

CHAPTER III

STRIKING OUT ALONG NEW ROADS—THE INTERIOR PROCESS

I. LUTHER'S FIRST BIBLICAL LECTURES—HIS MYSTICISM

The first lectures of the new professor of Biblical science were delivered in the years 1513 to 1515 and dealt with the Psalms. Those of his pupils who were monks and had to recite the Divine Office in choir, were particularly interested in the Psalms. The interpretation offered them by Luther has been preserved in his works. It is, however, not an explanation made in accordance with our modern ideas, but rather a collection of allegorical and moral sentences based upon the text, as was the custom in those days. Luther justly abandoned this allegorical manner of interpretation in later life. Non-Catholics have endeavored, without justification, to discover in these lectures the germs of his later teaching. His manner of expression is often indefinite and elastic and generally more rhetorical than theologically correct. His teaching on justification, grace, and free will, is, like his other doctrines, still fundamentally Catholic, or at least can be so interpreted if the dogmatic teaching of the Church is properly understood. Still there are a few indications of the coming change. Take, for instance, his emphatic assertion that Christ died for all men and his exaggerated opposition to the doctrine of justification by means of good works.¹ In general these lectures reveal talent, religious zeal, and fertile imagination—qualities which must have charmed his auditors to an unusual degree.

Luther was very amiable and communicative towards his pupils. His entire personality, the very gleam of his eye, exerted a certain fascination over those who associated with him.

The young professor of Sacred Scripture displayed a pronounced inclination towards mysticism. Mysticism had always been cultivated

¹ Cf. H. Boehmer in *Allg. Evang.-Luth. Kirchenzeitung*, 1924.

to a certain extent in the religious orders of the Catholic Church. The reading of Bonaventure had pointed Luther, even as a young monk, to the pious union with God at which Mysticism aims. Toward the close of his lectures on the Psalms, he became acquainted with certain works on Mysticism which he imbibed with great avidity. They were the sermons of Tauler and the tract "*Theologia deutsch.*" They dominate his thoughts in 1515. Although these works were not designed to do so, they helped to develop his unecclesiastical ideas. His lively experience of the weakness of the human will induced him to hearken readily to the mystical voices which spoke of the complete relinquishment of man to God, even though he did not understand them perfectly. His opposition to good works opened his mind to a fallacious conception of the doctrines of those books of the mystical life. It appeared to him that, by following such leaders, his internal fears could be dispelled by a calm immersion in the Godhead.

John Tauler, an ornament of the Dominican Order (died in 1361), was a famous preacher in the pulpits of Strasburg. His writings and sermons are filled with profound thoughts and have a strong popular appeal. They abound in attractive imagery and are replete with devotion. Tauler stands four-square on the basis of Catholic teaching and the best scholastic theology. Two points in his mystical admonitions found a special echo in Luther's soul, namely, the interior calmness with which God's operations are to be received, and the darkness which fills the souls of pious persons, of whom he speaks consolingly. Luther, however, introduced his own erroneous ideas into the teaching of Tauler. His demand that the soul be calmly absorbed in God, Luther interpreted as complete passivity, yea, self-annihilation. And what Tauler says concerning trials arising from the withdrawal of all religious joy, of all emotions of grace in the dark night of the soul, he referred directly to his own morbid attacks of fear, to which he endeavored to oppose a misconceived quietism, a certain repose generated by despair. In brief, he tried to transform all theology into what he called a theology of the Cross. Misconstruing Tauler's doctrine of perfection he would recognize only the highest motives, namely, reasons of the greatest perfection for himself as well as for others. Fear of divine punishment and hope of divine reward were to be excluded.

