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Luther's Concept of the Atonement Before 1517

By LEWIS W. SPITZ

Recent years have seen a delightfully refreshing interest in Luther's writings. One might almost speak of a Luther renaissance. Luther scholarship in Sweden immediately comes to one's mind. But other countries as well have made their contributions, and other religious groups besides the Lutheran. We may think of such men as Werner Elert and Erich Seeberg in Germany, Philip S. Watson in England, and Roland H. Bainton in America. This number could easily be multiplied. Among the subjects which have engaged the attention of these scholars in Luther's writings is his concept of the Atonement — a most important subject indeed! For as the doctrine of justification by faith is the very heart of Luther's theology, so the doctrine of the atonement is the very center of the doctrine of justification by faith. Luther's theology is not only theocentric but Christocentric; it is the theology of Christ Crucified, of the Cross. In this all Luther scholars are agreed. They are not all agreed, however, when they attempt to label Luther's doctrine of the atonement.

As it is easier to trace the mighty Amazon nearer its source than where it pours its flood into the ocean, so some believe it is easier to trace Luther's thinking in his earlier years than in those of his full development as a theologian and writer. Hence a great deal of attention is given to "the young" Luther. This seems to be Karl Holl's approach.¹ The present study is an attempt to present a number of Luther's expressions regarding Christ's work of redemption without any effort at co-ordinating them into any particular theory.

Whatever one may call Luther's doctrine of the atonement, it is obvious that his concept of it in relation to the doctrine of justification by faith has given his entire theology a unity, coherence, and balanced emphasis which has never been excelled by any other theologian, no matter how eminent he may have been in the field of systematic theology. As soon as Luther put his trust in the doctrine of justification by faith, his entire theology began to arrange

itself in an orderly pattern around it like iron filings along the lines of force in a magnetic field. Some time passed before Luther could detect all the non-magnetic materials, which would not respond to the magnet, and could eliminate them. That is, for some time traces of the old, now discredited, theology of erroneous medieval accretions can still be detected in his writings.

Theodosius Harnack directs attention to this fact. He shows how Luther by placing Christ in the very center of his theology created a different theological structure from that of the Middle Ages, though he did not lay aside all erroneous terms of the old at once. He says: "Not from above downward, but from below upward; not starting with the idea of the deity, its counsels, its immanent solitary activity in the creature, but starting with God in Christ, in the Word, etc. — that is for him the way which the knowledge peculiar to faith follows, and which according to his opinion alone deserves the name theology. That is Luther's original maxim, to which he also remained true at all times. To pursue a different way is for him 'speculating above the clouds and wanting to catch them.' In this way he also acquired for, and restored to, the Church a theology which, no matter how modest it may appear to one viewing it superficially, in contrast with the proud intellectual cathedrals of scholasticism, nevertheless, by far excels these in truth and inwardness, in solidity and depth, and also in magnificence, because it rests upon the strong and solid foundation which God Himself has laid and makes the heart cheerful and certain, and because its only purpose is to meditate on the thoughts of grace which God in the chief of all His works has laid down and made manifest."²

Harnack shows that even though Luther was not at once able to eliminate theoretically all the foreign elements and to assimilate and unite the related ones organically, this justifying faith, which already stands more firmly for him than heaven and earth, nevertheless gives to his theology the correct sense of the true and the false, for that which is salutary and that which is harmful to the soul, and endows it with a principle and gives it a character, by virtue of which it differs manifestly also from that of St. Augustine and of the mystics. As early as 1516, says Harnack, the words are true of Luther's theology which he later wrote in the foreword to his commentary on Galatians, where he confesses: "In my heart

this article rules alone, and shall rule alone, namely, faith in my dear Lord Christ, who is the only middle, beginning, and end of all my spiritual and godly thoughts, which I may ever have day and night."³

The centrality of the Cross in Luther's theology, already in these early years, is clearly demonstrated by his approach to the Bible. As the Cross of Christ is the pivot on which his entire theology turns, so it is the hub around which his understanding of the Bible revolves. In a fragment of a sermon delivered on November 11, 1515, Luther warns against a misuse of the Bible and tells the reader how to use it rightly. He advises: "Whosoever will read the Bible must indeed pay heed that he does not err, for the Scripture indeed permits itself to be stretched and manipulated (*leiten*), but let none manipulate it according to his own feeling, but let him lead it to the fountain, that is, to the Cross of Christ, so he will surely hit the mark and will not miss. *Unum praedica, sapientiam crucis*, that is, that it is not in man's power, nor is he able, and so he learns to despair of himself and to hope in Christ."⁴ On the basis of such advice Luther could safely risk putting the Bible in the hands of the laity. The reader gets lost on his journey through the Bible only if he takes his eyes off the goal—the Cross of Christ.

