

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

the Christian believer from the disciplinary law of Moses and on the freedom of the soul that is directed towards God. From this Luther inferred that the true Christian was free from all law and formulated for himself a contrast between the law and the Gospel which implied fatal consequences. The Apostle, again, paints a striking picture of the rejection of the Jewish nation from anterior secret decrees, which prove his notion of predestination to hell. In a similar way his lively imagination interpreted other doctrines of the Epistle, which he confidently undertook to explain, despite the fact that his deficient training rendered him incompetent for the task.

He began to lecture on Romans in the second semester of 1515. We have his own manuscript of the lectures and a faithful copy of it, which is preserved in the Vatican Library. Fr. Henry Denifle, O. P., has the honor of having first edited extensive extracts from the Roman copy in 1904. Four years later John Ficker published the original, the existence of which was till then unknown. It belongs to the Berlin Library.

These publications were of inestimable advantage for the student of Luther. As contrasted with the numerous defective reproductions of these lectures previously circulated, we have here for the first time an authentic insight into the genesis and original form of Luther's teaching. Since that day, investigators have been occupied with the task of analyzing and discussing these lectures. The principal outlines are clear, but there are differences of opinion with respect to various details. This is all the more natural, since Luther, when he delivered these lectures, was still undergoing a spiritual process of development. He sometimes contradicts his own views and retains various elements of Catholic thought which cannot be reconciled with his changed views. The opening sentences disclose the impulsive vigor with which he advances towards his new position. He commences by stating that St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, was desirous of eradicating "all wisdom and righteousness" of the terrestrial man; that he wished to destroy, "in heart and marrow," all man's works, even the best-intentioned and noblest, and all his virtues. Instead, he wished "to cultivate and glorify sin," that is, to describe the permanent hereditary sin of mankind, in order to set up an alien righteousness, *i. e.*, the grace of Christ imputed to us by faith. In this manner, he says, St. Paul inculcates the doctrine of self-

annihilation on the one hand, and, on the other, resignation to the sole causality and omnipotence of God.

2. THE PRINCIPAL PROPOSITIONS OF LUTHER'S DOCTRINE

The ancient Church, above all things, upheld the freedom of the human will to do good. She steadfastly maintained that God wills the salvation of all men without exception and to this end offers them the necessary grace, with which men should freely coöperate. Baptism makes a man a child of God by virtue of sanctifying grace; but the inclination to evil remains through no fault of his own, provided he does not consent to sin. Concupiscence is diminished by the means of grace offered by the Church. If any one has been seduced into committing mortal sin, he may confidently hope to regain the state of grace through the merits of the death of Christ, provided he submits to penance and resolves to amend his life. Mere faith in the application of the merits of Christ is not sufficient. Actual grace assists man to be converted and to persevere in doing good.

In these few propositions we have described a splendid system of doctrine, which accords with the free, rational nature of man as well as with the infinite goodness of God. This is not the place to demonstrate its truth from the sources of divine revelation, Scripture and tradition.

Luther, with the Epistle to the Romans in his hand, proclaimed that man was not free to do good; that all his efforts were sinful, because evil concupiscence dwelled in his soul; that God did everything in him, governing him as the rider governs his steed. He did not differentiate between natural and supernatural good. Christ, he said, has fulfilled the law for me and atoned for every weakness and sin. Through His righteousness the believing and trustful sinner is covered, apart from his own works and his own righteousness. He remains a sinner as before, but is justified by the imputation of the justice of Christ and necessarily brings forth good works through the infinite causality of God, just as trust in God is imparted to the hesitating only through the divine omnipotence.

According to Luther's teaching, not all men are thus favored by God, since His inscrutable decree consigns many to eternal damnation. Resignation to hell is the highest virtue because it connotes

complete submission to the will of God. But this very resignation reconciles the despondent soul with the thought of a merciful God. Perfect humility and submission (*perfecta humilitas*) must serve us as a kind of anchor. The doctrine of the absolute certainty of salvation, or rather, the certitude of justification through mere belief in Christ, had not yet been discovered by Luther. Instead, he still upheld the Catholic teaching on merit, similarly as when, in connection with justification, he employed Catholic expressions, albeit obscurely and hesitatingly, to set forth his conception of the renovation of the inward man. The renovation, however, which Luther indicates, is far removed from that which the ancient Church teaches on the basis of Sacred Scripture, namely, that the spirit of God, poured forth into the soul, abides in man. Luther ridicules the outpouring of grace in man in virtue of the so-called habits and the implanted supernatural virtues. He had nothing but scorn for the "sophists" who entertained such "silly notions."

