ALISTER E. McGRATH

Luther's THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Second Edition

Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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For Joanna

Acknowledgments

Luther scholarship is a corporate enterprise, in which each successive study draws increasingly upon the findings of those preceding it. The present study thus owes an incalculable amount to the labors of others. I wish to express particular thanks to those who have helped me at various times and in various ways as I prepared the first edition of this work. That edition, published in 1985, owed much to the advice, encouragement, and criticism of Professor A.G. Dickens, Prof. Dr Leif Grane, Prof. Dr Bengt Hägglund, Prof. Dr Heiko A. Oberman, and especially Professor E. Gordon Rupp.

In revising and rewriting this book a quarter of a century later, I am indebted to the massive body of scholarly literature that has appeared since 1985, which casts valuable light on many of the themes engaged in this study. While many of the conclusions of the original study have been confirmed by more recent studies, this new scholarship has forced revision of some of the arguments and conclusion of the first edition of this work. I am grateful to all working in this field for helping to uncover its complexity, while at the same time illuminating some of its major themes. I hope that this new edition of this work will be judged to reflect accurately our new understanding of this fascinating and tumultuous age, as well as the specific issue on which it focuses – the emergence of Luther's reforming theology over the period 1509–1519, and especially its “theology of the cross.”

Abbreviations

WA	*D.M. Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (65 vols: Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nochfolger, 1883–1966)
WABr	*D.M. Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel* (18 vols: Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nochfolger, 1930–1985)
WADB	*D.M. Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Deutsche Bibel* (12 vols: Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nochfolger, 1906–1961)
WATr	*D.M. Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Tischreden* (6 vols: Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nochfolger, 1912–1921)

Introduction

The years 1517 and 1519 are generally regarded as being of decisive importance in the intellectual development of the Augustinian friar Martin Luther (1483–1546), and the history of the Protestant Reformation as a whole. The first witnessed Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses on Indulgences at Wittenberg, and the second his historic disputation with Johannes Eck at Leipzig. It is all too easy for the historian to pass over the intervening year, 1518, as being little more than an interlude between these two pivotal events, a valley nestling between two mountains. In April of that year, however, at the invitation of his superior within the Augustinian Order,[1] Johannes von Staupitz, Luther presided over the traditional public disputation at the assembly of the Augustinian Congregation at Heidelberg. In the course of the Heidelberg Disputation,[2] a new phrase was added to the vocabulary of Christendom – the "theology of the cross."

We must immediately be alert to the danger of interpreting the phrase "theology of the cross" in the light of modern western notions of theology as a professionalized academic discipline, focusing on the essentially cognitive question of ideas about God. Recent studies of the Augustinian Order have emphasized its commitment to a practical, affective vision of theology – a *Frömmigkeitstheologie*, a pastoral theology concerned with fostering and sustaining an authentic Christian existence in the world,[3] rather than with purely abstract conceptual reasoning, aimed at an academic audience. Giles of Rome (d.1316), who did much to shape the crystallizing ethos of the Augustinian Order in its early

years,[4] argued that theology is fundamentally affective, rather than theoretical or practical.[5] The leading works of influential theologians of the Augustinian Order – such as Hermann of Schildesche (d. circa 1290), Henry of Friemar (d. circa 1355), and Jordan of Quedlingburg (d.1380) – show little interest in the fine details of an Augustinian theology of grace, but focus instead on more pastoral and spiritual issues, such as creating and sustaining the life of faith, coping with doubt and difficulty, and being shaped by the passion of Christ.[6] This *theologia* is not an abstract doctrine of God, but a practical theology of Christian living, patterned after the life and death of Christ, which creates humility, faith, and a love for others. It is a fundamentally anti-speculative, anti-theoretical way of conceiving and shaping the Christian life, which involves the "normative centering" of that life around the cross of Christ.[7] Luther's *theologia crucis* stands firmly within this tradition, even if it reaches beyond it.

I first began to study the origins and development of Luther's reforming theology under the direction of Professor Gordon Rupp (1910–1986) at Cambridge University during the years 1978–1980. Although my initial historical research in the late 1970s and early 1980s focused on the origins of Luther's reforming ideas,[8] it became clear that this required detailed study of the historical development of the notion of "justification by faith,"[9] so central to the Reformation debates, and an understanding of the complex intellectual currents that shaped the emergence of the ideas of the Protestant Reformation.[10] Further scholarly developments since the publication of the first edition of this work in 1985 have had a significant impact on our understanding of some critical questions of intellectual

history relevant to this study, and have led to the production of this new edition.