These were extravagances which could not aid him, but, on the contrary, involved great danger to his orthodoxy; in fact, constituted

a serious aberration. But he trusted his new lights with the utmost self-confidence. Writing of Tauler to his friend Lang at Erfurt, who was also fascinated by the works of that mystic, Luther compares him with contemporary and older theologians and says that while Tauler was unknown to the Schoolmen, he offered more real theology than the combined theological professors of all the universities.²

The other mystical writer who interested him, was discovered by Luther in a manuscript. He lived in the fourteenth century and was the author of the "*Theologia deutsch.*" His name is unknown to us. He was a priest at Frankfort on the Main. His work, which is a didactic treatise on perfection, is Catholic, although not exempt from obscurities. Luther esteemed it as a book of gold, particularly in view of its praise of the sole domination of God in the soul that suffers for Him. He edited this book, at first incompletely, in 1516, then in its entirety, in 1518. It is remarkable that a book on Mysticism was his first publication. Soon he occupied himself with the mystical writings of the so-called Dionysius the Areopagite, the father of Mysticism, and with those of Gerard Groote, a more modern author.

His style in those days, as also later on, reveals how profoundly he was animated by the devout tone of these mystics. Thus, in writing to George Leiffer, a fellow-monk at Erfurt, who was afflicted by persecutions and interior sufferings, he says (1516): "Do not cast away thy little fragment of the Cross of Christ, but deposit it as a sacrosanct relic in a golden shrine, namely, in a heart filled with gentle charity. For even the hateful things which we experience, are priceless relics. True, they are not, like the wood of the Cross, hallowed by contact with the body of the Lord, yet, in as far as we embrace them out of love for His most loving heart and His divine will, they are kissed and blessed beyond measure."³ In discussing the idea of self-annihilation under the guidance of God, which was his favorite thought in these days, he shows that he has gone astray. He says that man should not choose among good works, but abandon himself to God's inspiration, as the steed is governed by the reins. In an address delivered in 1516 he declares: "The man of God goeth, whithersoever God directs him as a rider. He never knows whither he is headed; he is passive rather than ac-

² Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. I, p. 87.

³ *Briefwechsel*, I, p. 68 (April 15, 1516); Grisar, *Luther*, I, 88.

tive. He journeys ever onward, no matter what the condition of the road, through water, mud, rain, snow, wind, etc. Thus are the men of God who are led by the divine spirit.”⁴ Such are the doctrines which he opposed to those who became distasteful to him on account or their insistence on good works and what he called their Pharisaical observance of external practices.

On May 1, 1515, a chapter of the Augustinian congregation was held at Gotha under the presidency of Staupitz. Luther preached the sermon at the opening assembly. The theme which he selected treated of the contrasts which must have developed in the monasteries of the congregation, namely, the “little saints” and their calumnies against the monastic brethren who disagreed with them in matters of discipline. With extreme acerbity, and employing the crudest and most repulsive figures of speech, he scourged their criticism of others as inspired by love of scandal and malevolent detraction.⁵ Apparently the majority of the brethren of his Order sided with him, for they elected him to the office of rural vicar, *i. e.*, special superior of a number of monasteries as the representative of Staupitz.

At stated times he visited the monasteries thus entrusted to him. There were eleven of them, including Erfurt and Wittenberg. After the middle of April, 1516, he made a visitation of the congregations of the Order at Dresden, Neustadt on the Orla, Erfurt, Gotha, Langensalza, and Nordhausen. The letters written by him during his term of office as rural vicar, which normally lasted three years, contain practical directions and admonitions concerning monastic discipline and are, in part, quite edifying. Some of his visitations, however, were conducted with such astonishing rapidity that no fruitful results could be expected of them. Thus the visitation of the monastery at Gotha occupied but one hour, that at Langensalza two hours. “In these places,” he wrote to Lang, “the Lord will work without us and direct the spiritual and temporal affairs in spite of the devil.”⁶ At Neustadt he deposed the prior, Michael Dressel, without a hearing, because the brethren could not get along with him. “I did this,” he informed Lang in confidence, “because I hoped to rule there myself for the half-year.”⁷

⁴ Grisar, *Luther*, VI.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 69 sq.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 266.