We return to the importance of the Cross in the doctrine of justification by faith. Luther did not exaggerate its importance. It cannot be exaggerated. The doctrine of justification by faith stands or falls with the true doctrine of the Cross. Dogmatically speaking, we may say that the doctrine of subjective justification stands or falls with that of objective justification. Unless Christ by His active and passive obedience—we have learned to speak in these terms—has redeemed the world, there is no forgiveness which may be acquired by faith in the Redeemer. This, then, underscores the importance of the doctrine regarding Christ's redemptive work and raises the question of His vicarious atonement—a question which engages particularly also present-day Luther students.

According to Carlson, Aulen finds in Luther's writings the dramatic character of the Atonement.⁵ "It cannot well be denied," he holds, "that the idea of conflict and victory appears in Luther's treatment of the atonement. The Swedish students have amassed an impressive body of supporting evidence."⁶ Carlson questions,

however, whether this is the only view of the Atonement that can be derived from Luther, and he shows that it is indeed not the only one that has been attributed to him. He ascribes to the period of Orthodoxy adherence to the satisfaction theory and declares that large numbers of students of Luther since that time must at least have found passages to support this theory.⁷ Referring to Hjalmar Lindroth's *Foersoningen*, he mentions three types of passages dealing with the Atonement. In the first, he says, the satisfaction idea appears alone, in the second the dramatic motif comes out very clearly, and in the third the two are interwoven.⁸ The reader will be alert to the possible presence of these types in the passages which will be cited from the early writings of Luther.

Watson seems to favor Aulen's theory and suggests its close resemblance to patristic conceptions. He regards Dr. Sidney Cave's criticism of Aulen's thesis as one-sided. According to Cave, says Watson, Luther taught not only the patristic view, but also the penal theory of the Atonement, or at least gave interpretations of Christ's work of which the penal theory is a rationalization.⁹ Theodosius Harnack, he adds, might seem to lend support to this view when he maintains that Luther's chief emphasis is not chiefly on Christ's conflict with the powers of evil, but on His relation to the Law; therefore not on redemption, but on atonement.¹⁰

Watson sees the difficulty in trying to force Luther into a specific theory. He reminds the reader that Luther quite frequently uses imagery very different from that of conflict and victory to express the significance of the work of Christ. Luther, he says, "speaks of Christ's satisfaction of the Law, His merit, His sacrifice, His pacification of the wrath of God." But Watson suggests the question whether there may not be a consistent purpose underlying all Luther's statements about the work of Christ, however diverse they may be superficially.¹¹ The Luther student will find this to be true even of the young Luther. Luther's theology is indeed so rich in expression that it is difficult to force its terminology into any particular pattern. *Christus Victor?* Surely there are in Luther's writings abundant passages which describe Christ's conflict with His and our spiritual enemies. Luther's disciples today use the same language, particularly at Easter time. Luther also frequently speaks of the satisfaction Christ rendered for us. He speaks of Christ's

fulfillment of the Law and His bearing the wrath of God. He knows that Christ has redeemed us from the guilt and the power of sin. But his portraits of Christ as the Savior are only so many facets of the same diamond. Luther may see in Christ our Champion who slew our enemies, as David slew Goliath, or he may regard Him as the benevolent Master who pays the debts of His servants and so frees them from slavery.

Watson holds that if Dr. Cave's allegation that Luther teaches what is virtually a penal theory of the atonement could be substantiated, it would reveal a profound and irreconcilable contradiction in Luther's thought. He maintains, with Dr. Cave, that the penal theory implies the primacy of divine justice, which requires that the claim of God's Law and wrath should be satisfied before His love can do its work.¹² Here, however, we must again be reminded of the fact that Luther places the Cross in the center of his theology. God's love goes out to man only through Christ. Apart from Christ, God is not Love, but Wrath toward the sinner. The God of love and justice is one and the same God. Viewed in Christ, He is Love; viewed apart from Christ, He is Wrath in His attitude toward the world. Luther's pronouncements regarding salvation must be blended as so many strokes of the artist's brush to present the finished picture of his thinking.

