

Turning Point: Luther at the Diet of Worms (1521)



- Mark Noll, *Turning Points*, ch. 7
- Key texts to start with: [The Freedom of a Christian](#), [On the Bondage of the Will](#), [The Babylonian Captivity of the Church](#), [The 95 Theses](#).
- [Augsburg Confession](#) of the Lutheran churches (1530).
- [Luther on reading and teaching the Gospel narratives](#).
- Luther's amazing [sermon on John 1:29](#).
- Luther's blistering [commentary on Galatians](#).
- Guys who blog quite a bit on Luther - [Ron Frost](#), [Peter Mead](#), [Glen Scrivener](#).
- Carl Trueman on Luther at the Clarus Conference 2005 - [audio](#).
- [Martin Luther in 30 minutes](#) from MTC.
- [A Mighty Fortress is Our God: The Story of Martin Luther](#) - available at [iServe Africa bookstore](#)
- Graham Tomlin, *Luther and his World* – available in the iServe Africa library
- Michael Reeves, *Unquenchable Flame / On Giant's Shoulders*

Some of the key issues:

- Authority of Church versus authority of Word – “my conscience is captive to the Word of God”
- Against Papacy that Luther saw to be slamming the door to the kingdom in people’s faces, not going in and preventing others from entering
- Sacraments reduced to Baptism and Lord’s Supper (versus 7 catholic sacraments)
- Luther’s ‘theology of the Cross’ (from 1517 onwards) - increasingly seeing that the will is bound, can do no good of ourselves (and if we think that we can, that is evil); it is in powerlessness that there is power. This was an extension of Augustinianism that the church could no longer contain.

Summary of Alister McGrath's *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 1985

McGrath starts by placing Luther in his setting as a late medieval theologian of the *via moderna*. The *via moderna* (modern way) was a philosophical movement from the 14th century that contrasted itself with the *via antiqua* (old way) of doing philosophy. The old way was a Realist approach to philosophy; whereas the *via moderna* was Nominalist in nature. The *via moderna* emphasised logic and direct experience and rejected empty speculation and abstraction. Ockham's razor, the principle that plurality is never to be posited without need, was the basic spirit of the *via moderna*. The advocates of the *via moderna* believed in the principle of the uniformity of nature and engaged actively in scientific research. Thus, the *via moderna* believed that the world was uniform and could be successfully understood through enquiry and the endeavour of the human mind.

Late medieval theology taught that God would accept the person who did their best (the actual phrase used was, "did what was within them", in Latin "*quod in se est*"), based on the covenant between God and humanity. God remains faithful to his covenant with humanity, despite our inability to keep our side of the covenant. Because of his commitment and faithfulness to the covenant, God extends his mercy and grace to people to justify them before himself.

"Even grace and faith, through which we are justified today, would not justify us of themselves (*ex seipsis*), without God's covenant. It is precisely for this reason that we are saved: God has made a testament (*testamentum*) and covenant (*pactum*) with us, so that whoever believes and is baptised shall be saved. In this covenant God is truthful and faithful, and is bound by what he has promised."

Once it has been established that Luther operates with a covenantal concept of causality in respect to justification, the question of the minimum condition required for man's justification becomes important. But what is to be understood by 'doing your best'? For Luther, the basic condition which man must meet in order to be justified appears to be a recognition of one's need for grace, and an appeal to God in his mercy to bestow it.

Luther's basic theme is that the Word of God forces man, despite his outward morality, to recognise his sin and emptiness, and thus to turn to God, crying out for the gift of grace which he now recognises he needs. The Christian, in other words, is a spiritual beggar, who can do nothing except cry out for the salvation which is his in Christ. Once he does this, he has fulfilled the condition necessary for the bestowal of grace by the terms of the divine *pactum*, and the gift of grace follows as a matter of course. It can be seen that Luther was indebted to the *via moderna* in his belief that all people can do something to establish the pre-conditions of salvation, even if he gave that "something" a unique Augustinian twist by insisting that it is to humble themselves before God. Luther was thoroughly medieval in respect of his doctrine of justification, as displayed in his lectures on Psalms during 1513-1514.