In a letter to the same friend he writes as follows about the engagements with which he was overwhelmed at that time: "I really ought to have two secretaries or chancellors. I do hardly anything all day but write letters. . . . I am at the same time preacher to the monastery, have to preach in the refectory, and am even expected to preach daily in the parish church. I am regent of the *studium* [i. e., of the younger monks] and vicar, that is to say prior eleven times over; I have to provide for the delivery of the fish from the Leitzkau pond and to manage the litigation of the Herzberg fellows [monks] at Torgau; I am lecturing on Paul, compiling an exposition of the Psalter, and, as I said before, writing letters most of the time. . . . It is seldom that I have time for the recitation of the Divine Office or to celebrate Mass, and then, too, I have my peculiar temptations from the flesh, the world, and the devil."⁸

2. INTERIOR STATE

The last sentence quoted above contains a remarkable declaration about his spiritual condition and his compliance with his monastic duties at that time. He seldom found time to recite the Divine Office and to say Mass. It was his duty so to arrange his affairs as to be able to comply with these obligations. The canonical hours were strictly prescribed. Saying Mass is the central obligation of every priest, especially if he is a member of a religious order. If Luther did not know how to observe due moderation in his labors; if he was derelict in the principal duties of the spiritual life; it was to be feared that he would gradually drift away from the religious state, particularly in view of the fact that he had adopted a false Mysticism which favored the relaxation of the rule. As rural vicar, it is probable that he did not sustain among the brethren the good old spirit which the zealous Proles had introduced into the society. Of the "temptations of the flesh" which he mentions we learn nothing definite. He was not yet in conflict with his vows. His wrestlings with the devil may signify the fears and terrors to which he was subject.

He continued to be on good terms with his friend Staupitz, who was interested in the young monk's manifold activities. Staupitz also

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 275. October 26, 1516.

posed as a mystic, and favored the spiritual tendency which Luther followed. This talented and sociable man was very popular as a useful adviser in the homes of the rich and as an entertainer at table. Whilst Luther could not accompany him on such errands, he enjoyed his company on monastic visitations. In July, 1515, he accompanied Staupitz to Eisleben, when the latter opened the new Augustinian monastery at that place. As he walked in his sacerdotal vestments in the procession through the city of his birth at the side of his vicar, who carried the Blessed Sacrament, Luther was suddenly seized with unspeakable fright at the thought of the proximity of Christ. On mentioning the incident to his superior afterwards, the latter comforted him by saying: "Your thought is not Christ," and assuring him that Christ did not desire this fear.⁹ At times, in consequence either of a disordered affection of the heart or of over-work, he was so distressed that he could not eat or drink for a long time. One day he was found seemingly dead in his cell, so completely was he exhausted as a result of agitation and lack of food. His friend Ratzeberger, a physician, mentions this incident, without, however, indicating the exact time of its occurrence. Luther was relieved of this pitiable condition by recourse to music, which always stimulated him. After he had regained his strength, he was able once more to prosecute his labors. As a result of his suffering and worry he became very much emaciated.

Did Luther subject himself to extraordinary deeds of penance at any period of his monastic life, as he frequently affirmed in his subsequent conflict with the papacy and monasticism, when he was impelled by polemical reasons to describe himself as the type of a holy and mortified monk, one who could not find peace of mind during his whole monastic career? Holding then that peace of mind was simply impossible in the Catholic Church, he arbitrarily misrepresents monasticism, in order to exhibit in a most glaring manner the alleged inherent impossibility of "papistic" ethics to produce the assurance of God's mercy. "I tormented my body by fasting, vigils, and cold. . . . In the observance of these matters I was so precise and superstitious, that I imposed more burdens upon my body than it could bear without danger to health." "If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery, then I should have got there." "I almost died

⁹ *Tischreden*, Weimar ed., Vol. I, Nr. 137.

a-fasting, for often I took neither a drop of water nor a morsel of food for three days."¹⁰

Such exaggerated penitential exercises were prohibited by the statutes of the congregation, which were distinguished for great discretion, and insisted upon proper moderation as a matter of strict duty.

