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Luther Discovers the Gospel: Coming to the Truth and Confessing the Truth

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“I am a peasant’s son, and my great-grandfather, grandfather, and father were peasants. ... That I earned a bachelors and masters but then took off the brown hat and gave it to others, that I became a monk, which brought me shame and greatly irked my father, that the pope and I clashed, that I married an apostate nun—who would have read this in the stars? Who would have foretold it?”

[Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-), Tischreden, vol. 5, no. 6250]

Who indeed?! That was Luther (not me!). Someone once asked Luther about the value of astrology. Philipp Melanchthon, his co-worker, had an interest in such things. Natural magic, people called it in that day—not trying to manipulate nature but simply to read it. And many, like Melanchthon meant well. After all, if God created the heavens and the earth and still held all things in His hand, then maybe He was trying to tell us something through the signs in nature, a little something about what might happen in daily life through a kind of natural revelation.

But Luther would have none of it. Of course no sparrow falls from heaven without God’s knowing and allowing, but sorting through all that swirls around us is far too complicated. Besides, Luther thought, what’s the point of trying to decode nature when all that really is necessary for our knowing has been revealed to us by God in His Word. So when asked about whether the heavens told us the future, Luther pointed to his own life story: a peasant’s son from peasant stock, he went to



the university and got a bachelors and masters degree but then abandoned law school –“took off the brown hat” of the student’s uniform—and entered the Augustinian cloister to become a monk, much to his father’s dismay and disgust. But he was hardly finished. Luther put it so casually: “the pope and I clashed.” Clashed?!—that’s hardly the word for it. This was nothing short of a revolution, sparked by the confession of a monk who had never expected any of this back then, never in a million years. Oh yes, along the way he also married a run-away nun, as Luther put it—you can almost hear him laughing by now. Who would have read this in the stars? Who indeed?!

But that’s why history is so much fun. It is so full of surprises, of twists and turns we never could imagine. Sure, we plan, but as the German proverb puts it, “Der Mensch denkt, aber Gott lenkt.” That is, to make it rhyme, “Man proposes, but God disposes.” Not “dispose” as if to throw away (though we could just as well throw away all those great plans we make when we think we are in control). No, we can plan all we want, but God has His own plans in mind. Read Ecclesiastes if you don’t believe it. Luther certainly knew the message: the race is not always to the swift; the battle is not always won by the strong; sometimes ordinary monks win and popes and emperors lose –that’s not in Ecclesiastes, but it might as well be—so fear God (that is, believe) and keep His commandments (that is, take up what He sets before you in life, in the vocations or callings God gives). Yes, Luther learned that and much more. And he spoke of what he learned and believed. He confessed.

It is amazing what God does, how He raises up what Luther would call “outsized men” in history—“heroes,” but not necessarily the sort of sort of great figures we can see coming, that is, people with a long pedigree that we expect to do great things. We expect the son of a king, generally speaking, to do kingly things himself some day. And God uses such people. But He also uses the obscure, those we would never expect to rise up and stand out—the son of a peasant like Luther. How many monks were there in that day? Yet one of those became—quite contrary to his own plan—a fellow who turned the church on its head (not to mention the empire in which he lived). That’s Luther: an obscure Augustinian friar, an ordinary university professor at a new institution still fighting for its existence trying to gain a measure of respect. More: here is a truly tortured soul whose own spiritual trials and tribulations drove him to distraction, though at the same time he was truly an “everyman,” that is, like so many others who would be satisfied with the smallest crumbs of comfort that might fall from the God Almighty’s table.

