

## **February:** The Proceedings at Augsburg (LW 31: 259-292)

In this final four months of our now five years of studying Luther in preparation for the anniversary observances taking place this year, we turn our attention to the fallout and tragic series of events which led the excommunication of Luther and the schism of the Western church, otherwise known as the Reformation. Because of various political intrigues and complications having to do with the impending election of a new emperor, Pope Leo X was not able to proceed immediately with the case against Luther. That indictment had been brought to him by the German papal party (Luther's "papists") headed by Johannes Eck, whom Luther first met when at the famous Leipzig Debate (our topic for next month). Unable to act swiftly on Eck's lobbying against Luther, and wanting Luther's Elector Prince Fredrick's support on other matters, Leo send his lieutenant Cardinal Cajetan to try to diffuse the increasingly tense controversy. With all of Germany celebrating the Wittenberg monk as he traveled under a safe conduct pass to the southern Germany city of Augsburg, Luther met privately on the first day with the Cardinal and in the company of lawyers and stenographers on a second day. Luther's assumption was still that misunderstandings could be cleared up if the poisonous atmosphere stirred up by his German papist enemies could be flushed away. He did not know the Cajetan had been strictly ordered by the Vatican not to argue the case with Luther, but rather persuade him to recant, keep quiet and stop troubling the church.

In the aftermath of the meetings, Luther decided to publish his account of them. A forgery claiming to have been written by him but put out by his enemies had inflamed the situation with the accusation that Luther had ignorantly ignored a papal decretal known as the *Extravagante* which impugned his scholarship as well as his integrity. Much of the *The Proceedings at Augsburg* (LW 31: 259-292) takes us way down in the weeds; Luther publishes his "figurative" interpretation of *Extravagante* which he had presented to the Cardinal in Augsburg to refute the allegations made against his scholarship and integrity. What was at dispute in this was the rather technical question of whether the treasury of the church available to the papacy consisted in Christ's merit or merely in the indulgences made possible by Christ's merit. Luther's figurative interpretation was that the decretal's claim for papal access to Christ's merit was only meant figuratively, not literally. But by the time he ends the treatise, Luther withdraws his figurative interpretation and bluntly rejects the papal decretal as false.

There is much in these sections that could be of interest. Repeatedly Luther advocates free theological disputation in the search for truth wherever the church has not already decided questions. In this context he repeatedly concedes that as a sinful human being he is prone to error and willing to be corrected. But just as regularly he admonishes his superiors that he, like everyone else, is conscience bound to truth as they have learned it from the Scriptures by clear methods of learning and reasoning. If he is in error, his

superiors have a pastoral duty to show him with Scriptural reasoning where he has gone astray so that he can be persuaded in his conscience.

Note well: Luther neither denies that Christian doctrine claims conscience nor gives conscience free reign. His conscience is captive to the Word of God, which can indeed be formulated in language adequate to the purpose of distinguishing doctrine true the gospel from false.

Luther also makes interesting remarks contrasting exegesis, which draws out the meaning of Scripture, from eisegesis which imports meaning into Scripture. With all the “reader response” silliness going on in our churches these days, here is an admonition from Luther: there is “a clear meaning of the Scriptures... The truth of Scripture comes first” (LW 31: 282, cf. 276). He even quote Jerome; it is the “most vicious kind of teaching to distort passages and to bend the Scripture passage which opposes them to suit their wishes” (LW 31: 283).

Luther is not naïve about what he is claiming. He knows that the “plain meaning” of Scripture depends on certain assumptions about what kind of text Scripture is and how it is accessed to produce the knowledge of Christian doctrine. Without these assumptions about the Scriptures as instrument of the Spirit *of Christ* who gives access to their meaning *as Christ*, however, the alternative is total obscurity and thus a waxen nose in the hands of ecclesiastical bureaucracy (i.e., the Curia, the papal court, which produced the decretals and canon law).

Luther also at the still early stage in the controversy makes interesting comments about ecclesiological issues. He is still a faithful “papist” himself, who welcomed Cajetan’s at first “fatherly” approach to him. But he is already suspicious of the theory, based on a faulty reading of the Letter to the Hebrews, that Moses transferred the priesthood to Christ who transferred it to Peter whose successors are the popes in Rome. He speaks favorably instead of episcopal collegiality and of the possibility of a general council of all Christendom, not a papal (Lateran) council. But he does not pull punches. It was bad enough when one Judas sold Christ for filthy lucre. How the church today is fallen with “many Judases” selling Christ in the form of indulgences.

The excerpt from the Proceedings at Augsburg which follows is, Luther claims, a document he presented to Cardinal Cajetan at their second meeting, which the Cardinal rejected out of hand, instead sternly demanding that Luther recant and keep silent.