The above picture of singular holiness is produced not by early witnesses, but by assertions which Luther made little by little at a later period of life. The established facts contradict the legend. Perhaps his description is based partly on reminiscences of his distracted days in the monastery, or on eccentric efforts to overcome his sombre moods by means of a false piety. His greatest error, and the one which most betrays him, is that he ascribes his fictitious asceticism to all serious-minded members of his monastery, yea, of all monasteries. He would have it that all monks consumed themselves in wailing and grief, wrestling for the peace of God, until he supplied the remedy.¹¹ It is a rule of the most elementary criticism finally to cut loose from the distorted presentation of the matter which has maintained itself so tenaciously in Protestant biographies of Luther.

It may be admitted that, on the whole, Luther was a dutiful monk for the greatest part of his monastic life. "When I was in the monastery," he stated on one occasion, in 1535, "I was not like the rest of men, the robbers, the unjust, the adulterous; but I observed chastity, obedience, and poverty."¹²

Yet, after his transfer to Wittenberg, and in consequence of the applause which was accorded to him there, the unpleasant traits of his character, especially his positive insistence on always being in the right, began to manifest themselves more and more disagreeably. In his opinion, the Scholastic theologians, even the greatest among them, were sophists. They were a herd of "swine theologians," while he was the enlightened pupil of St. Paul and St. Augustine.¹³ The finer achievements of Scholasticism, especially those of its intellectual giant, Thomas of Aquin, were scarcely known to him. Could his confused mysticism perhaps supplement his deficient knowledge

¹⁰ See the passages quoted by me in *Luther*, Vol. VI, pp. 191 sqq. A special chapter in that volume (pp. 187 sqq.) discusses "Luther's Later Embellishment of His Early Life" in the various phases of its development.

¹¹ Cf. Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. II, pp. 157 sqq.

¹² *Op. cit.*, Vol. VI, pp. 233 sqq.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 130 sqq.

of Scholasticism? No, it only made him more self-conscious and arbitrary in the sphere of theology. He gave free vent to his criticism of highly respected ascetical writers. An example of his egotistical excess in this respect is furnished by his glosses for the year 1515, which he indited on the Psalter of Mary, a work of Mark of Weida.¹⁴ In addition to these characteristics, there was his peculiar irritability, which is strikingly exhibited in his correspondence during 1514. The theologians of Erfurt, led by Nathin, had reproved him for taking the doctorate at Erfurt instead of at Wittenberg, since the Erfurt school had claims on him as one of its own pupils. It is possible that some harsh words were exchanged in regard to this matter. The young professor in a letter addressed to the monastery at Erfurt says that he had well nigh resolved to "pour out the entire vial of his wrath and indignation upon Nathin and the whole monastery" on account of their lies and mockery. They had received two shocking letters (*litterae stupidae*) from him, for which he now wants to excuse himself, though his indignation "was only too well founded," especially since he now heard even worse things about Nathin and his complaints against his (Luther's) person. In the meantime, God had willed his separation from the Erfurt monastery, etc.

The ill-feeling between Nathin and his Erfurt colleagues, on the one hand, and Luther and his monastic partisans on the other, arose from the controversy concerning the stricter observance of the rule within the Order.

3. OPPOSITION TO SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS AND RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

Contradictory conceptions of monastic life continued to be harbored in the Augustinian congregation even after the settlement of the contention with regard to Staupitz's plans of union.