Luther was doing it all as the church had taught him, as it had told him things worked spiritually—and he confessed that sort of message, but it brought no comfort. (More on that in a moment.) Then, amid his own struggles there came a beam of light, light from the Word. It took some time to sort things through. But as he did, the light grew until Luther was awash in the sunlight of God’s grace, a



blinding, joyous light for Luther. He learned to look and find God where God looked least like Himself—hanging on the cross, in water in the baptismal font off in the corner of a church, in a piece of bread and swallow of wine that, in their own right, would never make a meal, yet as a gift—not our repeated, re-enacted sacrifice—these were more than enough to fill his soul. Luther learned to look for and find God in the contraries of life, to cling not to the logic of how he ought to get to heaven but in the illogical yet sure Word that was promise, Gospel. It was a message of grace that he came to confess. But how did he get there? The apostle Paul had his Damascus Road awakening (though actually he learned only a little there; it really largely shook him up and then would later learn much, taught, as Paul said, by Christ himself). So what about Luther? We'll get there in a bit, but first some groundwork.

The term "confess" in our understanding is to speak forth about the Word (Christ) as well as the Word as a larger message (Gospel), that we trace back to the Word (the Scriptures, the revelation of God through His prophets and apostles/evangelists). "To confess" is first a personal action, an expression of what I (or you or Luther as an individual) believe, and one's heart is truly in it. But there is also the matter of the individual's intellectual commitment, not that faith or confessing is the equivalent of an intellectual exercise—we remember our dogmatics: we still have faith when sleeping, not to mention babies and other cases we can think of—but we know that God has given us our reason and all our senses and we do indeed think about and reflect what we believe. So we confess individually.

But "confess" is also a corporate/collective matter –what the church believes. This is not the church creating dogma from the bottom up, not Schleiermacher in the 19th century creating doctrine, beliefs generated/defined by the community as it feels best. No, it is rather a matter of individuals who confess finding others who confess the same thing, read the same thing, understand and believe the same thing from the Scriptures, and then those who find themselves with this in common stand together and confess as a group, as a community, as the church. So there is one individual and then another and then another and then another—adding up to our confessing, not because we all are so brilliant as to think of such things or create such things, but the Holy Spirit has put faith in our hearts one at a time, and I reflect this, and you reflect this, and we reflect this. That's how the Spirit works through the Word. That is ultimately what Luther's discovery of the Gospel, what Luther's confessing, what the Reformation is about.

We look at what God has done, of course—but there is a little more to add (two words) that really makes a lot more: what God has done for me. Personal pronouns are crucial—letters written in gold, said Luther. There is a book by Carl Michalson called *The Hinge of History* that makes an important point of how to look at the Christian faith. (As the book moves on, I'm not so keen on what happens and where Michalson ends up, but the starting framework is worth noting.)



Michalson says Christianity is like hinge on a door: two parts that are both essential with a pin that holds them together. The two parts come together in Christ (who runs down through the middle). We see the two parts explicitly in the second article of the Nicene Creed. The one half is the historical facts: came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary...—bizarre, one-of-a-kind, one-time facts or events, but events to be sure. Christianity certainly needs these facts. After all, as Paul write in 1 Corinthians, “if Christ is not raised, our faith is in vain.” So we need the events. But, as that Corinthian Bible verse says, the events do not stand along. There is also faith. The second half of the hinge are the promises of God, promises not floating off in the blue but tied to events. So the event of the resurrection is accompanied by the promise: this resurrection is for you. It could, theoretically, have been just Christ’s resurrection, a vindication of His life while we are left to find our own way. But God did not do that. He promises that this raising is also ours. Events + Promises = Christianity. This is so fundamental we may miss the point, but it is always there: for you, for us. This is Christ’s body/blood given/shed for you ... Baptism opens the kingdom of heaven for you, etc.

I was reminded of this point—the emphasis on the pronouns—a few weeks ago when I was in Cambridge for the funeral of Deomar Roos. Prof. Roos had taught in Brazil, and then been at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, as a guest professor for almost two years before going to Westfield House. For some years he had suffered with cancer that would rear up and then be controlled again—but now it quickly got the better of him and he died. At his funeral, Reg Quirk told of visiting Deomar in the hospice where they read out of Isaiah, one of Deomar’s favorite books. Isaiah 43:1 was marked. Deomar wanted it for his funeral sermon text and one his tombstone in Hebrew, Portuguese, and English—but it had to be a better translation, he said, than the English he had at hand. The verse read, “I have called you by name,” but that was not good enough, Deomar insisted. The sense, the meaning of the text was stronger: “I have called you by your name.” As Reg reported, Deomar said the Gospel is in the personal pronoun. God wanted him, even as he wants us all. It is important for us to make a point of this: events and promises that are my promises, our promises