The present study is an attempt to unfold the intricacies of the development of Luther's developing insights into the justification of humanity *coram Deo* over the formative years 1509–1519. The intellectual and spiritual origins of Luther's reforming theology are of immense intellectual interest and importance, both in terms of the chronology of this process and its theological substance. This work aims to explore Luther's changing views on the acceptance of humanity in the sight of God in the light of the best scholarship, demonstrating how Luther reflects many theological and spiritual debates of the late Middle Ages, particularly those current within his own Augustinian Order.

A fundamental theme of this study is that the emergence of Luther's celebrated “theology of the cross” over the years 1509–1519 is to be understood as an aspect of Luther's changing understanding of how humanity can find acceptance in the sight of a holy and righteous God. Luther's *theologia crucis* emerges within the context of his reflections on the doctrine of justification, particularly his agonized and extended attempt to understand what it means to speak of the “righteousness of God” – a theological leitmotif that plays a leading role in Paul's letter to the Romans. The present study thus offers an extended analysis of Luther's changing views on the doctrine of justification over the period 1509–1519, aiming to offer the best explanation of both the textual and contextual evidence.

This transition can only be understood in the light of the late medieval theological context within which these insights took place.[11] Luther's transition from being a representative theologian of the late Middle Ages to the pioneer of a new reforming theology is a subject of

enormous historical and theological interest, whose complexity is more than outweighed by its inherent fascination.[12] The present study is therefore essentially an investigation of the development of Luther's doctrine of justification over the years 1509–1519, viewed in particular relation to his late medieval theological context. In the course of this study, many of the questions that are the subject of continuing debate among Luther scholars – such as the *date* and the *nature* of Luther's theological breakthrough – will be examined and reviewed in the light of the most recent scholarship.

Inevitably, any attempt to clarify the historical development of Luther's theology and identify possible influences encounters serious methodological difficulties, which must be acknowledged even if they cannot entirely be resolved. The most serious of these concerns the relative weighting to be given to Luther's writings and what is known of his historical context. This issue was debated with some passion by Leif Grane (1928–2000) and Heiko Oberman (1930–2001) in the 1970s, and remains disputed. Is scholarship limited to a detailed historico-critical engagement with Luther's texts? Or can these be set against our understanding of their historical background, allowing certain possibilities to be inferred from that context and amplified on its basis, even when they are not absolutely demanded by the texts themselves?[13]

It is important to appreciate here that historical scholarship is a work in progress, subject to revision in the light of new evidence and theoretical development. Luther scholarship may be informed by such developments; it cannot allow itself to be *determined* by them. Every reconstruction of Luther's historical background is provisional, and giving priority to such an historical reconstruction risks reconstructing both

Luther's theological development and its intellectual outcomes in the likeness of prevailing scholarly trends. For example, Oberman's own interpretation of Luther's intellectual development can now be appreciated to be shaped by some assumptions characteristic of that period and school of scholarship, which subsequent research has corrected or challenged. The approach adopted in this study is to give primacy to detailed engagement with Luther's texts, while insisting that these be contextualized and interpreted against the backdrop of what is now known of the theological and religious questions, debates, and trends of that era.

As this study will make clear, recent scholarship has brought about a significant change in our understanding of Luther's late medieval context, especially in relation to the religious and theological trends within his own Augustinian Order. Detailed studies of the distinctive identity and ethos of this Order in the last 25 years have emphasized the distinctiveness of its *spiritual* – rather than merely its more narrowly *theological* – ideas and approaches. The emergence of both Luther's theology of justification and his “theology of the cross” can now be set against a broader spiritual context, grounded in the passion literature of the later medieval era in general, and of the Augustinian Order in particular. Since these developments in Augustinian studies have yet to be adequately assimilated by Luther scholarship, they have not yet been incorporated into accounts of the origins of Luther's theology of justification or his *theologia crucis*. The second edition of this work makes extensive use of such recent studies, clarifying how Luther's distinctive theology both reflects late medieval themes while at the same time departs from them.

We begin our study by reflecting on the fascinating and complex religious and intellectual context within which

Luther's theological breakthrough took place.

Notes

1. We shall use the traditional short form “Augustinian Order” to refer to the *Ordo Eremitarum Sancti Augustini* (originally abbreviated as OESA; now abbreviated as OSA).