The doctrine of the vicarious atonement presupposes the necessary qualifications on the part of the Atoner for the task He was to perform. According to the Scripture, there is only one who could thus qualify, namely: Jesus Christ, true God and true Man in one person — the God-Man. Only He could act as man's substitute; only His work would be satisfactory to God. The Redeemer, or Atoner, as Luther portrays Him, meets this qualification. There is never any doubt in Luther's portrayal regarding either Christ's true humanity or deity. Luther never challenges Christ's sufficiency for the task He was to perform. His earliest expositions of Scripture known to us — on the Psalms and on Romans — know only Christ, God incarnate, as the Savior. "It is mainly as the One who has borne our sins," says Koestlin, "that He [Christ] is presented to our view. We may refer, for illustration, to His weeping, which nothing but our sins occasioned, and especially to His last suffering and death. It is here that the consciousness of the primitive divine

wrath directed against sin asserts itself in its full strength. In many instances, scattered through the entire work [commentary on the Psalms], we find already a complete expression of that very deep view of the sufferings of Christ as due to the wrath of God which remained a distinct characteristic of Luther's teaching. It was punishment which He there endured. He saw the wrath of God and therefore wept and prayed for us. In order to suffer thus, He took upon Himself infirmity from the sole of His foot to the crown of His head. Confessions of sin uttered by the Psalmists are to be regarded as spoken directly by Him. He, made to be sin and a curse for us, confessed our own sins before God. The death which He suffered was that appointed for Adam: He reaped what Adam sowed. He even tasted hell, but did not exhaust its misery. The ungodly must drink the dregs, and can never fully drain the cup. Believers now, on the other hand, shall never taste of it."¹³

It is to be expected that Luther's presentation of doctrine is not always as clear in the early years of his writing as it became later. As late as the year 1516, says Harnack, Luther could still teach in a vacillating manner on the one hand "that we are righteous only of God, who justifies and imputes righteousness," and on the other hand that our righteousness does not consist in works, as Aristotle teaches, but "in faith, hope, and love."¹⁴ For another illustration we may cite a sermon delivered on the tenth Sunday after Trinity, in 1516, in which Luther combines the merit of Christ with that of His saints, stating with respect to indulgences: "Quae [indulgentiae] profecto, etsi ipsum meritum Christi et sanctorum eius ideoque omni reverentia suscipiendae, tamen teterrimum factae sunt ministerium avaritiae. Quinam enim per eas salutem quaerunt animarum et non potius pecuniam bursarum!"¹⁵ It was Luther's difficult task to make new bottles for the new wine he was pouring. Luther found it necessary to become a neologist. He had to give old terms a new meaning and had to create new terms to express old truths. In the process he sometimes failed to keep the old and the new sharply apart.

For any number of passages which might indicate a lack of clear thinking regarding salvation a dozen and more can be cited to show how fully Luther put his trust in the merits of Christ alone. For these we turn chiefly to his commentary on Romans of 1515—16.¹⁶

Commenting on Rom. 5:15: "But not as the offense, so also is the free gift," Luther says: "Therefore the meaning is: 'The grace of God' (through which He justifies us or, rather, which is present as having its source in Christ, as the sin of man has in Adam) 'and the gift,' namely, the one which Christ pours out from the Father upon them that believe in Him, this gift was communicated 'through the grace of this single Man,' that is, through the personal merit and the personal grace, for the sake of which it pleased God to give us this gift. That 'through the grace of this single Man' is to be understood of the personal grace of Christ, equivalent to one's own and the personal sin of Adam, but 'the gift' is nothing but the righteousness which has been given us."¹⁷ Thus we receive the gift of divine righteousness only through the Man Christ. Only He can dispel the fear of the judgment on the Last Day. Commenting on Rom. 8:7: "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God," Luther says: "This fear accordingly no one has overcome save Christ alone, who has overcome death and all temporal evils and also eternal death. Who therefore believes in Him has in the future no longer any reason to fear."¹⁸ Christ is our Righteousness; He has overcome our fear: therefore His is the glory. But Christ can be rightly honored only if we credit Him with all good things and accuse ourselves and attribute all evil things only to ourselves.¹⁹ Here Luther again emphasizes Christ's humanity. In His humanity the divine Redeemer must be adored. To this, says Luther, the Prophet incites.²⁰

