

2-1-1941

Luther's Spiritual Martyrdom and Its Appeasement

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Recommended Citation

Dierks, Theo. (1941) "Luther's Spiritual Martyrdom and Its Appeasement," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 12 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol12/iss1/9>

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"with fear and trembling" because of the sinister and faith-destroying influence of our own flesh. On the other hand, we must continue to use the Word of God, by which faith was wrought and by which it is preserved. We must frequently meditate on the precious promises of the Gospel and examine ourselves whether we be in the faith, 2 Cor. 13:5. We have this treasure of faith in earthen vessels, 2 Cor. 4:7; hence let us pray: "Lord, increase our faith," Luke 17:5.*

River Forest, Ill.

E. W. A. KOEHLER

Luther's Spiritual Martyrdom and Its Appeasement

Luther had entered the monastery in order to merit eternal life and was convinced that the life of a monk was the surest way in which to obtain the grace of God. Now, the way in which Luther sought to gain salvation was according to the Catholic doctrine of justification, with this difference, that as a monk he had taken upon himself the heaviest yoke of Christ and that he had given himself exclusively into the service of God.

During the first two years in the monastery Luther's faith in his monkery seems to have remained unshaken, for during those earlier years there is no trace of an acute spiritual conflict. Luther did at times experience doubts and misgivings; but "burning up with zeal," his life as a whole was "quiet and peaceful." However, after Luther was ordained priest, and after he had begun the study of Catholic theology, there was a marked difference. Luther says of his monastic life: "Certain it is, I was a pious monk and observed the rules of my order so strictly that I venture to say that if a monk could have gained heaven through monkery, I should certainly have got there. This all my fellow-monks who have known me will attest." (Weimar ed., XXXVIII:143.) "I was so deeply plunged in monkery, even to delirium and insanity. If righteousness was to be gotten by the Law, I should certainly have attained it." (Vol. XL, Pt. I:134.) But Luther adds: "If it had lasted much longer, I should have martyred myself to death

* EDITORIAL NOTE.—Lest the author be misunderstood, we quote a few sentences from his own book, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (p. 126): "Knowledge is so essential to faith that sometimes faith is called knowledge outright. 'And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent,' John 17:3. However, the word 'knowledge' is here used in a fuller sense. It means not a purely intellectual knowledge, such as unbelievers may have, but it is a live knowledge, a *nosse cum affectu*, a knowledge which has affected the heart and the will, working conviction and confidence. While faith is based on, and sustained by, the knowledge of the mind, it is essentially a *fiducia cordis*, confidence of the heart, which confidence is an emotional attitude of the heart plus an act of the will. 'With the heart man believeth unto salvation,' Rom. 10:10."

with watching, praying, studying, and other performances." (Vol. XXXVII:143.) Time and again Luther refers to his experiences in the monastery as a "spiritual martyrdom."

But what were the "real difficulties" in Luther's monastic life? What was the real cause of Luther's spiritual conflict? It has been maintained that the cause of Luther's suffering was physical, that, owing to a neurotic condition, the result of intense asceticism, Luther was seized by an alarming fear and was more or less mentally deranged. (Hausrath.) Catholic theologians (Denifle, Grisar) and others have claimed that Luther's troubles were sexual and that he, like Augustine, was a slave of lust. But Luther himself says: "When I was a monk, I was not much troubled with sexual desires" (Tischreden, I:47), and that his confessions to Staupitz "were not concerned with women" (Tischreden, I:240). Luther's real difficulties were the question of God's righteousness, the problem of being justified through the Sacraments, and the subject of predestination. But what was the real cause of Luther's spiritual martyrdom? We answer: *The Doctrine of the Catholic Church*. It was the Catholic doctrine of justification combined with the Scotist doctrine of free will and grace; for if any conscience-stricken sinner seeks salvation according to these doctrines, he must suffer the torments of the damned. Luther's trouble was also aggravated by the "modern" conception of God as the absolute Free Will.

According to the Augustinian doctrine of justification, as taught by both Thomists and Scotists, the sinner is justified by means of grace infused by God either through or in conjunction with the Sacraments. In none of the Scholastics (except in Bernard of Clairvaux) do we find even an inkling or trace of the Scriptural doctrine of the objective reconciliation and justification. It is true, at that time, even as today, the Catholic Church spoke much of the suffering and death of Christ; however, at that time, religion centered on the thought that Christ will return to judge the quick and the dead. Only he who has that "grace which makes acceptable" can merit eternal life and stand in the Last Judgment and escape eternal damnation.