Luther’s claim for justification by faith was still hardly understood by his papist opponents, who evidently thought that he meant that 1) general faith that there is a God justified, and 2) that without this general faith the sacraments were dead works that accomplished nothing. The technical language for the latter concern was the scholastic expression *ex opere operato*, which we could put into contemporary language as affirming that the

sacraments *objectively* or *automatically* or *mechanically* infused grace without regard to personal attitude. If you go to church, it just “rubs off” on you. Luther seems to be

denying this efficacy of attendance at church on the one hand and affirming that a general faith that there is a God justifies on the other. It didn't make much sense to opponents.

In the excerpt Luther clarifies that faith is a "specific," "particular" Yes and Amen to the Word of God who is Christ in the gospel, such that disbelief here in His personal word of forgiveness makes Christ into a liar. Moreover, without faith in Christ's particular promise of grace, the spiritual alternatives are pride or despair: pride in thinking that you in particular can justify yourself by your own powers, despair in thinking that you in particular are unworthy of Christ's grace. Luther thus comes to a remarkable formulation in articulating justification by faith. You go, he says, to the sacrament because you are unworthy and so that you may be made worthy. Preparation, in other words, does not first achieve holiness and then attend, but in contrition goes where holiness is conferred as a gift. Thus you honor Christ and take Him at His word – and so actually become righteous.

The other objection is that in Thesis 7 I stated that no one can be justified except by faith. Thus it is clearly necessary that a man must believe with firm faith that he is justified and in no way doubt that he will obtain grace. For if he doubts and is uncertain, he is not justified but rejects grace. My opponents wish to consider this theology new and erroneous.

This I answer by saying:

1. It is an infallible truth that no person is righteous unless he believes in God, as stated in Rom. 1 [:17]: "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Likewise, "He who does not believe is condemned already" [John 3:18] and dead. Therefore the justification and life of the righteous person are dependent upon his faith. For this reason all the works of the believer are alive and all the works of the unbeliever are dead, evil, and dimmable, according to this passage: "A bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" [Matt. 7:18-19].

2. Faith, however, is nothing else than believing what God promises and reveals as in Rom. 4 [:3], "Abraham believed God, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" [Cf. Gen. 15:6]. Therefore the Word and faith are both necessary, and without the Word there can be no faith, as in Isa. 55 [:11]: "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty."

3. I must now prove that a person going to the sacrament must believe that he will receive grace, and not doubt it, but have absolute confidence otherwise he will do so to his condemnation.

I prove this first through the word of the Apostle in Heb. 11 [:6]: "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." According to this it is clear that we dare not doubt but must firmly believe that God rewards those who seek him. If we must believe that God is one who rewards, then we must above all believe that he justifies man and gives his grace to those still living. Without grace he gives no reward.

Second, in the face of the peril of eternal damnation and the sin of unbelief, we must believe these words of Christ: "Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" [Matt. 16:19]. Therefore if you come to the sacrament of penance and do not firmly believe that you will be absolved in heaven, you come to your judgment and damnation because you do not believe that Christ speaks the truth when he says, "Whatever you loose," etc. [Matt. 16:19]. And with your doubt you make of Christ a liar, which is a horrible sin. If, however, you say, "What if I am unworthy and unfit for the sacrament?" I answer as I did above. Through no attitude on your part will you become worthy, through no works will you be prepared for the sacrament, but through faith alone, for only faith in the word of Christ justifies, makes a person alive, worthy, and well prepared. Without faith all other things are acts of presumption and desperation. The just person lives not by his attitude but by faith. For this reason you should not harbor any doubt on account of your unworthiness. You go to the sacrament because you are unworthy and so that you may be made worthy and be justified by him who seeks to save sinners and not the righteous [Cf. Luke 5:32]. When, however, you believe Christ's word, you honor it and thereby are righteous.

Third, he has commended this faith to us in many ways in the gospel. First, when he said to the woman of Canaan: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you have believed" [Matt. 15:28]. This shows that not faith in general is meant here, but the special faith which was concerned with the daughter who was to be healed in answer to her

mother's prayer. For she boldly believed that this would be done, that Christ could and would do it, and so her prayer was fulfilled. She never would have obtained this, however, if she had not believed. Therefore she was made worthy of this answer to her prayer, not by her attitude, but by faith alone.

Second, when Christ asked those blind men, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" and they answered "Yes, Lord," he said "According to your faith be it done to you" [Matt. 9:28-29]. See, they were certain that it would come to pass as they petitioned. Therefore it came to pass without any preparation on their part. If, however, they have doubted the outcome, they would not have prayed well or received what they had prayed for.