2. For the historical background to this disputation, see H. Scheible, “Die Universität Heidelberg und Luthers Disputation,” *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 131 (1983), pp. 309–329; K.H. zur Mühlen, “Die Heidelberger Disputation Martin Luthers vom 26. April 1518,” in *Semper Apertus. 600 Jahre Ruprecht-Karl-Universität Heidelberg 1386–1986*, ed. W. Doerr (6 vols; Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 188–212. These studies require supplementation at points – for example, on the theological faculty at Heidelberg, see H. Bornkamm, “Die theologische Fakultät Heidelberg,” in *Aus der Geschichte der Universität Heidelberg und ihrer Fakultäten* (Heidelberg: Brausdruck, 1961), pp. 135–154.

3. A. Angenendt, Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 3rd edn, 2005), pp. 71–75. See further, B. Hamm, Frömmigkeitstheologie am Anfang des 16. Jahrhunderts: Studien zu Johannes von Paltz und seinem Umkreis (Tübingen: Mohr, 1982), pp. 132–203. Hamm interprets Frömmigkeit as “the practical realization of religion – of modes of believing, proclaiming, teaching, forming ideas, conceiving and articulating values, fears, hopes, etc. – in such a way that daily life is formed and informed by it.”

4. F.X. Martin, *Friar, Reformer, and Renaissance Scholar: Life and Work of Giles of Viterbo, 1469–1532* (Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press, 1992).

5. M. Schrama, "*Theologia affectiva*. Traces of Monastic Theology in the Theological Prolegomena of Giles of Rome," *Bijdragen. Tijdshrift voor filosophie en theologie* 57 (1996), pp. 381–404. For similar emphases in later theologians of the Order, see M. Schrama, "*Studere debemus eam viriliter et humiliter:* Theologia Affectiva bei Hugolin von Orvieto (d. 1373)," *Bijdragen. Tijdshrift voor filosophie en theologie* 53 (1992), pp. 135–151.

6. E.L. Saak, *High Way to Heaven: The Augustinian Platform between Reform and Reformation, 1292–1524* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 350–355. Although most theologians of the Order emphasized the importance of Augustine of Hippo's theology, their more pastoral writings often show little obvious interest in these themes, tending to be limited to more specifically theological tracts.

7. For this important notion in its historical context, see B. Hamm, "Reformation als normative Zentrierung von Religion und Gesellschaft," *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 7 (1992), pp. 241–279; idem, "Von der spätmittelalterlichen reformatio zur Reformation: der Prozess normativer Zentrierung von Religion und Gesellschaft in Deutschland," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 84 (1993), pp. 7–82.

8. See the first edition of this study: Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

9. Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd edn, 2005). The first edition was published in two volumes in 1986.

10. Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 2003). The first edition was published in 1987.

11. For the importance of this context for the shaping of the modern age, see M.L. Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400–1400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 265–350.

12. For Luther's role in the emergence of modernity, see M.A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 101–128.

13. See L. Grane, *Modus loquendi theologicus: Luthers Kampf um die Erneuerung der Theologie 1515–1518* (Leiden: Brill, 1975); H.A. Oberman, “Reformation: Epoche oder Episode?,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 68 (1977), pp. 56–111, especially pp.88–109; L. Grane, “Kritische Berichte: Lutherforschung und Geistesgeschichte,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 68 (1977), pp. 302–315.

Part One

The Background Luther as a Late Medieval Theologian, 1509–1514

Chapter 1

The Dawn of the Reformation at Wittenberg

Our story concerns the intellectual and spiritual development of Martin Luther (1483–1546) during the years 1509–1519 – particularly 1512–1519, which many regard as being a decisive phase in this process. During these critical years, Luther began to inch his way toward his own distinctive understanding of how sinners are able to enter into the presence of a righteous God, classically expressed in the doctrine of justification by faith. While the relationship between the emergence of Luther's theological distinctives and the historical origins of the Reformation as a whole is somewhat more complex than some popular accounts suggest,[1] there is little doubt that Luther's theological breakthrough was one of a number of factors that proved to be of decisive importance in catalyzing the massive social, economic, political, and religious transformations of the Protestant Reformation.[2]

This study sets out to analyze the emergence of Luther's understanding of the question of how humanity is justified in the sight of God, focusing especially on his shifting views concerning what it means to speak of God as "righteous." How can a sinner hope to find acceptance in the sight of a righteous God? *Wie kriege ich einen gnädigen Gott?* Luther's changing answers to that central question set the scene for the great upheavals of the Reformation.[3]

Yet a second distinctive feature of Luther's early thought emerges alongside these reflections on the nature of divine righteousness, and how a righteous God could accept and love sinful humanity. Luther's celebrated “theology of the cross” is the outcome of the same process of reflection that led Luther to his doctrine of justification. The two themes are intertwined in his early writings, and can in some ways be seen as two sides of a single, related question – namely, how humanity is to live by faith in the shadowlands of sin and doubt. We shall consider both these major theological themes in this study.