His exposition of the new theology, which we have condensed above, is accompanied by a haughty and repellent treatment of the traditional dogmas and theology. He selects some actual deficiencies of the older theologians, in order to stigmatize the entire past, especially the Scholastic system, with which he was but inadequately acquainted.¹

3. EFFECTS OF LUTHER'S FIRST APPEARANCE

Protests were immediately voiced. In September, 1516, Luther arranged for a disputation at the University of Wittenberg, to be conducted by Bartholomew Bernhardi, a native of Feldkirch in Vorarlberg, for which he himself supplied the theses. They were chiefly concerned with the utter moral incompetence of man in the state of nature. The solemn disputation, according to his own testimony, was intended to silence the "yelping curs" which might rise up against him. The theses stated that man sins even when doing the best he can; for he is absolutely unable by his own unaided efforts to keep the commandments of God.²

¹ On the doctrinal content of Luther's Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, see Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. I, pp. 184 sqq., 374 sqq.

² *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 310 sq.

In October, 1516, he began his celebrated shorter lectures on the Epistle to the Galatians. In the printed edition with which we are familiar, as well as in the condensed form in which they have been recently published, they constitute a still more vigorous expression of his views. These lectures were followed, in 1517, by his prelections on the Epistle to the Hebrews, which have not yet been printed. The Wittenberg disputation and the lectures delivered by Luther at that time were subsequently represented by him and his friends as "the commencement of the gospel business."³

Whilst the reports concerning Luther caused the monks at Erfurt and other cloisters to be startled, and whilst the opposition to him at Wittenberg increased, influential professors at the University gradually espoused his cause. Among these were the following: Andrew Karlstadt, who up to this time had labored energetically in the interests of Scholasticism; Nicholas Amsdorf, who was destined to distinguish himself as an ardent enthusiast, more Lutheran even than Luther himself; and Peter Lupinus, a former professor and originally an antagonist of the new thought. Of special importance for Luther was the support and coöperation of the Augustinian, Wenceslaus Link, prior of the Wittenberg monastery and since 1511 a doctor at the University, a confidant of Luther and one of the supporters of Staupitz. After having accompanied the latter on several visitation tours, he arrived in 1517 at Nuremberg, where he pleaded the cause of Lutheranism in eloquent sermons. At Nuremberg, the humanist Christopher Scheurl became a friend of the Lutherans. At Erfurt Luther had an active supporter in his old friend, John Lang, the prior of that place. To him Luther wrote, in 1517, that he contemned the reproaches of the Augustinians of Erfurt for his alleged presumption, since God's work would be realized in him. "Pray fervently for me," he wrote, "as I pray for you, that our Lord Jesus may assist us and help us bear our temptations, which are known to no one but ourselves."⁴

The law faculty of Wittenberg entertained diverse opinions of Luther. Among the first to defend him was the jurist Jerome Schurf, who subsequently became the patriarch of jurisprudence at Wittenberg. The renowned Martin Pollich, who, with Staupitz, was one of the founders of the University, freely acknowledged Luther's extra-

³ *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 303 sqq.

⁴ Enders, *Luther's Briefwechsel*, I, p. 124 (November 11.)

ordinary talents.⁵ Most of the other professors, however, were either against him or noncommittal, because they disapproved of his opposition to canon law. Already at that time Luther was not fond of the representatives of jurisprudence, to whose legal demands, on the basis of his peculiar mysticism, he opposed an exaggerated "passive" complaisance.

The reformer's most agitated opponents at Wittenberg quite naturally were those monks and clergymen whom Luther in his lectures and in the pulpit was wont to castigate as self-righteous. We know from what has been said above that the high esteem in which the Observance was held by many Augustinians was severely criticized by Luther. Among the younger student monks were some who brought with them from the cloister sound traditions and a spirit of enthusiasm for the external exercises of piety which Luther and his supporters disliked. They became the kernel of an active party who attacked the new theology. Luther assailed the self-righteous and Pharisaical Observantines all the more hotly. At the time of his lectures on the Epistle to the Romans (1515) he delivered a Christmas sermon, in which he raised his voice against them.