To atone for our sins the divine-human Redeemer had to produce a righteousness superior to any the human race could produce. Commenting on Is. 65:1 (cf. Rom. 10:20), Luther explains: "This word . . . must be understood thus: Without our works and merits the righteousness of God is offered us — us who desire and long for things entirely different from God's righteousness. For who would have sought the Word which was made flesh if He had not revealed Himself? So He was found when not sought; but once found, He will ever be sought further and ever be found better. He permits Himself to be found if we turn from our sins to Him; but He is sought if we remain in conversion [*Umkehr*]."²¹

To make it possible that He and His righteousness could thus be found, Christ had to do God's will in fullest measure. He had

to be obedient even unto death; for also in dying Christ fulfilled the will of God. Thus His passive obedience is not only a penalty for the guilt of sin, but an active fulfillment of the Law. He suffered and died because He loved God. Luther explains: "For Christ also was damned and forsaken more than all saints. And not, as some suggest, did He suffer only lightly, but really and truly He sacrificed Himself for us to God the Father into eternal damnation. Indeed, His human nature was not otherwise than a person who is to be eternally damned to hell. For this His love to God, God also immediately raised Him from death and hell, and so He devoured hell. Therein all His saints must become like Him; some more, some less. The more perfect they are in love, the more willing and easily they will be able to do it. But Christ performed this the hardest way, therefore He complains in so many passages of Scripture over the pains of hell."²² Love is the motivating power in Christ's suffering, and love is the fulfillment of the Law.

Commenting on Paul's complaint: "I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart" (Rom. 9:2), Luther takes occasion to characterize the nature of love. He says: "Love is not purely joy and sweetness, but great, deep sadness and bitterness. But, no, it is full of joy and sweetness in the midst of bitter sadness, because it regards the misery and wretchedness of others as its own. So also Christ glowed most fervently with love in His final and severest Passion. Indeed, according to the blessed Hilary, this was His greatest joy that He was suffering the greatest sorrow."²³

The death of Christ proves His perfect love of the Father and His absolute obedience to the Father's will. So completely did Christ merge His will with that of the Father that, even in His extreme struggle with death, He submerged His not-willing beneath His willing. Luther puts it thus: "So also Christ in His fight with death perfected His not-willing (so to speak) by means of the most fervent willing. For so God deals with his saints that He has them do with the greatest strength of the will what they most decidedly do not will."²⁴ We are here reminded of Christ's prayer in Gethsemane: "O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39).

It is in obedience to His Father that Christ suffers and dies.

On Rom. 14:9: "For to this end Christ both died and rose and revived, that He might be Lord both of the dead and living," Luther makes the comment: "Not as though He had striven for this as for His own self, but He was obedient therein to the Father, who willed that He should thus die and rise again; otherwise He, too, would not have died and been resurrected unto God, but unto Himself."²⁵ It may be well to note here that no mention is made of the ancient idea of paying a ransom to the devil. Christ dies unto God, not unto the devil.

Seeberg contends that also in rendering satisfaction to God not the blood, but the righteousness of Christ is most prominent in Luther's earliest writings. He adds, however, that the death of Christ cannot be regarded as having significance for this Person alone. It is the "completest satisfaction" for our sins and therefore works the forgiveness of our sins. He refers to Luther's comment on Rom. 4:25: "Who was delivered for our offenses and was raised again for our justification," regarding which Luther says: "The death of Christ is the death of sin and His resurrection is the life of righteousness. For through His death He rendered satisfaction for our sin and through His resurrection He imputed His righteousness to us. And so His death does not merely symbolize, but also works the forgiveness of sins as the most satisfying satisfaction. And His resurrection is not merely an earnest of our righteousness, but also works it in us, if we believe in it, and is its cause."²⁶ This righteousness is given us only through faith. "So it is resolved," says Luther, "so it pleases God, and therein nothing will be changed."²⁷ But "this is, indeed, extremely bitter for the wisdom of the flesh," says Luther, "which rebels against it and permits itself to be incited to blasphemy; for here it is completely killed and totally annihilated when it recognizes the fact that its salvation in no wise depends on itself and its activity, but is founded on that alone which is outside itself, namely, on God's predestination."²⁸ No glory to man; all glory to God!