Third, the centurion said, "Only say the word, and my servant will be healed" [Matt. 8:8]. Certainly he believed in and obtained what was done for him in a specific, immediate concern, not according to a general faith.

Fourth, according to John 4 [50]: The official "believed the word that Jesus spoke to him," that is, "Go; your son will live." By means of this faith he saved his son's life. So indeed every person approaching God should believe that he will receive what he requests, or he will not receive it.

Fifth, Christ says in Mark [11:24], "Verily I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will." Notice that he says "whatever," allowing no exception. It is clear however that we ask for something in the sacrament, for no one goes to the sacrament unless he asks for grace. Therefore we must listen to Christ when he says, "Believe that you receive it, and you will." Otherwise all things in the church would waver and nothing would stand for certain, which is absurd.

Sixth, this passage: 'If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move hence to younger place,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you' [Matt. 17:20]. And if you look through the entire gospel you will find many other examples, all of which refer not to a general but to a particular faith and which pertain to achieving some immediate result. For this reason a firm faith is necessary if a person wishes to receive pardon, since the sacraments of the New Testament, according to the Teacher [Peter Lombard], were instituted for motivating and activating our faith.

Seventh, for this reason the Lord often rebuked the disciples [Matt. 8:26], and especially Peter, for their lack of faith, not their lack of general faith but of special faith concerning a specific immediate need.

Eighth, James 1 [5-8] says: "If any of you lacks wisdom let him ask God...let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like the wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind...for that person must not suppose that...[he] will receive anything from the Lord." That is certainly a most unequivocal statement, which also leads me to the conclusion that no one can receive grace or wisdom who doubts that he will receive it. Nor do I see what one can say against this conclusion.

Ninth, the holy Virgin would never have conceived the Son of God if she had not believed the annunciation of the angel. Thus she said, "Let it be to me according to your word" [Luke 1:38], just as Elizabeth proclaimed, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" [Luke 1:45]. Hence St. Bernard and the universal church marveled at her faith. Likewise Anna, the mother of Samuel, after she believed the word of Eli, went her way, "and her countenance was no longer sad" [1 Sam 1:18]. On the other hand, the children of Israel, because they did not believe the word of promise concerning the land of Canaan, perished in the wilderness.

Briefly, whatever remarkable thing we read about in the Old and New Testaments, we read that it was accomplished by faith, not by works or general faith, but by faith directed to the accomplishment of an immediate end. Hence nothing else is so highly praised in the Scripture as faith, especially that of Abraham as in Rom. 4 [:1-5], which was a faith in the fact that a son Isaac was to be born to him. Nevertheless "it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Thus it is also with us in the sacrament: If we believe, we shall receive grace; if we do not believe, we shall go to our judgment.

Tenth, St. Augustine says in his treatment of the Gospel of St. John, "When the Word is coupled with the element, it becomes a sacrament, not because it becomes a sacrament, but because it is believed." See, baptism cleanses one, not because it takes place but because one believes that it cleanses. For this reason the Lord said in absolving Mary, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" [Luke 7:50]. Hence this common saying: "Not the sacrament of faith, but faith in the sacrament, justifies." Without this faith it is impossible to have peace of conscience, as it is written in Rom. 5 [:1], "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God."

Eleventh, St. Bernard says in his first sermon on the annunciation, "You must above all believe that you cannot have forgiveness of sins except through the mercy of God." But add to this that you must believe and add this too, that your sins are forgiven by God. This is the testimony which the Holy Spirit brings forth in your heart, saying, "your sins are forgiven." For thus the Apostle concludes "that a man is justified by faith" [Rom. 3:28] out of grace. This is what St. Paul says.

These and many other explicit passages lead me inexorably to the opinion stated above.

For this reason, most revered father in Christ, since you are blessed by divine favor with unusual gifts, especially with keen judgment, I humbly beg your most reverend highness to deal judgment, I humbly beg your most reverend highness to deal leniently with me, to have compassion with my conscience, to show me how I may understand this doctrine differently, and not to compel me to revoke those things which I must believe according to the testimony of my conscience. As long as these Scripture passages stand I cannot do otherwise, for I know that one must obey God rather than men [Acts 5:29].

May it please your highness to intercede with our most holy lord, Leo X, in my behalf so that he will not proceed against me with such stern rigor that he cast my soul into darkness, for I seek nothing but the light of truth and I am prepared to give up, change, or revoke everything I am informed that these passages are to be understood in another sense. For I am neither arrogant nor so eager for vainglory that for this reason I would be ashamed to revoke ill-founded doctrines. Indeed, it will please me most of all if the truth is victorious. However, I do not want to be compelled to affirm something contrary to my conscience, for I believe without the slightest doubt that this is the meaning of Scripture. May the Lord Jesus direct and preserve you in eternity, most revered father. Amen.