When we confess, we talk about God, we give voice to “theology,” which simply means a talking about God. This talking about God is something a believer rightly approaches with some caution and does carefully. “Theology” is an attempt by believers to say, to reflect what God has revealed about Himself, to restate what God first says to us. We seek to put in other words, honestly and faithfully, what God’s message seems to be in particular circumstances in our life. To put it another way, we read what God has said in His in his biblical revelation, and then we seek to restate those things in answer to life’s questions and circumstances. That’s speaking theology. (Of course many of us were fortunate already to have heard and known these things early on from our fathers or mothers who told us as children of God’s love for us—but that ultimately has its source back in the



Scriptures, so that is still a reading and applying of what God has biblically revealed.)

We speak theology with great care lest we confess not what God has said to us but what we think or what we would like God to say. We want to be careful not to misrepresent God. As Luther put it in one of my favorite sayings of his –and I repeat this again and again to our students at the seminary with the hope that they will capture the same spirit -- “Wenn zur Theologie kommt, eine gewisse Bescheidenheit gehört dazu.” That is, “When it comes to theology, a certain modesty is called for.” “A certain modesty”—this from Luther, the man who turned church and empire on their heads?! Indeed! Luther came to see that he was not God (nor are we), and he did not presume to know the whole mind of God. But he did know (as can we) some things that God did tell him (and us), things we need to know and believe for forgiveness, for life, and for salvation, and also things for life in this world as His creatures, as His redeemed people in His creation.

Luther could and would be bold. But he would also make plain that he was always ready to rethink, to reconsider, because he was not God. He was only trying to speak about God, to confess what he understood God to be saying to him and to us all as sinners in need of God’s salvation.

So how did Luther come to this point? Yes, I know: I have hinted at this several times and have yet to start to answer the historical question of how Luther got to the point of discovering the Gospel. But we are finally to that point.

There are many ways to understand this phenomenon in the early 16th century that we call the Evangelical Reformation or the Lutheran Reformation. A variety of factors are necessary to explain this movement—political, economic, geographic, cultural, and more. For example, it is fortunate the Reformation happened in the German lands, part of the Holy Roman Empire—a hodge-podge of some 250+ principalities or territories ruled by an elected emperor with limited influence and also distracted by wars with the Turk and the French to the east and west. So the evangelical message found wiggle room, so to speak, in many political entities on German soil. Things might not have gone as well in more unified France just next door. Economically things were tight but on the upturn, a time of inflation but also a time where artisans and craftsmen were starting to carve out an identity for themselves—and Luther’s theology of vocation, that is, of serving God also outside church callings, would resonate with these people. Geographically it is fortunate that Luther was in Germany rather than Italy, for he benefited not only from the distance from Rome but also from Germany’s resentment of the way the Italian-dominated church hierarchy viewed the German people as a cash cow. The Germans, far more than any other people, sent wagon loads of gold over the Alps to Rome—and they came to resent it, and many would rally around Luther as an alternative, their German Hercules to clean house. Indeed, to get the Reformation right, we have to consider a variety of factors.



But as I emphasize in classes at the seminary, while this all is true, at bottom the Reformation is fundamentally a theological movement. It is a rethinking of how to talk about God (theology!) that arose not as some abstract intellectual movement but as a very real, very personal quest for a loving God. We are back to Luther: he had his own personal problems, but he found an answer in what God revealed to him in the Scriptures. And then, realizing these problems were shared by his students in class, not to mention his fellow Germans—indeed, his fellow human beings—Luther felt compelled to confess what he learned. He would speak forth of the love of God in Christ, to give an account of the hope that was in him. Luther's personal reform prompted his personal confession, and his personal confession soon blossomed into a far wider reformation and confession of the church. I was struck by something that Prof. Koch said in his comments on Sunday when he talked about Luther's understanding of *oratio*, *meditatio*, *tentatio* making a theologian. The *oratio* was a prayer not just in general but to be led to the truth, to be led back into the Scriptures. And then the *meditatio* is not merely a thinking or meditating within, but to complete that "thinking about" a person has to tell others, to speak forth, to confess what is found.