Luther himself arrived at the conviction that man is justified by grace through faith only after years of spiritual anguish, labor, and struggle. Hence he does not tire to direct men away from themselves to Christ and His righteousness. Already in 1514 he said in a sermon: "Christ would be our hen for salvation (Matt. 23:37).

This is that with all our righteousness we cannot at all be saved; but we must flee beneath the wings of this our hen, so that we receive from His fullness what is not to be found in us. Mal. 4:2; Ps. 91:4; 63:7. For whosoever saunters along securely in his own righteousness, him the birds of prey, that is, the most cruel devils, will wrest away."²⁹

In his "Sermo in Festo Bartholomaei Apostoli," Aug. 24, 1516, he says: "Jews are those who seek to be justified by their own works: therefore they do not want to hear that Christ is their Righteousness and are offended in Him, saying, 'Let us do evil,' etc. But let them; they are blind."³⁰ In his "Dictata super Psalterium, Glossa: Psalmus XXIX (XXX)," Luther, quoting Rom. 4:25, speaks of the Lord's holiness with which He sanctifies you and says: "But in the death of Christ we are baptized and made holy."³¹ In his "Scholae: Psalmus XXXI (XXXII)" he declares: "No one is blessed unless his iniquities are remitted. Hence the corollary: No one is without iniquity, everyone is a son of wrath and therefore in need that it be forgiven him. But this is not done save through Christ."³² In his commentary on Romans he says: "For God would not save us through our own, but through a strange righteousness and wisdom, through a righteousness which does not come from within us and has its source in us, but which comes from elsewhere to us. Therefore a righteousness which comes altogether from without and is entirely foreign to us must be taught."³³ This thought reoccurs like a refrain. Luther repeats: "Therefore it was correct when I said that all our good is outside ourselves — Christ! As the Apostle says (1 Cor. 1:30): 'Who of God is made unto us Wisdom, and Righteousness, and Sanctification, and Redemption.' All that is in us only through faith in Him and hope in Him."³⁴

The blood of Christ and propitiation occupy a prominent place in Luther's thinking. There is no satisfaction without the blood of Christ, "whom God hath set forth . . . to be a Mercy-Seat (*propitiatorium*) through faith in His blood. . . . In His blood: He wanted to become the Mercy-Seat for us only in this manner, that He first would render satisfaction for us through His blood. And so He became a Mercy-Seat for the believers in His blood."³⁵ Luther emphasizes the importance of faith to the highest degree, as is obvious from the complete citation. He declares: "'Quem proposuit deus'

(i. e., *ab aeterno ordinavit et nunc ita posuit 'propitiatorium per fidem' i. e., ut sit propitiatio pro peccatis, sed non nisi credentibus*), quia per incredulitatem propitiatorium potius in tribunal et iudicium mutatur, 'in sanguine ipsius,' quia *non voluit hoc propitiatorium nobis fieri, nisi per sanguinem prius pro nobis satisfaceret. Ideo in sanguine suo factus est propitiatorium credentibus.*" Glossa 34. 20.³⁰ Again: "God does not grant grace freely in the sense that He demanded no satisfaction, but He offered up Christ, that He should render satisfaction for us, in order now to give grace freely to those who had rendered satisfaction through another."³⁷ Could Luther have expressed the doctrine of the vicarious atonement more clearly? No one can be justified without Christ; "for by forgiving sins through the Mercy-Seat and so justifying, He reveals how necessary His righteousness is, since there is no one to whom He must not forgive."³⁸ "He bears them [sins], therefore, patiently to forgive them; He forgives them to show His righteousness or justification through faith in our mercy-seat in His blood."³⁹ Objective justification makes possible subjective justification. "Only the New Testament, that is, grace through faith in Christ, takes away sin," says Luther. "God, however, takes away sin when He gives faith, since sins are remitted to those who believe."⁴⁰ On the other hand, the remission of sins proves God's power to forgive sins.⁴¹