In order that he might stand in the Day of Judgment, Luther sought to love God above all things, and his attention was called to such "evangelical perfection" in the first paragraph of the "Rule of Augustine." Luther had vowed to "keep the whole Rule" (Vol. VIII:633). This meant that every infraction of the Rule was to be regarded as sin, and through the rigorous routine of the monastery Luther's conscience was sharpened to a razor's edge. Now, it is true, the Scholastics made a general distinction between mortal and venial sins; but it was never definitely decided con-

cerning every sin into which category it belonged. Besides, there was also a great difference of opinion among the monks as to which infraction of the Rule was to be regarded as a mortal and which was to be regarded as a venial sin.

According to Catholic doctrine Baptism pertains only to original sin and to the sins committed before Baptism, for after Tertullian the dictum read: After Baptism either satisfaction or punishment. If a mortal sin is committed, the sinner thereby loses the grace of God, and in that case he must turn to the "second plank," the sacrament of penance, in order that through the absolution of the priest he may receive a renewal of grace and thus be justified.

Luther knew that for the reception of grace the sinner must do "what is in him"—this was taught by both Thomists and Scotists. Luther also knew that, if the sinner would do what was in him, God would infallibly infuse grace. But as monk he had obligated himself to seek perfection, and therefore he could not be satisfied with anything less than contrition, the perfect sorrow (sorrow because of love to God). Luther had also heard from the "modern" teachers that such contrition was the ultimate and most perfect disposition for the reception of grace and that man could, if he so willed, by his natural powers love God above all things. However, the way of contrition did not work as far as Luther was concerned, for he seldom, if ever, felt contrition. Luther did not love God above all things, and the more he pondered over this problem, the less he loved the God who had ordained that contrition was a necessary disposition for the reception of grace.

Whenever Luther tried to make himself worthy of grace, he felt only attrition (sorrow because of fear of hell), the "repentance of the gallows." This he regarded as another sin, which he must confess and for which he must do penance. It is true, Luther had also heard from his teachers that very few ever attained contrition and that nearly all had to rely on attrition, and then by confessing their sins to a priest and receiving the words of absolution have their attrition transformed to contrition by the infusion of grace. But never do we read that Luther was ever satisfied with mere attrition. But supposing that Luther had been satisfied with attrition, could confession and absolution have quieted his conscience? After Luther had confessed his sins and received absolution, he did not feel contrition, for he did not love God. We must also remember that according to Catholic doctrine, absolution remits the guilt of sin and absolves from eternal punishment, but the sacrament of penance binds the sinner to temporal punishments, for which he must satisfy either here or in the hereafter.

Luther tried to make satisfaction, but he was never certain that he had perfectly satisfied. How, then, could he be certain that he was really a child of God and that he had not again committed a mortal sin? No; not the attrition doctrine, teaching that sorrow is meritorious, nor the words of absolution could bring peace to the conscience-stricken Luther.

In the Catholic Church the Gospel is the "new law." New or old, Luther was simply caught in the meshes of the Law and could not extricate himself. Luther thought he had committed a mortal sin and had thereby lost the grace of God. Trying to regain grace through the sacrament of penance, he labored to dispose himself for grace by contrition; but he felt no contrition. He sought peace in absolution and was bound to satisfaction. He endeavored to satisfy and thought he had not perfectly satisfied and had therefore lost the grace received through the sacrament. Again he had committed a mortal sin. Thus round and round he went and could find no way of escape. When had he really done what he ought to do? When had he done it perfectly? Here is proof that, if the justification of the sinner depends on a single thing that man must do, be this requirement ever so small and insignificant, the sinner must despair.

The specific Roman Catholic doctrine of justification can never assure a sinner that he actually has forgiveness. According to this doctrine, man is made righteous through the infusion of grace, and being made righteous, he has forgiveness of sin. However, when the sinner examines himself, he can only see and feel unrighteousness, no matter how many times he confesses his sins and no matter how many times he hears the words of absolution. Why? If the absolution granted by the priest within the Catholic Church were unconditional, then the sinner could be certain of having forgiveness. But, as pointed out previously, according to Catholic doctrine the priest remits only guilt and the eternal punishment but binds to temporal punishments, satisfaction which the sinner must make either in this world or in purgatory. The forgiveness granted in the Catholic Church through the absolution of the priest is therefore not a full and complete pardon but is conditioned by the satisfaction rendered for sin. Certainty of forgiveness can be found only where the words of absolution refer to, and proclaim, that objective absolution revealed in Christ's open grave. That absolution is complete and unconditional. That word alone can give peace of conscience. But that word Luther never heard in the Catholic Church.