Those brethren who treasured the ancient monastic discipline, protected by papal privileges and exemptions, were accused of self-righteous Pharisaism and of disobedience towards the General of the order by Luther and his party. They were the "Little Saints" against whom he had inveighed in his impetuous address at Gotha. In his lectures and sermons he reproached, though often only in allusions, their "observantine" practices, their adherence to the doctrine of good works, and their want of charity. His invectives, however,

¹⁴ *Theol. Studien u. Kritiken*, 1917, pp. 81 sqq.

were launched with a bitterness which those concerned assuredly did not merit, even though there might have been reasons for complaint. It may be said that the ancient and the modern wings opposed each other in the Wittenberg monastery. Probably there was friction also in the monastery at Erfurt, where Luther's friend Lang was prior, as well as in other monasteries of the congregation. Luther's monastery, however, was the center of the contention. The young students of the Order brought with them their divergent views out of the cloisters whence they came and they carried the new atmosphere of Wittenberg along with them when they left. Luther's partisans at Wittenberg boasted that they were more closely attached to the General of the Order at Rome than their opponents. The General, they contended, was not in favor of the singularities of the Observantines.

At the commencement of his first series of lectures on the Psalms, Luther delivered a sarcastic address on the obedience due to religious superiors. "How many do we not find," he says, "who believe they are very religious, and yet they are, if I may so express it, only men of an extremely sanguine temperament (*sanguinicissimi*) and true Idumaeans [*i. e.*, pagan-minded]. There are people who so revere and praise their monastic state, their order, their Saints, and their institutions, that they cast a shadow upon all others, not wishing to grant them their proper place. In a very unspiritual manner they are humble followers (*observantes*) of their fathers and boast of them. Oh, the frenzy that prevails in this day! It has almost come to this that every monastery repudiates the customs of all others and is imbued with such pride as to preclude taking over or learning anything at all from another. That is the pride of Jews and heretics, with which we, unfortunate ones, are also encompassed," etc.¹⁵ In the addresses which he delivered in the monastery church he frequently alludes to the obstinate pride of the Jews and heretics, in condemnation of those members of his order or of other orders who adhered to the strict observance. These "Observantines, exempted and privileged characters"—thus he fulminates in another lecture, are devoid of obedience, which is the very soul of good works. It will be seen—he continues—how detrimental to the Church they are; in the interests of the rule, they were determined to insist upon exceptions; "but that is a light that comes from the devil."¹⁶

¹⁵ Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. VI, pp. 497 sqq. *Sanguinosissimi* must probably be read in lieu of *sanguinicissimi*.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, Vol. VI, p. 498.

This was the contest which led the fiery monk to enter upon doubtful ways. His opposition to the so-called doctrine of self-righteousness caused him to form a false conception of righteousness; instead of attacking an heretical error, he combated the true worth of good works and the perfections of the monastic life.

Voluntary poverty, as practiced by the mendicants, was one of the foundations of his Order. The inmates of monastic houses were to live on alms according to the practice introduced by the great Saint Francis of Assisi and for the benefactions received were to devote themselves gratis to the spiritual needs of their fellowmen. Many abuses, it is true, had attached themselves to the mendicant system: self-interest, avarice, and worldly-mindedness infected the itinerant mendicants. But in his explanation of the Psalms Luther attacks the life of poverty *per se*: "O mendicants! O mendicants! O mendicants!" he pathetically exclaims, "who can excuse you? . . . Look to it yourselves," etc. He places the practice of poverty in an unfavorable light.¹⁷ In his criticism of the "self-righteousness" of his irksome enemies, he confronts them with the righteousness of the spirit that cometh from Christ. These people, whom he believed it his duty to expose, were guilty, in his opinion, of a Pharisaical denial of the true righteousness of Christ. His righteousness, and not our good works, effect our salvation; works generate a fleshly sense and boastfulness. These thought-processes evince how false mysticism, unclear theological notions, a darkening of the monastic spirit, and passionate obstinacy conspired in Luther's mind.