In this pattern of salvation the Law occupies a position of such importance as to merit special attention. As Adam's sin consists in the transgression of the Law, so the righteousness of the saints does not consist in fulfilling the Law, but only in the imputation of Christ's fulfillment of the Law, which He Himself accomplished.⁴² Thus believers fulfill the Law through faith in Christ, whose righteousness and fulfillment of the Law is their own, given by God, who has pity on them, by grace.⁴² In his sermon delivered on St. Stephen's Day, 1515, Luther declared: "So spoke the Apostle Romans 8. The wisdom of the flesh is death, for it is not subject to God, neither can it. Therefore, as we are carnal, it is impossible for us to fulfill the Law, but Christ alone came to fulfill it, which we could only break. . . . Nevertheless, Christ ascribed His fulfillment to us in that He exhibited Himself as a hen to us, that we might flee under His wings and through His fulfillment we

also might fulfill the Law. O sweet hen! O blessed chicks of this hen!"⁴⁴ God imposes the Law that grace should be sought and acknowledged and the wisdom of the flesh should be set aside, for by the Law is the knowledge of sin.⁴⁵

"Every Law gives occasion to sin, unless grace and favor aid and the inclination (*affectus*) and will are directed towards the Law. . . . As the poet puts it: 'We always desire that which is forbidden and stretch the hands desiringly after that which is denied.' 'So the sick desires the forbidden water.' 'What is permitted is not welcome; what is not allowed burns the hotter.' 'What pursues me that I flee, and what flees from me that I pursue.'"⁴⁶

The Law is the strength and the power of sin, through which sin remains and rules. From this despotism of the Law and sin no one is freed save through Christ.⁴⁷ By the Law the old man is discovered. Commenting on Rom. 7:4: "Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the Law by the body of Christ," Luther explains: "One does not recognize the old man before the Law has been recognized and set up (*positam*); but when it has been set up, the old man is, as it were, also born. So by the Law we are subject to the old man and sin, that is, we see that we are subject."⁴⁸ Commenting on the next verse (7:5): "For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the Law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death," he adds: "Namely, through the Law of Moses, for that is the Law of the former man, that is, of the old man, which was not set up by him, but he was much rather through this Law resurrected unto life. For that reason it says, 'were by the Law,' for without Law there was no old man. 'Law of the man' so it says in the creative sense, because it first creates the man and subjects the soul to him, as also the law of marriage is not created by the husband, but creates the husband and subjects to the husband. In marriage it subjects palpably (*handgreiflich*), but here in a spiritual sense, in so far as it now leads to a knowledge and an increase of the lust to sin or rather to obedience (to it). For by the Law sin grows still more as long as grace is absent. . . . But when grace is granted, the old man dies and the Law can thereafter no longer create or manifest him. So we die unto the power and dominion of the Law, but not

to the Law *per se* and simply, that is, we are not under the Law, even when we have the Law."⁴⁹ "But now are we delivered from the Law" (7:6). "Howso are we delivered 'from the Law'?" Luther asks. He answers: "Manifestly by this, that we through faith in Christ render satisfaction to the Law and through faith are free and inclined to the works of the Law. He who does not possess this grace is unwilling or acts from fear of punishment or from lust of gain. Therefore we need the love which seeks that which is God's and which is given to him who in faith and in Christ's name prays for it. Even though we sin often and are not fully willing, we have, nevertheless, made a beginning and, marching forward, are righteous and free. Indeed we must always fear the fact that we are under the Law. Therefore we must always believe and pray for love. For who knows whether he is not doing from fear of punishment or love of his own advantage, whether he is not even in a real fine form in his prayers and pious works striving more for rest and pay than to do God's will?"⁵⁰ In reference to the words: "that we should serve in newness of spirit and not in the oldness of the letter" (7:6), Luther takes occasion to remark that Paul here includes the whole Law, also the Moral Law. He says: "Lyra accordingly errs when he insists that Christ has abolished the Law in so far as it concerns judicial and ceremonial, but not in so far as it concerns moral precepts. Much rather he here says clearly also of the moral precepts that they are in the Law of death and of the letter."⁵¹

Seeberg sums up Luther's attitude toward the Law as follows: "But indeed the freeing from the Law is by him a freeing to the Law. It does not mean unrestraint and caprice, but love of the Law and willingness to its works. In this sense the Christian is free from the Law: he has become righteous and therefore acts freely according to the Law. So the Law remains; but it also does not remain, for in the end everything depends on one's attitude towards the Law. Therewith the general theological task of the Law is completely preserved. In all stages through which a person passes in his life, it has the task to humble the proud, that is, to show men that they are sinners — a knowledge to which man indeed attains only with the help of God."⁵²