As you have heard, confessing is first an individual matter—I speak forth what I believe. Personal pronouns are crucial: no abstract position here but letters written in gold, as Luther remarked on the "for me." Then I see more like-minded, like-believing people and we confess. That's how things look in the abstract, in theory. But that's not usually where we start in real life. A Luther (or any of us) is not dropped down into the midst of life from somewhere else, taken out of storage, from a sealed room somewhere and thrust into this world and told to figure things out suddenly from the start, from anew. Instead by the time we are old enough to think of what we are going to confess, to speak forth while intellectually aware of what we are saying, we already have been confessing. We have learned and absorbed a message from somewhere else. When a child is asked, "Who loves you and is your savior?" he or she says "Jesus," not out of the blue as if this were some flash of revelation from heaven. Instead children say that because parents or a pastor or a Bible school teacher have told them that. They believe, of course. They trust—that's what Luther called faith: not simply *credulitas* or *assensus*, that is, intellectual credulity or assent, but rather it is *fiducia*—trust, a resting in the hands of another. A child can make a simple confession: "Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so." But children know and believe that because they have been brought up with it. They have learned it.

The same is true of Luther: he began confessing what he first had learned growing up, what had been told him and what he had absorbed as from childhood on. But I do not want to be too hard on Luther's parents. After all, they taught what they themselves had learned and what was typical. And it actually was a mixed message, because in with the urging for moral good was also talk of the goodness of God. The psycho-biographers (Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*



especially) would like to look at this through Freud and portray a severe home life as the basis for rebellion against the church family. So problems with Luther's father sparked later rebellion against "papa," the pope. And mother issues led to a clash with mother church, not to mention Mary. But evidence suggests Luther's home was no more severe than most of his day. And he actually speaks well of his parents. In later life he spoke of his father taking him out to look at the heavens and talk of God's power that held them all—not Gospel so explicitly, but not judgment talk. And when Luther was away from Wittenberg on business and word came that his father had died, Luther in turn reported that in a letter and remarked, "Never have I hated death so much." That's not exactly the thing to say if you are estranged from your parents. So they did leave some positive seeds. But, again, what they taught was typical of the religiosity of that day. So in a sense, the Reformation is un-learning that, turning away from one confession to another when Luther discovered what really brought him peace and joy. So what did Luther un-learn in order then to discover the Gospel?

The late middle ages were highly religious and very confused. The influence of the church was everywhere. The medieval ideal was the priest or monk, those in religious vocations who served God by what they did. But whether in a sacred calling or a secular, all people saw themselves as pilgrims. They fixed their eyes on the world to come and endured this present life, trying to avoid whatever might take them off course and keep them from heaven to come. And if they did not manage to finish well when death came, there was always purgatory for the final cleansing, though no one ever knew just how much that might involve (and the church was careful to be suitably vague). A person looked out for his soul and tried to obtain as much merit, as much good will in God's eyes as possible. Righteousness for salvation was clearly seen as a quantity, something to be amassed till it was piled high enough to reach heaven. People in church vocations were, of course, not only on the right course, but they had the shortest route since all they did in their vocations was thought to be God-pleasing and obtained good for their souls. Other people in ordinary callings of daily life were taking the slow route.

But the ordinary folk could gain merit as well. They could make pilgrimages honoring a saint at some shrine, and that the saint would, in turn, intercede for them in heaven. People venerated relics with the same goal in mind. The trade in relics was huge. Since the Crusades for the holy sites in Palestine, the trade in relics skyrocketed, and the church quickly realized this not only fostered piety but was big business. Luther's own prince, Frederick the Wise, was one of the most active collectors with thousands of relics, so many that they were only all displayed on special occasions, spread throughout in the Castle Church in Wittenberg. A catalog identified the holdings for the pious who, if they properly venerated them all, could cut their time in purgatory by millions of days. Frederick had quite a collection—pieces of various robes once worn by the Virgin Mary and even breast milk from nursing her Savior-Son, thorns from the crown of thorns, pieces of the



whip used on Christ, straw from the manger, a rock on which Christ stood before his ascension, even a corpse from Herod's slaughter of children in Bethlehem—it went on and on. Frederick easily had one of the largest relic collections in northern Europe.