In the years 1515 and 1516, the phalanx of the self-righteous, the *justitiarii*, as he styles them, again constitute the object of his attacks. There is Christ, the hen with its protecting wings, which he must defend against the vultures that pounce upon us in their self-righteousness. These enemies of the sweet righteousness imputed to us by God are "a pestilence in the Church; intractable, nay, rebellious against their superiors, they decry others and clothe themselves with the lamb-skins of their good works."¹⁸

An Augustinian friend of his, George Spenlein, having become weary of certain persecutions, had had himself transferred from Wittenberg to the monastery at Memmingen. Luther sent him a peculiar letter of condolence on April 8, 1516. According to this missive, it would seem that the self-righteous Spenlein had been for a long time "in opposition to the

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, Vol. VI, p. 500.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, Vol. VI, pp. 502 sq.

self-righteousness of God, which had been bestowed most lavishly and gratuitously upon him by Christ"; whereas he (Spenlein) desired to stand before God with his own works and merits, which, of course, is impossible. He (Luther), too, had harbored this notion, and says he still wrestles with this error. "Learn, therefore, my sweet brother," thus he addresses Spenlein in the vocabulary of mysticism, "learn to sing to the Lord Jesus and, distrusting yourself, say to Him: Thou, O Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, but I am Thy sin. Thou hast accepted what was mine and hast given to me what was Thine. Oh, that thou wouldest boldly appear thyself as a sinner, yea, be a sinner in reality; for Christ abides only in sinners." "But, if you are a lily and a rose of Christ, then learn to bear persecution with patience, lest your secret pride convert you into a thorn."¹⁹

The germ of Luther's reformatory doctrine is plainly contained in this species of Mysticism. Step by step he had arrived at his new dogma in the above described manner. The system which attacked the basic truths of the Catholic Church, was complete in outline. Before giving a fuller exposition of it, we must consider the individual factors which co-operated in its development in Luther's mind.

Confession and penance were a source of torturing offense to the young monk. Can one obtain peace with God by the performance of penitential works? He discussed this question with Staupitz on an occasion when he sought consolation. Staupitz pointed out to him that all penance must begin and end with love; that all treasures are hidden in Christ, in whom we must trust and whom we must love.²⁰ These words contain nothing new; but the exhortation to combine love with penance entered the inflammable soul of Luther as a voice from heaven. According to his own expression, it "clung to his soul as the sharp arrows of the mighty" (Ps. CXIX, 4); henceforward, he says, he would execrate the hypocrisy by means of which he had formerly sought to express a "fabricated and forced" penitential spirit during the tortures of confession. Now that the merits of Christ covered everything, penance appeared easy and sweet to him. He expresses himself on this point in a grateful letter to Staupitz, written in 1518.²¹

On the occasion referred to, it is probable that Staupitz, as was

¹⁹ Enders, *Luthers Briefwechsel*, I, p. 29.

²⁰ *Tischreden*, Weimar, ed., II, Nr. 2654.

²¹ Enders, *Luthers Briefwechsel*, I, p. 196 (May 30, 1518.)

his custom, expressed himself in a vague and sentimental manner, rather than in clear theological terms. His writings are susceptible of improvement in many respects. The influence which he exerted on Luther was not a wholesome one. He was too fond of him to penetrate his character. He perceived in him a rising star of his congregation, a very promising ornament of his Order. Even in the most critical period anterior to Luther's apostasy, he eulogized his courage and said: Christ speaks out of your mouth,—so well it pleased him that Luther, in the matter of righteousness and good works, ascribed everything to Christ, to whom alone glory should be given.²² Certain of a favorable response on the part of his superior, Luther wrote thus in the above letter to him: "My sweet Saviour and Pardoner, to whom I shall sing as long as I live (Ps. CIII, 33), is sufficient for me. If there be anyone who will not sing with me, what is that to me? Let him howl if it please him." The short-sighted Staupitz sided with Luther even after he had been condemned by the Church.