In viewing the various quotations cited from his writings before the year 1517, we find that Luther portrayed Christ as the God-Man who was fully qualified to atone for the sins of the world. Christ fulfilled the Law by His perfect love and obedience even unto death for the sinner. He thereby also rendered complete satisfaction to God's justice. The God of wrath is now a God of love in Christ. Satan can no longer demand that God deal with the sons of Adam as He dealt with him; for God did thus deal with the human race in the suffering and death of His Son. Hence also death and hell have lost their claim to possess man. The Law, moreover, is not a taskmaster for the believers, even as it no longer condemns them, for the renewed will of the believers is identical with the commandments of God's Law. In rendering a fully satisfying satisfaction to God in the sinner's stead, Christ has indeed become the Victor over all of our spiritual enemies.

Whatever label one may feel inclined to give to Luther's concept of the Atonement before 1517, it enabled him to write that consoling letter to Georg Spenlein in 1516, in which, speaking of the righteousness of God, which is given us most richly and freely, he writes: "Therefore, my sweet brother, learn Christ and Him Crucified, learn to sing unto Him and despairing in thyself to say to Him: Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, but I am Thy sin; Thou hast taken what is mine and given me what is Thine; Thou hast taken what Thou wast not and given me what I was not. Beware, lest at any time thou shouldest aspire to such purity, that thou wouldst not appear unto thee as a sinner, yes, be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners. For for that purpose He descended from heaven, where He dwelt in the righteous, that He might also dwell in sinners. Meditate on that love of His, and thou shalt see His sweetest consolation. For if it were necessary to attain to peace of conscience through our labors and afflictions, wherefore did He die? Therefore only in Him, sincerely despairing of thyself and thy works, thou shalt find peace. Thou shalt, moreover, learn from Him how He has received thee and made thy sins His own as well as His righteousness thy own."⁵³

Christ is, indeed, the Victor, and whosoever believes in Him will not be lost and swallowed up, but will experience in his own body the victory which Christ won through His passion.⁵⁴

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- ³ *Ibid.*, I, 55.
- ⁴ M. Luther, *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Boehlau, 1883—), I, 52. (The Weimar edition of Luther's works will hereafter be indicated by the customary abbreviation, *W. A.*)
- ⁵ Edgar M. Carlson, *The Reinterpretation of Luther* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948), pp. 178—9.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 179—180.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), p. 118.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- ¹³ Julius Koestlin, *The Theology of Luther in Its Historical Development and Inner Harmony*, trans. Charles E. Hay (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), I, 105.
- ¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, II, 325.
- ¹⁵ *W. A.*, I, 65.
- ¹⁶ H. H. Borchert and Georg Merz (eds.), *Vorlesung ueber den Roemerbrief 1515—16*, trans. Eduard Ellwein Vol. II, *Martin Luther, Ausgewaeblte Werke* (Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1937). This volume will hereafter be referred to as Ellwein.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 233.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 309.
- ¹⁹ *W. A.*, IV, 124.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 349—350.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 345.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 434.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 517.
- ²⁶ Erich Seeberg, *Luthers Theologie*, Vol. II, *Christus Wirklichkeit und Urbild* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer in Stuttgart, 1937), p. 111; Ellwein, p. 203.
- ²⁷ Ellwein, p. 147.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

- 29 Harnack, *op. cit.*, II, 325.
- 30 *W. A.*, I, 81.
- 31 *Ibid.*, III, 161.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 33 Ellwein, p. 3.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 35 *Ibid.*, pp. 155—156.
- 36 *Vorlesung ueber den Roemerbrief 1515/16*, ed. J. Ficker, 1923, quoted by Seeberg, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
- 37 Ellwein, p. 147.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 420.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 249.
- 44 *W. A.*, I, 35.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 Ellwein, p. 66.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 264.
- 52 *Op. cit.*, p. 114.
- 53 Ernst L. Enders, *Dr. Martin Luthers Briefwechsel* (Frankfurt am Main: Schriften-Niederlage des Evangel. Vereins, 1884), I, 29.
- 54 Ellwein, p. 309.