Relics not only fueled piety but also meant prestige. Cities vied for relics to outdo their neighbors. So Venice managed to obtain what was said to be the body of St. Mark for its cathedral, smuggling it out of Muslim-controlled Egypt in a barrel of pork that the customs officers would never touch. Or—as we were reminded at the recent visit of Pope Benedict to Cologne for the Youth Gathering—Cologne has the bodies of the three kings who followed the star to Bethlehem. (Though as German TV noted, the Bible never really does say “three” or name the kings—but three were nonetheless brought down the Rhine and entombed in the church where the jeweled coffins are still to be seen.) All of these have certificates of authenticity, of course—of course! Note the background principle: there are those who have amassed more righteousness, more good than they need, so they can share it with others—saints can give it to those in need who honor them. Righteousness is seen virtually as a quantity to heap up in order to tip things in your favor and so to gain salvation.

Another outlet for piety was the buying of indulgences. Originally these were a release from a temporal penalty imposed by a priest to remind the penitents of what they had done in order to avoid that again. But by Luther's day the claims had been inflated so a plenary indulgence forgave sins past, present, and even future. The cost depended on how much you had to spend—a sliding scale reflecting your income and social position. Plenary indulgence was given infrequently at first and you had to go to Rome, but the church soon issued them more often, all the better to collect more through sales. And the salesmen came to your homeland—except to Electoral Saxony because Frederick had that relic collection and that was income for him. We know how things turned out then in 1517 when Saxons crossed the border to get the more valuable indulgences. Their attitudes—they were desperate but also callous and smug—would so infuriate Luther that he would write 95 Theses to call for change. Even then conservative Luther would be willing to live with indulgences as originally conceived, as a release from that reminder from the priest to keep people from sinning again. But more important would be Luther's insights on what repentance really was: not do penance but rather be penitent. Penitence was not an action that gained merit but an attitude of heart and mind.

No, there was no lack of religiosity in Luther's day as he grew up—pilgrimages, relics, indulgences, the saying of the rosary and the interest in Mary were on the rise, and saints were sought out for help through life's troubles. That kind of piety figured prominently in the famous story when, in the midst of the thunderstorm, Luther called out for St. Ann, the patron saint of miners. Luther's father was a miner, so Luther doubtless heard her invoked often before. It was a natural

reaction. Luther turned automatically to religion—but what kind of religion was it? And it clearly rested on fear, on having enough righteousness accumulated to survive before Christ who so often was pictured as the judge sitting on a rainbow, lily from of one ear and sword from the other, a figure to be feared.

That was the kind of popular piety that surrounded Luther, a spirit and outlook he grew up with and absorbed. And in a moment of crisis out on the road in the midst of the thunderstorm, he confessed what came naturally: a fear and desperation that filled so many. It was not a cold, intellectual calculation but a spontaneous reaction of the heart, prompted by what Luther believed. He tried to bargain with God, and he had a mediator, an advocate—but it was St. Ann.

Indeed, it is hard to run counter to such a system, especially when the powerful institutional church stands behind it.¹ It is all too much. We shake our heads and wonder how people could be drawn into this. But young Luther was very typical of his era, or his culture. Had you asked what he believed, he would have confessed this approach. He believed in Christ, but that believing really meant focusing on the church and all it had to offer for obtaining merit for salvation. Luther's entry into the monastery is really just an act of confessing this late medieval faith. He was troubled and had no peace. Had he done enough? What else was there to do? That thunderstorm was only the trigger that set off a personal spiritual explosion that was primed to happen. Law school would lead to a secular profession with temporal rewards. But the monastery... The monastery was a sacred calling that could lead more easily to heaven. So Luther confessed not only with his lips but with his feet: he walked through the door of the Augustinian cloister in Erfurt, turning to say to his friends who walked with him to the gate, "After today you shall see me no more." So he thought.