As the ancient prophets, philosophers, and scribes who proclaimed the truth were persecuted, so, Luther assures us, he in turn is being persecuted. Men exclaimed that he erred when he called Christ a hen, who, as it were, gathers us under His wings, in virtue of His merits and righteousness, in order to make us righteous. The opponents of the hen should know that their righteousness is sin. Since man is unable to fulfill the law, it behooves him to exclaim: "O sweet hen!" However, one may not seek virtues and gifts according to one's own opinion. Thus, with a lavish hand, Luther casts about him the products of his mysticism in the course of a sermon.⁶

Meanwhile, his adversaries, who were solicitous about the Church and their Order, did not remain inactive. Luther charged them in a sermon in mid-summer, 1516, with shooting arrows at those who are pure of heart. They, in common with countless other contemporaries, he exclaims, are becoming obdurate in their "carnal righteousness and wisdom." They are the greatest evil in the Church; their shibboleth, that one is obliged to

⁵ Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. IV, pp. 258 sq.

⁶ Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. III, p. 970 (German ed.)

do what is good, is a pestilence whereby they antagonize the goodness of God. He enumerates no less than seven transgressions of which they were guilty.⁷

Luther's enemies were cowed by his vehement attacks. They could not compete with him as an orator. In Wittenberg especially there was no one to challenge him. It was a tragical advantage in his favor that his talents enabled him to stand head and shoulders above all the brethren of his Order. Opposition merely increased his audacity.

On September 4, 1517, he arranged another sensational disputation by his disciple Franz Günther of Nordhausen on ninety-seven theses composed by him against Scholasticism and Aristotle. One of these theses was that man can "desire and do only evil." Another, that "his will is not free." Another, that "the sole disposition for grace is predestination, eternal election by God." Another that "neither the Jewish ceremonial code, nor the decalogue, nor whatever may be externally taught or commanded, is a good law; the only good law is the love of God," etc. At the end of these paradoxical theses we find the assurance that nothing in their contents contradicted Catholic dogma and the ecclesiastical writers. These ninety-seven propositions of 1517 enjoyed a certain circulation prior to the publication, in the same year, of Luther's famous theses on indulgences, which are not nearly so far-reaching. In consequence of this disputation several distinguished men, like Scheurl of Nuremberg, expressed the belief that a "restoration of the theology of Christ" was under way. Some time previously Luther triumphantly wrote to Lang: "Our theology and St. Augustine are making good progress and thanks be to God they prevail at our university. . . . The lectures on the Sentences [delivered by the Scholastic teachers] are completely ignored, and no one can assure himself of an audience who does not profess this [*i.e.*, our] theology."⁸

The assertion that Augustine was coming into his own in virtue of the new doctrine was as little in accord with the truth as the statement that that doctrine was genuinely Pauline. On the contrary, Luther's errors may be refuted point for point from the writings

⁷ *Op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 971 (original German edition; omitted in the English translation which we always quote in this volume, except where the German edition is expressly mentioned.)

⁸ *Op. cit.*, Vol. IV, pp. (May 18, 1517.)

of Augustine, who, in his contest with the Pelagians, forcefully points out the rôle of grace, yet neither denies that man has a part in every good deed, nor, much less, that he has a free will. The great Doctor of the Church acknowledges the devastating results of original sin, but he demands the fulfillment of the entire law with divine aid. In the theology of St. Augustine the grace of divine sonship is not merely an imputation of alien righteousness, but a supernatural state of the soul which has been truly cleansed of sin. He admits that the distribution of grace is an inscrutable mystery, but rejects the theory of absolute predestination to hell as an abomination. He frequently argues in favor of the freedom of the human spirit and the dominion of love. But he does not hold man to be independent of the laws of God or the Church; or that love must be the sole motive of action to the exclusion of fear of God's punishments so natural to man. Above all, Augustine is a defender of ecclesiastical authority and tradition, who inexorably combated arbitrariness, the spirit of innovation and subjectivism in doctrinal matters. In spite of Luther's boastfulness, he and Augustine are poles apart. All that may be said in extenuation of Luther is that Augustine's thought is frequently profound, and that, as a rule, he does not propound his doctrines methodically, but either in the service of controversy or adapted to the changing requirements of souls and the Kingdom of Heaven. As a consequence, his teaching in some respects is more easily misunderstood than that of other ecclesiastical writers. Luther repeatedly read his own ideas into Augustine with a rashness that was but little removed from conscious falsification.

For the rest, to understand Luther, we must bear in mind that the theological tradition since the days of Scholasticism was not yet fully clarified. Some of the theological doctrines which he criticized had not been treated adequately in the schools. The subsequent labors of the theologians at the Council of Trent indicate how much still remained to be done in the matter of clearing up such questions as original sin, grace, and justification.