But theological reflection never takes place in a social or cultural vacuum. To tell the story of the development of Luther's ideas, we must explore the situation within which they emerged. We therefore turn immediately to consider the state of late medieval Europe on the eve of the Reformation – especially in Germany, which played a particularly significant role in shaping the contours of late medieval Christianity,[4] as well as laying the foundations for the Protestant Reformation. In what follows, we shall consider this context more closely.

The Late Medieval Context

By the end of the Middle Ages, the need for reform and renewal within the Christian church within Germany and elsewhere was so obvious that it could no longer be ignored. The Middle Ages had seen the political power of the church, and particularly that of the papacy, reach previously unknown heights. While the spiritual authority of the pope within the church had long been recognized, the medieval period witnessed the extension of such claims to the secular sphere.[5] Even if the force of the claims made on behalf of the papacy to absolute spiritual

and temporal authority was greatly diminished by the absence of effective executive powers by which they might have been enforced, the fact remains that such claims were made and recognized, at least in part.

The political success of the church during the Middle Ages was not, however, without its cost. To the faithful, the Christian church remained the visible embodiment of Christ upon earth; to an increasing number of skeptics, within its ranks as well as outside them, it appeared as a vast legal, judicial, financial, administrative, and diplomatic machine, whose spiritual concerns were frequently judged to be difficult to detect, even to the eye of faith. The secular interests of the clergy, the widespread absence of bishops from their dioceses, and the financial difficulties of the curia are further examples of factors which combined to compromise the moral and spiritual authority of the church at the time in so serious a manner.

There were many within the church at the time who were troubled by the soaring power and influence of the papacy, and sought to confine it within acceptable limits. The Conciliarist movement argued that ecclesiastical power should be decentralized. Instead of being concentrated in the hands of a single individual, it should be dispersed within the body of the church as a whole, and entrusted to more representative and accountable "general Councils."[6]

Yet despite these concerns, there is every indication that the church remained deeply embedded in western European culture at this time, with popular piety experiencing a resurgence in the fifteenth century. The church was no abstract theological notion, no peripheral social institution; it stood at the heart of the social, spiritual, and intellectual life of western Europe throughout the Middle Ages, including the Renaissance.

The older view, which tended to see the Renaissance as a secular interlude between the medieval “age of faith” and the unruly religious passions unleashed by the Reformation, never really made much sense, and is somewhat difficult to sustain on the basis of the historical evidence.[7] An individual's hope of salvation rested on her being part of the community of saints, whose visible expression was the institution of the church. The church could not be bypassed or marginalized in any account of redemption: there was, as Cyprian of Carthage had so cogently argued in the third century, no salvation outside the church.

Although the fifteenth century was regarded as a period of religious degeneration and spiritual stagnation by an earlier generation of historians, more recent research has decisively overturned this verdict.[8] On the eve of the Reformation, religion was perhaps more firmly rooted in the experience and lives of ordinary people than at any time in the past.[9] Earlier medieval Christianity had been primarily monastic, focused on the life, worship, and writings of Europe's monasteries and convents. Church-building programs flourished in the later fifteenth century, as did pilgrimages and the vogue for collecting relics. The fifteenth century has been referred to as “the inflation-period of mystic literature,” reflecting the growing popular interest in religion. The fifteenth century witnessed a widespread popular appropriation of religious beliefs and practices, not always in orthodox forms.

The phenomenon of “folk religion” often bore a tangential relationship to the more precise yet abstract statements of Christian doctrine that the church preferred – but that many found unintelligible or unattractive.[10] In parts of Europe, popular religious beliefs echoing the notions of classical “fertility cults” emerged, connected

and enmeshed with the patterns and concerns of agrarian rural communities.[11] Much popular religion was shaped by a fear of death and hell, often linked with more popular beliefs of fiends and devils lurking in woods and dark places, awaiting their opportunity to snatch unwary souls and take them straight to hell. At times, hints of these popular concerns can be found in Luther's early writings, particularly as he agonized over the implications of his own inability to achieve the holiness that his age regarded as a guarantee of salvation.[12]

It is now clear that there was considerable confusion within the late medieval church, undoubtedly exacerbated by a largely uneducated clergy,[13] on matters of doctrine, and the doctrine of justification in particular. It is precisely this widespread confusion at the beginning of the sixteenth century that appeared to have occasioned and catalyzed Luther's theological reflections during the years 1509–1519, with which we are here concerned. As these focus on the concept of "justification," we may pause to consider this idea in more detail.