And Luther tried hard as a monk to make the system work. As he once said, "If ever a monk gained heaven through monkery, it would have been I." Hours spent in prayer, meditation, listing sin after sin in an effort to purge his soul. But

¹ A side note: the power of church mixed also with civil rule greatly complicated matters. Over many generations the church had amassed tremendous wealth and vast property holdings in every European land. Bishops and abbots not only ruled their diocese or monasteries, they ruled territories as well, wearing both ecclesiastical and civil-political hats, which often brought a clash of interests or at least greatly muddled things. On the eve of the Reformation the church owned a third of land holdings in England, for example, as well as in France, and half of Danish lands. The prince-bishop was a powerful figure. One of these who figures into Luther's story is Albrecht of Brandenburg. Though not a cleric, Albrecht nonetheless managed to become (to buy himself) bishoprics of Magdeburg and Halberstadt—which made him a pluralist which was against church law, but a contribution to the church took care of that. And then he managed to become Archbishop of Mainz, one of the seven powerful men who elected the Holy Roman Emperor. But to get the post he had to borrow money from the Fuggers, a wealthy family with a vast private fortune from international business ventures. And to pay back the Fuggers and to help Rome looking for money to build St. Peter's, Albrecht arranged for indulgences to be sold in German lands by high-energy salesmen such as John Tetzel. "When the coin clinks in the collection chest, the soul flies up to eternal rest." Indulgence sales skyrocketed—except in Frederick's Saxony since he had his own relic collection, but we've mentioned that.



still no peace. Even when he became a priest and could offer up the continued sacrifice of the mass to gain merit, there was no ultimate comfort. When sent to Rome on business for his Augustinian order he took advantage of the system as he rushed around to churches and shrines to pile up the merits, almost sorry, as he would later say, that his parents were not yet dead so that he could have freed them from purgatory with his pilgrimages. This was a kind of confessing with his life and actions.

It did not seem to matter whether he had been in secular life pointed to law studies or now in a sacred vocation as monk and priest. And it did not get any better when Luther was pressed into formal theological studies by his Augustinian order that wanted him ready for some future academic role. The formal classroom/textbook theology taught the same thing he'd grown up with and already confessed, only now the classroom theology did this in great hair-splitting detail. There were a variety of explanations for how this all worked, but the approach Luther learned goes (greatly simplified) something like this:

People are born sinful, but not completely fallen or helpless. There remains a spark of goodness, not enough to save but enough to prompt a person to at least try to do something good to please God. It is only logical to think this ability, this spark, is still there. After all, God is perfect and makes no mistakes; God has given us the law; therefore since God would not ask something of us if we could not do it, and therefore there must be some way in which we can respond to Him and keep the law. We may not do it perfectly or be able to do it on our own, but enabled by His grace, we can work at it—a process. And how do we get that grace? Well, remember the spark of goodness? That spark enables us to take the first feeble step. That little baby step does not save, but it earns us congruent merit, that is, merit similar to what God wants. He does not give heaven at this point, but He will give grace to help us work at getting there. As the famous phrase put it: *facientibus quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*—"to those who do what is in them, God will not deny grace." Do what (supposedly) comes naturally. From that humble beginning, God continues to infuse grace—so keep at those sacraments and keep working the system of popular piety, perfecting your faith until finally you obtain full merit, if not in this life, then in the purgatory to come. Then God rewards with heaven.

Note how the system works: it is *quid pro quo*, that is, you get this for that, heaven for effort. The key word is "*ergo*"—"therefore"—a system based on logic. If God gives law and if God makes no mistakes, therefore there must be some way for you to keep it. If God gives law, and if God also gives grace and faith, therefore salvation must be some combination of faith and the keeping of the law, that is, of faith and good works. It is all logical. It is all quite natural. Actually it is also Aristotle, built around the syllogistic logic of that ancient Greek philosopher whose method for organizing and thinking categorized what seemed so normal and became the method for thinking at the medieval universities. There would be many



variations on logic over the years, but generally speaking, the roots were in Aristotle. It was such a good way of making sense of the world, or so it seemed. So, too, in theology. It is all so logical—but is it biblical? No matter—it is what Luther would have confessed. So natural human tendencies (to try to do something for God) were reinforced by formal theology that explained or supported this sort of confession.