It is highly amazing, however, to see Luther proposing new theories without interrogating more closely the well-established doctrinal tradition of the Church and questioning the latter's prerogative to teach, which had been instituted by Christ for the defense of dogma. We marvel at the fact that this sacred authority is almost com-

pletely set aside by him, as though it were non-existent. Luther acts as if his fight were merely a fight against the schools, against Scholastic sophists, against the Aristotelians, against the new writers and their friends, such as the followers of Gabriel Biel, whom he calls "Gabrielists," or against the defenders of such older authors as the "*sententiarii*." The mighty authority of the Church, which every Catholic theologian must consult at every step, did not impress him sufficiently during his formative period. This deficiency is attributable, in part, to the schools where he studied and disputed, for the later Scholastics, while indulging in hair-splitting investigation, neglected the important doctrine on the Church, or at least did not pay enough attention to it. Too much preference was given to speculation in contrast with authority and the question of its binding power, and, in general, with the positive study of the treasures of tradition entrusted to the Church and her supreme government.

True Luther was not entirely unfamiliar with the doctrinal authority of the Church. On the contrary, it is very remarkable that in his exposition of the Epistle to the Romans, despite his deviations from the faith, he strongly and in vehement language condemns the activities of heretics who separated themselves from the Church. Evidently he did not at that time entertain any idea of revolt against the hierarchy, though his complete defection from the common doctrine of the past, if insisted upon, was bound to lead to a separation from the hierarchy as his next step.

In his resolution to continue his criticism of good works—a criticism dictated by false mysticism—it is notable that he still retains the idea of the monastic state for a number of years. He devotes some beautiful passages to the excellence of the monastic vows in his lectures on the Epistle to the Romans. Hence, he arrived at his new doctrine not as a result of his eagerness to break the sacred bonds, but by following entirely different and most intricate routes, especially that of a morbid mysticism.

4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF LUTHER'S DOCTRINE

The publication of Luther's commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans (1515-1516) and the study of contemporary sources, has clearly demonstrated, among other things, the falsity of the as-

sumption that Luther's innovation originated in the intention of effecting a thorough and universal reform of the Church.

Ideas of powerful external and internal "reforms" have been ascribed to the "reformer" as the starting-point of his public appearance; in reality, however, such ideas did not influence him at all. What he primarily intended was to get his peculiar doctrines accepted and introduced in his monastery and Order, in the University of Wittenberg, and, finally, in the whole realm of contemporary scholarship.

It is true, as the sources mentioned above indicate, he combined with his efforts to impose his doctrines a loud demand for a reformation of ecclesiastical conditions. He ascribed the chief cause of the prevailing abuses in the religious sphere directly to the neglect of the truths newly discovered by him. Blinded by his imagination and by his reckless habit of fault-finding, he exaggerated beyond all measure, both in his exposition of the Epistle to the Romans and in his other addresses, the shortcomings of his age in faith and morals. In matter of fact the young monk of thirty-two years, living within the narrow confines of a monastery, knew but little of the actual conditions existing out in the world! Thus far his contacts with the world had been but few. Nevertheless, he believed he saw a veritable "deluge" of errors and abuses everywhere, because mankind was completely estranged from the "Word," namely, the requirements of the Bible and "righteousness," as he understood them. "The pope and the ecclesiastical superiors"—thus he expresses himself with blind audacity in these lectures—"have rendered themselves execrable in their endeavors⁹; they are now unmasked as seducers of the Christian populace." These superiors, he hotly avers, fill the whole world with their sodomitical and other vices; the faithful have completely forgotten the significance of good works, faith and humility. Even the better class are idolaters rather than true Christians, because they are self-righteous.¹⁰ After such a wholesale condemnation of Christians, he is able, in turn, to describe minutely, in grotesque outlines and with humorous incisiveness, the errors of the narrower world by which he was surrounded, e. g., the monks in choir impatiently hastening to the end of the services. He criticizes those of high degree with a mystical zeal, because they

⁹ "Corrupti sunt et abominabiles facti sunt in studiis suis." (Ps. XIII, 1).