The years 1515-1519 were a period of transition in Luther's thought. It was during this period that he developed his thoughts regarding the justification of God. Luther's first move during 1515-1516 was to associate the humility required of a person to be acceptable before God with the justification of faith. Thus, humility and faith are inseparable. Humility is the natural consequence of saving faith and the equally necessary precondition for justification. For Luther, *iustitia fidei* (righteousness of faith) is that righteousness which arises through

doing your best. In other words, for a man to become righteous *coram Deo* (before God / in the presence/sight of God) 'the righteousness of God' demands that he possess 'the righteousness of faith'. What Luther states is that the righteousness which is valid before God can only be attained through the total humiliation of the individual following the example set him in Christ. By the *pactum*, God has ordained to accept *humilitas* or *humiliatio as iustitia fidei*, the covenantal righteousness which alone is valid in his sight, despite being insignificant *coram hominibus* (before man).

Early in 1515, Luther is still operating a theology consistent with the *via moderna*; the significant feature of which is a belief that God is equitable to everyone and therefore the nature of 'doing your best' must be possible by everyone. For Luther, God takes the initiative in man's salvation by means of the *pactum*, which offers him grace upon the condition that he humble himself to receive it - but he receives no such grace until he fulfils this condition, and this posture of humility is one which anyone is able to do out of their natural ability without any special assistance of grace from God.

However, there are signs that Luther was about to make a radical break with the *via moderna*. In his lectures on Romans during 1515-1516, Luther's emerging conviction that man is naturally prone to evil calls into question whether he is naturally able to make the necessary response to the divine initiative, expressed in the *pactum*. Luther no longer believes that man is capable of the true humility required of him in order that he might receive the gift of grace - he requires grace in order to achieve this true humility in the first place.

Three significant changes in Luther's teaching on this matter can be detected as having taken place during or before the Romans lectures:

1. Man is now understood to be passive towards justification
2. Luther states that man's will is held captive by sin, and is incapable of attaining righteous unaided by grace. 'Free will apart from the influence of grace has no capacity whatsoever to attain righteousness, but is necessarily in sin. Hence Augustine was right when, in his book against Julian, he calls it 'the enslaved rather than the free will'... since it is held captive in sin and thus cannot choose the good according to God.
3. The idea that man can do '*quod in se est*' is denounced as Pelagian. This development is of particular significance, in view of the fact that Luther himself based his earlier soteriology upon the presupposition that man could do *quod in se est*, as noted above.

It is clear that Luther's definitive teaching on faith as a divine gift is expressed within the pages of the Romans lectures of 1515-16. It is God, and God alone, who moves man to repentance and to the humble acknowledgement of the divine judgement which finds its proper expression in faith. Although Luther continues to understand fides in terms of *humilitas* for some time to come, it is clear that a decisive break with his earlier understanding of the concept has taken place... That insight relates not so much to the character of faith as the mode by which it comes about.

From here, Luther moved on to recognise that if a person does not have the ability to be humble and have faith, they can never become righteous. Therefore, they need to receive faith and righteousness from an external source – from God; what he called "the alien righteousness of Christ". This decisive move of realising that faith is also a gift from God,

along with righteousness, took place during 1515. Thus, by the end of 1515, Luther had made a decisive break with late medieval theology.

Luther's insight into the true nature of the 'righteousness of God' represents far more than a mere terminological clarification: latent within it is a new concept of God. Who is this God who deals thus with man? Luther's answer to this question, as it developed over the years 1513-19, can be summarised in one of his most daring phrases: the God who deals with sinful man in this astonishing way is none other than the 'crucified and hidden God' (*Deus crucifixus et absconditus*) - the God of the *theologia crucis* (the theology of the Cross).

From 1515-1519, Luther's theology of the Cross emerged. The most significant statements to this theology are to be found in Theses 19 and 20 from the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518:

19. The man who looks upon the invisible things of God as they are perceived in created things does not deserve to be called a theologian.
20. The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross, however, does deserve to be called a theologian.