But something else happened. Frederick the Wise opened a new university in Wittenberg. The Augustinian order agreed to provide professors. And after some twists and turns that we need not recount, Luther's superior and confessor, Johannes von Staupitz, had him transferred to Wittenberg where Luther finished his doctoral studies and became professor of biblical theology. It was not what Luther wanted to do, but monks do what their superiors tell them. Luther was still terribly bothered by his spiritual insecurities. Staupitz thought this might solve two problems at once—he'd get a much-needed teacher in Luther, and Luther would have to work through theology to teach his classes and in so doing, perhaps he would find answers to his spiritual problems. Luther did indeed—but not in the way anyone had planned!

Universities in Luther's day were firmly in the hands of the scholastics, the "school men," that is, those who taught at schools. And whatever they taught, theology included, they used logic to approach the subject up for discussion. If this, and if this, ergo that--therefore that. If God makes no mistakes and if God gives law and says "keep it for salvation," therefore ...

But Wittenberg was a new university without established traditions. At this same time when scholasticism still had a stranglehold on educational method, there was another approach to learning that was being championed by others who would have liked to be in the universities, but they were being kept out by the old guard, by the "school men." The alternative came from the Renaissance, that rebirth of classical learning. The Renaissance looked at ancient culture and realized that people did not live or learn by logic alone. Syllogisms—if A and B, therefore C—could not provide the answer for everything. The *studia humanitatis*, the study of man, that is, the humanities, the liberal arts of Renaissance humanism, saw the value also of rhetoric, of how language is used to explain, to move, to persuade. Renaissance humanists explored the grammar, the language of texts, and they learned the original languages to appreciate what an author was saying. Luther showed some interest in this new learning even before he joined the Wittenberg faculty: he learned some Greek and started Hebrew as well. But it was as a new university professor that things really came together with dramatic results.

Like any new professor, even today, Luther scrambled to find significant ideas and new insights to bring to his students. Looking to various resources to comment on biblical texts such as Psalms, Romans, Hebrews, Galatians, he used some of the text studies, the comments offered by Renaissance humanists. Luther started to



read biblical texts differently, to understand the message differently. It took time, but after a few years Luther realized he was adopting a different method for speaking theologically: not logic but the grammar, the rhetoric of the text was important. Out of so many insights, perhaps the greatest was this: the righteousness needed for salvation is NOT a quantity of good to be acquired by us but a quality given to us. Not what we obtain, what we have, but how we are. The "*favor Dei*," the "favor of God" is God's grace given not because we can keep the law (because in ourselves we really can't), but it comes despite what we are like in and of ourselves. Theology is not based on *ergo*/therefore. Luther hit on a different word he now confessed: "*dennoch*," that is, "nevertheless." God gives law, as Paul says in Romans, but—reading the text now, not working out of logic—but God gives law not to show us what we can do but to keep reminding us that we cannot, so that we will despair of our efforts and cling to Christ. *Dennoch* (nevertheless) is a very Lutheran word, a biblical word.

This new approach to theology was a new method, a new way of thinking. Luther denounced the old. We remember the 95 Theses because of the way they upset the system of the indulgence sales and sparked a public outcry. But arguably just as important—more important theologically—from that same year (1517) were Luther's "Theses Against Scholastic Theology." There he wrote, "It is not with Aristotle (that is, with logic) that one becomes a theologian; in fact, the opposite is true: it is only without Aristotle that one becomes a theologian. ... For Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light, and his Ethics [that taught *ergo* reward for doing good] his Ethics is the worst enemy of grace." The method is all wrong, Luther is saying. And to a former teacher Luther wrote, "I simply believe that it is impossible to reform the church unless the canons [that is, the church law] and decretals [that is, the papal rules], the scholastic theology, the philosophy, and logic as they now are are uprooted and another study installed." University curriculum that centered on scholastic logic to unlock the Scriptures had to go. Logic led only to spiritual problems: when have I done enough? But the new learning of this Renaissance humanism pushed Luther back into the language of the texts, and it was in those biblical texts that he found his answer to saving righteousness.