¹⁰ Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. I, p. 227.

insisted upon their rights in preference to suffering injustice, as true Christians should do. It was his opinion that Pope Julius II should have relinquished the rights of the Church in his conflict with the republic of Venice. Duke George of Saxony, who was engaged in warfare with the rebels in Frisia, would have done better had he and his people patiently suffered chastisement for their sins at the hands of their enemies for God's sake.¹¹ "I fear," he says, "that we shall all perish on account of our worldliness." These are utterances of a disturbed mind.

The memory of the abominations which he had witnessed, or which he claims to have heard of in Rome, ever rises up before him and fills him with terror. "Should we not regard as sinful the shocking corruption of the entire curia and the mountain of revolting immorality, pomp, covetousness, vanity, and sacrilege prevalent there?" Germany at that time was in an ugly mood, not only because of the avarice of the Roman collectors, but also on account of the reports of lax morality incident to the Renaissance, since and even before the days of the unworthy Borgia Pope, Alexander VI. Staupitz, too, was embittered against Rome and freely vented his feelings in the presence of Luther, who stated subsequently that Staupitz had incited him against Rome.¹²

Did this disaffection, which cropped out in spots already before Luther, lead to any opposition in dogma or practice, similar to his? Did Lutheranism have any precursors? Did it arise from a soil prepared by others?

Many prominent men had raised their voices in protest against the corruption and mistakes of the ecclesiastical authorities, but despite their criticisms, they generally remained loyal to the teachings of the Church, and simply demanded a reform on the basis of the ancient dogmas. Such, for example, was that powerful preacher Geiler von Kaysersberg. Only a few before Luther dared to go as far as did John of Wesel (+1481) and Wessel Gansfort (+1489). The former, who was pastor of the cathedral at Mayence, was cited before the Inquisition and sentenced to spend the balance of his days in an Augustinian monastery, after he had recanted his erroneous propositions, which, among other things, attacked indulgences and approached the Hussite heresy concerning the Church

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 228.

¹² *Tischreden*, Weimar ed., IV, Nr. 4707.

and predestination. While still an orthodox theologian, Wesel had taught at the University of Erfurt, but he did not influence Luther's development. Wessel Gansfort, who is often confused with John of Wesel, was celebrated as a great scholar by his admirers, but obscured the doctrine of the Church by many heretical propositions. Thus he affirmed the fallibility of ecumenical councils. The righteous, he taught, have the power of the keys in a certain sense. He asserted that satisfaction for sins committed was superfluous after their remission and there was no need for indulgences, etc. Still he conforms as little with Luther in the principal points of the latter's teaching, as did John of Wesel. He holds that man has a free will, that only faith animated by charity can effect justification, and that justification is not merely a declaration of righteousness, but an actual process of making man just. Neither the one nor the other of these scholars agrees with Luther in his reformatory demands; and hence they are incorrectly hailed as precursors of the Lutheran movement.

It has been asserted that long before Luther there existed a so-called Augustinian school of theology which propagated Lutheran ideas on liberty, grace and justification down to the days of the Protestant Reformation. In reality, however, no such school existed, either during or at the close of the Middle Ages. Isolated writers, especially during the early period of Scholasticism, did advance risqué propositions that smacked of Lutheranism, but they were not in any true sense precursors of Luther, particularly since they did not create a tradition. At the same time it is difficult, yea impossible, to ascertain to what extent Luther knew and used these earlier writers or appreciated their teaching. There is no reason to challenge his independent discovery of his heresies, hence we may readily concede their originality.¹³

¹³ On so-called precursors of Luther in the "School of Augustine" see Grisar, *Luther* (German original, Vol. III, pp. 1011 sqq.; this appendix is omitted in the English translation). Grabmann in the *Katholik*, 1913, Nr. 3, pp. 157 sqq. The connection of Fidatus of Cascia (died 1348) with Luther is rejected by N. Paulus in the Innsbruck *Zeitschrift für kath. Theologie*, 1922, pp. 169 sqq.; cf. the same writer in the *Theol. Revue*, 1922, pp. 18 sq. and *Histor. Jahrb.*, 1922, p. 323. Some Protestant authors also reject the theory, e. g., R. Seeberg in *Die Lehre Luthers* (1917), p. 118, and, relative to Fidatus, in *Theol. Literaturblatt*, 1923, pp. 197 sqq.; also Scheel in the *Zeitschrift für Kirchengesch.* 1922, pp. 258 sq. Cf. W. Köhler in the *Histor. Zeitschrift*, Vol. CXI, Nr. 1, p. 153, and W. Braun in the *Evangel. Kirchenzeitung*, 1913, pp. 181 sqq.