But why is it, some one will ask, that all Catholics do not suffer the same doubts and misgivings which Luther suffered? Many do not realize the gravity of sin, and those who do realize

the gravity of sin rely on the Church to save them. They trust in the sacraments of the Church, in the help of the saints, and in their own good works. Besides, since the days of Gregory the Great (d. 604) it is regarded as presumptuous within the Catholic Church to even desire certainty of forgiveness; as long as he is in this world, the Catholic dares only to hope for salvation.

But there was another problem which caused Luther much grief, and that was the question of predestination. He met this question for the first time in the *Canon of the Mass*, by Biel; and when he began to study theology itself, he found it on the first pages of the first book of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. But with Luther predestination was not a philosophical but an intensely practical question, and in a soul already burdened with the problem of seeking grace through the sacraments this doctrine could only cause greater despair. The conflict with a God who saved only through the infusion of grace became even more bitter.

Since the days of Augustine most of the theologians were predestinarians, and in Duns Scotus and the "moderns" God became an arbitrary despot. As God wills according to His good pleasure, He predestinates or reprobates, grants or withholds grace. Luther continually asked the question: "Am I predestinated or reprobated?" But he was trying to build his house of faith "from the top," and therefore he fell down and "broke his neck." The conception of God solely as the Absolute Being, who rules and governs the world, without the message that God forgives our sins for the sake of Christ, made Luther's burden unbearable, and we can well understand why Luther feared and hated God. That God who has ordained the way of perfection and yet refuses to grant to some the necessary grace because He willed to reprobate them, cannot be loved but only feared and hated. And if Luther feared and hated God, how then could he have contrition, the necessary disposition for the worthy reception of grace according to the standards of the Roman Church? Again he felt he had committed a mortal sin.

During Luther's spiritual martyrdom there was especially one man who kept Luther from despair, and that was Johann von Staupitz. Staupitz had studied at Tuebingen a few years after Biel's death, but somehow he had come under the influence of the so-called mystic theology, and the emphasis on the death of Christ, found in mystic theology, gave Luther relative appeasement in the problem of predestination. When Luther was tormented with this question, Staupitz told him that "predestination is to be understood and found in the wounds of Christ" (*Tischr.*, II, No. 1, 491). This was a thoroughly Catholic doctrine, for Biel had advised his readers to hold fast to the ordained and revealed will of God. But it was Staupitz, the mystic, who continually

emphasized this fact and thereby tore Luther away from the "modern" speculation about the absolute God and caused him to look at the man called Christ (Tischr., I, No. 526).

The other problem which caused Luther much anguish was the sacrament of penance. Luther plagued and martyred himself in order that he might obtain that love to God which according to "modern" theology would give to him the ultimate and perfect disposition for the infusion of grace.* Here again it was Staupitz who mitigated his sorrow. (Enders, I:196.) Luther had placed the love of God as the goal of his labors, for through sorrow over sin he sought to obtain the love of God. Staupitz told him to place the love of God at the beginning. Because he loved God, therefore he should be sorry for sin. This was the theology of the Thomists. First love God and then because of love to God be sorry for your sins, and through such sorrow you will induce God to love you. "These words stuck in me like a sharp arrow and I began to compare the word penitence with the Scriptural passages which treat of repentance, and, lo, it became a most delightful exercise." Thus Staupitz turned Luther's thoughts into a different channel and furnished some relief. But Staupitz did not and could not bring real peace to Luther, first, because he did not know that perfect contrition has its source in God's love to man—because God loves man, therefore man should love God and be sorry for his sins†—and, secondly, because he (Staupitz) was a Catholic, laboring under the dictum, After Baptism either satisfaction or punishment. Peace was found by Luther through Paul when he learned to regard the "righteousness of God" not as the punitive righteousness of God, which the sinner must endeavor to satisfy through penance if he would obtain the love of God and escape punishment, but as the righteousness of God revealed in Christ, which God gives and imputes to the sinner and which the sinner receives by faith. But Luther's spiritual martyrdom was finally ended when he rejected that dictum, which had plagued the Christian Church since its earliest days, After Baptism either satisfaction or punishment. That was the real cause of Luther's martyrdom, and when that was proved false, then his spiritual martyrdom was at an end.

Morrison, III.

THEO. DIERKS

* The Scholastics distinguished, as noted before, between a sorrow because of the fear of hell (attrition) and a sorrow because of love to God (contrition). Luther on the basis of the Scriptures taught the repentance of the believer who accepts the forgiveness and pardon of God in Christ, which he called the *taegliche Reue und Busse*, and which is the fruit of faith in the forgiveness of sin.

† There is true contrition, the "taegliche Reue und Busse" of the Christian. Staupitz did not and could not teach Luther such contrition, for he himself did not know the doctrine of the objective reconciliation and justification.

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