And what does all this have to do with "confessing," our general topic? Luther grew up having learned one kind of theology and readily confessed that. Remember Luther's remark: if ever a monk gained heaven by monkish effort, it would have been Luther. He believed and lived that theology, but it brought no peace. Forced to come up with classroom material, this new professor Luther turned to Renaissance humanism to help find new material. Humanism was not the answer but it gave him tools to read the texts, and there he found spiritual answers. He found comfort for himself. And then realizing that he was typical of countless others who also had no peace, Luther confessed these new insights that he found, and others found them comforting as well. The Reformation then can be seen as the product of a kind of educational curriculum movement and also as the product of an individual breakthrough that was multiplied among so many more as



this new way, a reforming way of looking at God's revelation, grew and grew. The new confession of one (Martin Luther) became the confession of many who were not echoing Luther but were saying the same thing as they also saw it where Luther did, namely, in the Scriptures.

Although it grew out of Luther's study and university classroom, theology turned out to be no abstract subject but rather a very personal engagement with God. We see that how we approach theology, the method we use for thinking and talking about God as we engage His biblical revelation, makes all the difference in the world. That's why we spend so much time not only on proclamation of the Word but also on education, on how we study—both professionals and laypeople—because how we learn shapes what we learn and what we then confess.

Speaking from faith, Luther discovered the Gospel by God's grace as God broke him down and then led him out of his dark night of fear and anxiety into the bright light of a sure confidence in God's promises in Christ. Speaking historically, Luther discovered the Gospel when, after a long journey that he hoped would bring him personal peace, he was pushed instead into circumstances that came together to show him a new method of thinking theologically. And realizing that he was not unique but, in fact, was just like everyone else who takes God and sin and heaven and hell seriously, Luther rushed to tell others not only of his hope but he taught them how he came to that hope. He confessed the Gospel. Others heard and rejoiced in that message and confessed it as well. And in the end that confessing swelled to reform the church. There was a new re-formed content (a confession) that was not held our shut up but was used (confessed!). Personally I have little patience for people who are pleased with their orthodoxy and pat themselves on the back that they have the right message but then do not do anything with it. In fact, because doctrine (teaching) is for use and not to be set on the shelf, I think it could even be argued that people who do have the right content but do nothing with it (that is, only "circle the wagons" in a defense posture) are not really orthodox after all. We pray in one Sunday morning collect (at least in the older Lutheran hymnal we used in the LCMS) that we may read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Scriptures that we may embrace and ever hold fast that message. But in the other collect, we ask for the Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes down from above that the Word, as befits it, may not be bound but be preached to the joy and edification of Christ's holy people—but I think the point is not to look inward but to make that group of holy people larger. That means the doctrine has to be used. Luther, once he hit upon the evangelical message, certainly waded into the mess of the church of his day and used it with all the energy he could muster.

There was no guarantee that positive things would come from Luther's confessing, no guarantee that a reformation would happen. Luther could just as well have discovered the Gospel, told others, and yet have gotten no response. There is no accounting for whether or not the devil, world, or the sinful flesh will



block that message. But Luther also realized he could not control that. It was only up to him to confess. Then it was up to the Holy Spirit to work and produce fruit. That's one final lesson for us to learn. We also cannot control. We cannot read the outcome in the heavens or find it in the stars. We can only seek to use the best tools available (as Luther did), to make the best presentation, the best confession we can (as Luther tried to do), and then what follows is God's doing. We might be disappointed, as Luther sometimes was, that more does not happen. But we can never be disappointed in what we have: the love of God in Christ, the confidence that by faith alone and by God's grace alone we have life eternal. This is what we confess.