The great Luther monument at Worms, which was unveiled in 1868, embraces quite a number of statues of so-called heralds of the Reformation. The central figure of Luther is encircled by statues of Savonarola, Hus, Wiclif, Reuchlin, and Peter Waldus. Do they belong in this constellation? As precursors of Luther's principal doctrines, certainly not; at most they may pass as opponents of the papacy in virtue of other doctrines or because of some particular controversies.

The most advanced of these opponents of the papacy was Hus, whose unfortunate end at the Council of Constance was the result of heretical doctrines subversive of both Church and State. Though Luther agreed with him in some things, and afterwards glorified him exceedingly, he was not a disciple of Hus. When, in his early monastic years, he chanced upon a volume of Hus, he refused to read it, though he noticed some good therein, because of his aversion for the author's name.¹⁴ Soon after his change of front, however, he exploited in the interest of his own cause the unhistorical legend that Hus, when he faced the stake, said: Now they are roasting a goose [Hus in Bohemian signifies goose], but a swan will come which they will not master. Luther, with a power of illusion which considerably exceeded that of the dreaming and meditative figure of Hus on the Worms monument, applied this alleged prophecy to himself.

Nor was there any greater affinity between Luther's teaching and that of Hus's precursor, John Wiclif, or that of Peter Waldus. Savonarola, the eccentric Dominican of Florence, who lost his life because of his unfortunate political activities and his schismatic attitude towards Pope Alexander VI, to some extent shared the stormy temperament of Luther, but he kept aloof from heresy. It has been aptly said of his peculiar posture on the monument of Worms that it appeared as if he wished to run away because he felt he did not fit in properly with Luther's company. Finally, there is Reuchlin, the scholarly founder of Hebrew philology, who remained a loyal Catholic. After a lengthy conflict concerning his theories of the Talmud, his book, "Augenspiegel," was prohibited by Leo X, chiefly on account of the undue use the young German humanists and incipient Lutherans made of his name. It was only the desire of

¹⁴ Grisar, *Luther*, Vol. I, p. 25.

throwing Luther into greater relief which procured for this learned writer an unmerited place on the monument at Worms.

The demand for so-called forerunners of the Reformation originated in a tendency of the nineteenth century, which has now been more or less overcome. Scholars admit the disparity of the ways which led away from Rome and regard it as superfluous to posit any precursors for the great and original Luther.

It must be admitted, however, that in the theological schools of Luther's day there were certain preparations for his doctrine. The evidence for this statement is supplied by a glance at Nominalism, particularly in the form in which it was taught by Ockham. True, at the close of the Middle Ages philosophical and theological Nominalism prevailed in many universities, without any particular injury or separatism. The eminent nominalist Gabriel Biel was quite orthodox in his teaching. But here and there dangerous errors crept in with the Nominalism inspired by the singular mind of William of Ockham. Young Luther absorbed some of these with his reading. "I am a member of Ockham's school" (*factionis Occamicae*), he says and acknowledges this passionate and schismatic partisan of Lewis the Bavarian in his contest with the papacy as his teacher. Not as though he had educated himself by means of Ockham's politico-ecclesiastical writings, or that he had imbibed that author's so-called conciliar theories. But certain philosophical and theological views of Ockham and his disciple, Peter d'Ailly, did not fail to influence him and several other theologians of the Augustinian Order.

Ockham disputed the philosophical demonstrability of the existence of God, of the freedom of the will, and of the spirituality of the soul. He taught that these truths can be known with perfect certitude only through faith. A proposition may be false in philosophy but true in theology. The ultimate cause of the eternal law and of the distinction between good and evil is solely the divine will. *Per se* an unworthy individual might be found worthy of eternal life if God has so willed it. All depends upon the will of God (theory of acceptation); and no supernatural *habitus* is necessary in the just.

It is not difficult to discern a trace of these Ockhamist errors in the teaching of Luther. What is more important is that Luther, going beyond Ockham, took that external imputation which the latter propounded only

as a possibility, for a reality and entirely eliminated sanctifying grace. Luther, like Ockham, taught that the same thing need not be true in philosophy as well as in theology. His repression of reason and his disregard of ecclesiastical authority were characteristics of Ockham. Both led him to assign to the emotions or to internal divine inspiration the rank of evidence, which, independently of the teaching of the Church, assured man of the true meaning of Holy Writ. The arbitrariness of God according to Ockham confirmed Luther in his dread of predestination. Finally, it is easy to see how Ockham's disregard of true Scholasticism must have reacted upon Luther's attitude towards the old school.