The Concept of "Justification" in Christian Thought

The importance of the doctrine of justification is best appreciated when the nature of Christianity itself is considered.[14] The central teaching of the Christian faith is that reconciliation has been effected between God and sinful humanity through Jesus Christ, and that this reconciliation is a present actuality for those within the church, and a present possibility for those outside it. The essence of the Christian faith is thus located in the saving

action of God toward humanity in Jesus Christ. The Christian doctrine of justification is primarily concerned with the question of how this saving action may be appropriated by the individual – in other words, with the question of what is required of human beings if they are to enter into fellowship with God. The hope of salvation in Christ is a leading characteristic of the faith of the Christian church throughout its entire history, which lends particular urgency to the question posed by the doctrine of justification: what must an individual *do* in order to be saved? The practical importance of this question may be illustrated with reference to the fate of a small group of Italian noblemen, sometimes known as the "Murano Circle," at the beginning of the sixteenth century.[15]

In 1510 Paolo Giustiniani, the leader of a small group of Paduan-educated humanists, entered the hermitage of Camaldoli, near Arezzo, soon to be followed by most of the remainder of this circle of humanists.[16] The circle had shared a common concern for personal holiness and ultimate salvation, in common with many of their contemporaries. After intense personal anguish, Giustiniani decided that his only hope for salvation lay in the ascetic monastic life as a means of expiating his sins. Our interest here, however, concerns Gasparo Contarini, one of the members of the circle who chose to remain in the world. In 1957 Hubert Jedin, searching through the archives of the hermitage at Camaldoli, discovered the correspondence between Contarini and Giustiniani during the years 1511–1523,[17] thus enabling us to enter to some extent into the mind of a man who was passionately concerned for his own salvation, and yet unwilling to enter a monastery. It is clear from this correspondence that Contarini went through a period of deep depression after his friends entered the hermitage. The question which appears to have caused Contarini

particular anguish was the following: if his friends doubted whether *they* could ever atone for their sins by leading lives of austere piety, what hope could there be for Contarini, who had chosen to avoid such a life by remaining in the world?

On Easter Eve 1511, in near despair, Contarini happened to fall into conversation with a priest, and as a result began to rethink his dilemma. We do not know who this priest was, and cannot be entirely certain of the exact substance of his advice to Contarini. Nevertheless, it is clear that Contarini had now resolved his dilemma. In his mercy, God had permitted his only son, Jesus Christ, to make satisfaction for the sins of the world, so that in Contarini's words:

> Even if I did all the penances possible, and many more besides, they would not be enough to atone for my past sins, let alone to merit my salvation … [Christ's] passion is sufficient, and more than sufficient, as a satisfaction for sins committed, to which human weakness is prone. Through this thought, I changed from great fear and anguish to happiness. I began to turn with my whole heart to this greatest good which I saw, for love of me, on the cross, his arms open and his breast opened right up to his heart. Thus I – the wretch who lacked the courage to leave the world and do penance for the satisfaction of my sins! – turned to him, and asked him to allow me to share in the satisfaction which he, the sinless one, had performed for us. He was quick to accept me and to permit his Father to totally cancel the debt which I had contracted, and which I was incapable of satisfying by myself.
>
> Now, since I have such a one to pay my debt, shall I not sleep securely in the midst of the city, even though I have not satisfied the debt which I had contracted?

> Yes! I shall sleep and wake as securely as if I had spent my entire life in the hermitage![18]

The question with which Contarini and his circle had wrestled, with such a variety of results, lies at the heart of the Christian doctrine of justification: what must I *do* to be saved? Contarini and Giustiniani came to very different conclusions – *but which corresponded to the teaching of the church on the matter?* The simple fact is that there was such confusion at the time that this vital question could not be answered by anyone with any degree of conviction. The Contarini– Giustiniani correspondence is of considerable interest, as it bears witness to a spiritual dilemma which is remarkably similar to that faced by the young Luther,[19] also occasioned at least in part by confusion within the church over the doctrine of justification.

The doctrine of justification had been the subject of considerable debate within the early western church during the course of the Pelagian controversy.[20] In 418 the Council of Carthage undertook a preliminary clarification of the church's teaching on justification in response to this controversy.[21] Its pronouncements were, however, vague at several points which were to prove of significance, and these were revised at what is generally regarded as being the most important council of the early church to deal with the doctrine of justification – the Second Council of Orange, convened in 529.[22] No other council was convened to discuss the doctrine of justification between that date and 1545, when the Council of Trent assembled to debate that doctrine, among many others. There was thus a period of over a millennium during which the teaching office of the church remained silent on the issue of justification.[23]