For Luther, the sole authentic locus of man's knowledge of God is the cross of Christ, in which God is to be found revealed, and yet paradoxically hidden in that revelation. The important points are that God can only be truly known through his revelation, and God chooses to reveal himself through the Cross, through suffering. This mystery exists, then: that God uses the work of Satan (i.e. suffering) to accomplish his own work of revelation and redemption.

Furthermore, the person who wishes to truly know God cannot know him through the route of human knowledge and reasoning (or through the created order, cf *via moderna*), nor through speculation (cf *via antiqua*). He must take the route of faith, because God chooses to reveal himself in a hidden way through the Cross. The Cross appears as foolishness because it is not obvious that God is present in the Crucifixion as God; this is the hidden aspect of the theology of the Cross. Yet the person who humbles himself and approaches the Cross with faith finds that God is indeed active there, accomplishing his purposes; this is the revelatory aspect of the Cross.

The basic paradox involved is illustrated with reference to the justification of an individual. In order that a man may be justified, he must first recognise that he is a sinner, and humble himself before God. Before a man can be justified, he must be utterly humiliated - and it is God who both humiliates and justifies. 'Thus an action which is alien to God's nature results in an action which belongs to his very nature: God makes a person a sinner in order that he might make him righteous.'

For Luther, death, the devil, the world and Hell combine in a terrifying assault upon man, reducing him to a state of hopelessness and helplessness. Most significantly God himself must be recognised as the ultimate source of *Anfechtung* (the pain and suffering and despair felt during an affliction): it is his *opus alienum*, which is intended to destroy man's self-confidence and complacency, and reduce him to a state of utter despair and humiliation, in order that he may finally turn to God, devoid of all the obstacles to justification which formerly existed. The believer, recognising the merciful intention which underlies despair, rejoices in such assaults, seeing in them the means by which God indirectly effects and ensures his salvation. It is for this reason that Luther is able to refer to *Anfechtung* as a

'delicious despair'. Despair, or the assault of hopelessness, it must be appreciated, is not some form of spiritual growing pains, which will disappear when a mystical puberty is attained, but a perennial and authentic feature of the Christian life. In order for the Christian to progress in his spiritual life, he must continually be forced back to the foot of the cross, to begin it all again - and this takes place through the continued experience of helplessness.

How is this crisis of hopelessness, helplessness and despair resolved? For Luther, the solution lies in the crucified Christ, who suffered precisely the same helplessness on our behalf. Christ became sin on our behalf, in order that his righteousness might become our righteousness. Reason is totally unable to comprehend this astonishing mystery, by which we are made the righteousness of God. Through faith, the believer enters into a spiritual marriage with Christ, as a result of which this marvellous exchange of attributes takes place.

It will be clear that the theology of the cross is thus a theology of faith, and of faith alone. The correlative to *Crux sola* is *sola fide*, as it is through faith, and through faith alone, that the true significance of the cross is perceived, and through faith alone that its power can be appropriated. 'The reason why some do not understand how faith alone justifies is that they do not understand what faith is.' By 1519, the two main elements of Luther's mature understanding of the nature of faith have become clear. First, faith is hearing the word of promise. The Word of God, and especially the preached Word, is the means of grace by which the sinner is justified. There is an intimate link between the Word of God and the cross, within the context of the *theologia crucis*. Second, faith is the bond which unites the believer with Christ, in a spiritual marriage which far transcends any mere external or forensic imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer.

Only those who have faith understand the true meaning of the cross. Where the unbeliever sees nothing but the helplessness and hopelessness of an abandoned man dying upon a cross, the theologian of the cross (*theologus crucis*) recognises the presence and activity of the 'crucified and hidden God' (*Deus crucifixus et absconditus*), who is not merely present in human suffering, but actively works through it. It is with this God, and none other, that Christian theology must come to terms. As Luther himself emphasised, faith is the only key by which the hidden mystery of the cross may be unlocked: 'The cross is the safest of all things. Blessed is the man who understands this.'