Nor was Staupitz the man who could thoroughly free Luther from his doubts about predestination, although Luther says he helped him. His general references to the wounds of Christ could not permanently set the troubled monk aright. He should have placed definitely before him the Catholic dogma, based on Sacred Scripture, that God sincerely desires the salvation of all men, and should have made clear to the doubter that voluntary sin is the sole cause of damnation. But he himself seems not to have grasped these truths, for in certain critical passages of his writings he allows them to retreat before a certain mysterious predestination. Luther's fear of predestination constituted the obscure substratum of his evolving new religious system. Recalling Staupitz's exhortations, he says, in 1532: We must stop at the wounds of Christ, and may not ponder over the awful mystery. The only remedy consists in dismissing from our minds the possibility of a verdict of damnation. "When I attend to these ideas, I forget what Christ and God are, and sometimes arrive at the conclusion that God is a scoundrel. . . . The idea of predestination causes us to forget God, and the *Laudate* ceases and the *Blasphemate* begins."²³ The part which these struggles had in the origin of his new doctrine, is to be sought in Luther's violent efforts

²² Weimar ed., XL, I, p. 131.

²³ *Tischreden*, Weimar ed., II, Nr. 2654.

to attain to a certain repose in the face of his presumptive predestination.

It is also remarkable that the last-quoted utterance is followed by one concerning his "great spiritual temptations." In contrast with the struggles of despair which he underwent, he is not deeply impressed by ordinary temptations. "No one," he writes, "can really write or say anything about grace, unless he has been disciplined by spiritual temptations."²⁴ His opponents, he says elsewhere, not having had such experiences, it behooved them to observe silence. When his doctrine encountered opposition in Rome, he wrote to Staupitz that Roman citations and other matters made no impression on him. "My sufferings, as you know, are incomparably greater, and these force me to regard such temporal flashes as extremely trivial."²⁵ He meant "doubtlessly, personal, inward sufferings and attacks which were connected with bodily ailments . . . , whereby, as formerly, he was always seized with fear for his personal salvation when he pondered on the hidden depths of the divine will."²⁶

In his interpretation of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, given during the years 1515 and 1516, Luther completely unfolded his new doctrine.

²⁴ Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. I, pp. 204 sqq.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, Vol. VI, pp. 100 sqq.; cfr. I, 14 sqq.

²⁶ Julius Köstlin.

CHAPTER IV

PROGRESS OF THE NEW DOCTRINE

I. INTERPRETATION OF THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS (1515-1516)

In none of his other Epistles does St. Paul penetrate so deeply into the questions of grace, justification, and election, as in his magnificent Epistle addressed to the Christians of Rome. Luther believed that this profound Epistle furnished the thread that would lead him out of his labyrinth. Disregarding the tradition of the Church concerning the meaning of the Epistle, he buried himself in its contents and brooded over its many mysterious expressions. For him the sacred document was to become the subject-matter of academic lectures with entirely new ideas. How often may he not have wandered up and down the venerable corridors of the monastery meditating on the significance of the words of the Apostle. His emaciated form may have become animated, his deep-set eyes may have flashed, as he imagined to discover in the Epistle to the Romans the desired solution of his problems. With ever-increasing confidence he imputed to the Apostle the ideas to which he was urged for the sake of the supposed quieting of his scruples. Simultaneously, an arsenal of new weapons against the self-righteous Pharisees within the Church seemed to open itself to him.

St. Paul sets forth the idea that neither the observation of the law of nature nor that of the Mosaic law can justify man before God, but only the grace of God now revealed through the Gospel of Christ. In this exposition Luther erroneously discovered a denial of the natural powers of man and the sole causality of God in His creature—a doctrine utterly foreign to the Apostle's mind. In the propositions on the grace of Christ, as set forth by Paul, he discovered an ascription of the merits of Christ equally foreign to the mind of the Apostle—a purely external imputation without works on the part of man. St. Paul discourses sublimely on the freedom of