Gabriel Biel, whose works young Luther likewise studied, kept aloof from the Ockhamist errors, for which reason Luther attacked him and the "Gabrielists." Biel, under the influence of Ockham, unduly extended the limit of man's natural faculties in the realm of virtue, mistakenly appealing to St. Thomas and the other great Scholastics in defense of his theory. Biel minimized the effects of original sin, whereas Luther exaggerates them and combats the "sophists" of Scholasticism, as though they were unanimous in over-rating the powers of fallen man.

We are here confronted with the negative influence of Ockham. In contrast with what he had learned at school, Luther was led to adopt an extreme view, namely, the complete degradation of man's natural powers for good. This extreme antithesis confirmed him in his belief that all things are produced by the omnipotence of God. It was for this reason that he denounced the Scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages as well as those of his own time as "swine theologians," because they overestimated the powers of man and failed to appreciate the rôle of grace.

Rationalism and excessive criticism had gone too far in the Nominalistic schools. Luther was not the only one who was frightened by this tendency. But the true antidote did not consist in the extreme position adopted by Luther, asserting the absolute impotence of reason in matters of salvation.

The negative influence of Ockhamism on Luther also appears in his use of Holy Writ. Despite its appreciation of the Bible, Nominalism did not properly avail itself of the truths of Sacred Scripture in its treatment of theological questions. Guided by a correct sentiment, Luther opposes the study of the Bible to the preponderance of dialectics and the neglect of positive facts. But his preference for the Bible is extreme. According to him, the "Word," *i. e.*, the word of God, is almost the only thing that should be considered. The "Word" should abolish the evils of the world. It was but a step from this attitude to proclaiming the Bible as the only source of faith, to the exclusion of tradition and the Church.

Thus Nominalism, in its Ockhamistic form, appears to be one of the factors which coöperated in the birth of the so-called Reformation,

partly in virtue of its positive, partly as a consequence of its negative, influence.¹⁵

5. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

At the end of this rather lengthy discussion of the genesis and contents of the Lutheran dogma it is proper to indicate briefly how the principal doctrines of Luther were conformed to the personal mood of their discoverer. The new theories of grace and justification, which were at first intended to quiet the monk afflicted with a disordered temperament, were forthwith raised to a general norm. Precisely because everything was so absolutely personal with him, the discoverer of these ideas, so diametrically opposed to tradition, plunged into them with a vim that would be incredible were it not evidenced by his writings, especially his lectures on the Epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians, and by his disputations. His temperament furnishes the key to this remarkable phenomenon. He felt called upon to reveal to ignorant and misguided humanity the truth that had dawned on him—called by his office as doctor of theology; called upon also to denounce all abuses of doctrine and life. In reality the doctorate obliged him to teach according to the mind of the Church, who had invested him with this dignity and to whom he had promised obedience. He, on the contrary, proclaimed that he would speak freely because he had the apostolic commission to teach. As a doctor, he said, it was his duty to reproach all, even those who occupied the highest places, if they were guilty of wrong-doing.¹⁶ It does not occur to him that, if he was desirous of effecting a genuine reform, he would have to direct his censures to the proper places and utter them in a becoming manner, not by blustering in the pulpit or before immature students.

In fact, he does not reflect at all, but allows himself to be carried away by his emotions. The fatal thing was that he believed himself to be moved by God.

Lacking the true concept of the Church and of ecclesiastical authority, the pseudo-mystic reformer believes that his ideas are inspired from above and his steps directed by God, whose guidance

¹⁵ For a more detailed exposition of the influence of Ockhamism on Luther see Grisar, *Luther* (Engl. tr.), Vol. I, pp. 130 sqq., where the researches of Denifle are utilized. The relations of later Nominalism to the Lutheran heresy still await complete clarification.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 228.

he professes to follow blindly. He is convinced that he is not seeking temporal advantages, and we may not gainsay him when he declares that he is and desires to remain a poor monk. At the same time he perceives, not without a basis in fact, an excessively large number of evils in the life of Catholics. Their presence seems to justify, nay, to challenge his intervention. Consequently, he reasons, the efficacious hand of God must rest upon him, particularly since he desires only to exalt Christ.

Later, too, he always firmly believed that he was acting in conformity with "God's acts and councils," though this conviction, in matter of fact, did not persist in periods of "temptation."

