends of evangelical truth are invited to assemble about 9 o'clock at the Church of the Holy Cross beyond the city wall. There according to ancient, apostolical usage, the godless books of the papal constitutions and the Scholastic Theology will be burned, inasmuch as the presumption of the enemies of the Gospel has advanced to such a degree that they have cast the godly, evangelical books of Luther into the fire. Let all earnest students, therefore, appear at the spectacle; for it is now the time when Antichrist must be exposed." At the set time, in the presence of the faculty and a large crowd of students, Luther, "trembling and praying," laid on the fire the *Decretum of Gratian*, papal decretals, the *Summa of Clavisio* on the Sacrament of Penance, the writings of Eck, Emser, and other opponents; and finally,

as the climax, the papal bull, with the words: "As thou hast confounded the truth of God, so may He this day consume thee in the fire."¹² The next day he said to his students: "Unless with your whole heart you discard the papal kingdom, you cannot attain the salvation of your souls."

So ends this period of the career of the Reformer. Luther had burned his bridges behind him. He knew that there was no return for him. In God's name he went forward.

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¹² Mackinnon, II, 220.

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