Reviewing the commencement of his career as a reformer, Luther says that he went ahead "like a blinkered charger."¹⁷ Basing upon his own example and his mystical theories he formulates the following principle: "No good work happens as the result of one's own wisdom; but everything must happen in a stupor."¹⁸ It was not stupor nor intoxication, however, that inspired the great churchmen of the past to give expression to ideas that moved the world or to perform their benign deeds (such as the renewal of medieval life by St. Francis of Assisi, St. Dominic, and Gregory VII). Their achievements were the product of mature reflection, accompanied by humble self-denial, fervent prayer, and close attachment to the heart of the Church. They wrestled with difficulties without self-confidence. Luther is so full of self-confidence that he regards every contradiction as a confirmation of his position. For, as he repeatedly declared, both at the commencement of his career and afterwards, a good cause is bound to meet with contradiction; in fact opposition proves that it is acceptable to God.

And what about responsibility? "Christ may witness, whether the words I utter are His or mine; without His power and will even the pope cannot speak." Thus he writes to his fatherly friend Staupitz after the great movement had begun.¹⁹ Despite the ravings of our opponents, he continues, I must now appear in public, though I have loved seclusion, and would much rather have preferred to be a spectator of the stimulating intellectual movement of our age, than to exhibit myself to the world. "I seek neither money, nor renown,

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, Vol. VI, p. 163.

¹⁸ *Tischreden*, Weimar ed., I, Nr. 406.

¹⁹ *Briefwechsel*, I, p. 199 (May 30, 1518.)

nor glory. I possess only my poor body, which is bowed down with weakness and every kind of affliction. If I, whilst engaged in the service of God, had to sacrifice it to the cunning or power of my enemies, they would but shorten my life by one or two hours." There was no conquering such self-conceit. The appearance of goodness is a powerful motive. Luther during the entire progress of his tragic monastic development was deceived to a certain degree by the semblance of goodness.²⁰

The result of his conflicts, as above described, though potentially dangerous to Christianity, is attributable not so much to an evil will or to any conscious intent to destroy, but rather to his abnormal character, to mystical "will-o'-the wisps," and to the prevalence of unusual abuses. It was not internal "corruption" that showed him the way; we have no proofs for such an assumption; but he was goaded by a combination of less culpable factors. In the background there always threatened the terrors of a just God and eternal predestination. The moral phenomena attending his first public appearance, the defects of his character, and his prejudice against good works, would seem to decide the question of responsibility against him. He incurred a clear and terrible responsibility when he was confronted by the adverse decision of the Church and her threat of excommunication. That he refused to submit to the divinely appointed authority was the great fault which entailed his ruin.

²⁰ Characteristic parallel traits are observable at the beginning of the last century in the religious Separatists in Bavaria, who also arrived at the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone, etc. Cf. the articles on "Boos" and "Gossner" in the *Kirchenlexikon*.

CHAPTER V

FROM THE INDULGENCE THESES TO THE DISPUTATION AT LEIPSIC (1517-1519)

I. THE CONTROVERSY ON INDULGENCES

In consequence of recent researches on the development of Luther, far less significance is to be attached to the celebrated controversy on indulgences which followed the theses of 1517, than tradition has ascribed to it. The ninety-five theses nailed to the door of the Wittenberg castle-church do not mark the commencement of the Protestant Reformation. As we have heard Luther himself intimate, the *initium evangelii* is to be sought in the new theology of Wittenberg and in the public movement which it created. The controversy concerning indulgences simply caused the movement to assume universal proportions. It placed the monk Luther upon the stage of the world and offered him an opportunity of gradually unveiling his revolutionary doctrine before all his contemporaries.

There was no room for indulgences in a system of grace and justification which attacked the meritoriousness of good works and the value of atonement.

Even before these ideas had fully matured (July 27, 1516), Luther delivered a sermon in which he expressed himself correctly on the Catholic doctrine of indulgences. Succeeding ages could have been benefited by his instructions. He correctly emphasized that an indulgence is not a remission of the guilt of sin, but "a remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, which the penitent would have to suffer, be it that it was imposed by the priest, be it that he had to suffer for it in purgatory." "In the gaining of a [plenary] indulgence, therefore," he says in conformity with the belief of the age in which he lived, "one may not then and there feel sure of salvation." "Only those gain a plenary remission of punishment who have become reconciled to God by true contrition and confession." At that time Luther still knew and appreciated the value of indul-