A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 8 • Number 1 • WINTER 1999

Martin Luther: The Man and His Mind

Robert Kolb

His lectures on the Psalms were engaging the mind of a young professor at the new University of Wittenberg in 1519. He had begun a new stage in his career as a professor of the Bible by lecturing on the Psalter six years earlier. Thereafter, in 1515, he had turned to the Epistle to the Romans. "I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans." His ardor, however, stood under a shadow because

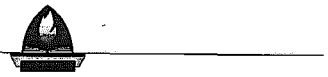
> a single word in chapter one, "in it the righteousness of God is revealed," had stood in my way. For I hated the words "righteousness of God," which—according to the use and custom of all the teachers—I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.[1]

Such fears about being justly stricken by God for his sins continued to haunt Martin Luther as he instructed his students on the letters to the Galatians and the Hebrews before returning to the Psalms in 1519.

A quarter century later, in an autobiographical glimpse back at the early development of his theology, Luther acknowledged that during his second set of lectures on the Psalms his meditation brought him to understand the meaning of Paul's citation of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans

1:17: "The righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith." With a joy that had not diminished over twenty-six years Luther wrote in 1545, "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and did enter paradise itself through open gates. There a totally different face of the entire Scriptures showed itself to me."[2] Although scholars have debated the nature and the timing of Luther's "evangelical breakthrough to the gospel," Luther himself saw the content of that breakthrough in his distinction between two kinds of righteousness in God and two kinds of righteousness in the human creature.

But Luther discovered that God is really God when He shows His steadfast mercy to His people. His divine righteousness—being God in the true and right way—consists in this demonstration of His immutable love and compassion.



As Luther explained in the preface to his Latin writings of 1545, it dawned on him as he reflected upon Romans 1:17 that the righteousness revealed by the proclamation of the gospel to faith of the believer is not the righteousness by which God preserves the order of His law and therefore visits His wrath upon sinners. Luther knew from his own experience that a completely honest confrontation with the

law of God accuses and crushes the most pious heart. For Luther had sought to win God's favor and to make his own life right by walking in the law of the Lord. He had sought grace from God in order to perfect his own works. In this experience he found himself diving only more deeply into the emptiness of his own soul. His efforts to please God were not efforts to praise God but efforts to secure his own place in God's sight. If God were really God only when He dealt according to the law justly with His people, then God would always and only be right when He punished and destroyed sinners who had earned the wages of sin.

But Luther discovered that God is really God when He shows His steadfast mercy to His people. His divine righteousness—being God in the true and right way—consists in this demonstration of His immutable love and compassion. As Luther's mind had run through Scripture in 1519, he recalled in 1546, he found that what makes God truly God is that divine power and wisdom which saves His people and restored them to their original righteousness. God's unconditioned giving of the forgiveness of sins and thus new life in and through Christ Luther defined as "gospel" —posed against the divine word of "law" which condemns every violation of God's good plan for human living. Luther made these categories of law and gospel his primary framework for all biblical interpretation and preaching.

At the same time Luther came to understand that which makes human beings truly human is not their works, performed according to God's law. The Psalmists and Paul, as well as other biblical writers, gave him the insight that to be human means first of all to be God's creature, to be restored to life under God's rule as God's own child. Luther had believed that the activities or performance of the human creature constituted a secondary human righteousness, the right way of being human among other creatures. Their righteous—human—activities flowed from their

being children of God, which constituted their primary righteousness. His reading of Scripture brought Luther to recognize that Adam and Eve were God's beloved children before they had done a single work. He came to believe Paul when the apostle said that sinners must become new creatures, fashioned by the Word of God, without any precondition in their own performance.

In 1535 Luther described "our theology" as this distinction between the two kinds of human righteousness.

> This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits.

Luther explained what he meant with an analogy:

> As the earth itself does not produce rain and is unable to acquire it by its own strength, worship, and power but receives it only by a heavenly gift from above, so this heavenly righteousness is given to us by God without our work and merit. As much as the dry earth of itself is able to accomplish in obtaining the right and blessed rain, so much can we accomplish by our own strength and works to obtain that divine, heavenly, and eternal righteousness.[3]

These convictions did not come easily to Martin Luther's mind. Born November 10, 1483, Luther was raised by pious, strict, upwardly mobile parents. His father left his peasant village to make his way in the smelting industry of the county of Mansfeld. He married Margaret Lindermann, whose family had enjoyed success in merchandising in the small town of Eisenach. Pursuing a career in the metal refining industry, Hans Luther rose to prominence in the village

of Mansfeld, to which he had brought his family when young Martin was in infancy. The father wanted his son to continue the path up the social ladder he had begun, and he sent his little boy to school in Mansfeld, and then to Magdeburg and finally to the secondary school in Eisenach, near maternal relatives. From there Martin pursued the path of learning on the medieval academic highway. He made his way to the nearby University of Erfurt, where, according to his father's wishes, he pursued a career in law.

However, as an intensely pious young man in a highly religious society, Luther took his own sins and shortcomings very seriously. He lived in a fragile world, and whether that world was blown apart literally by a lightning bolt (as is often reported) or only figuratively by the spiritual pressure of his own foibles and failures, he abandoned his study of the law and entered the monastery of the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt in 1505.

Luther had no ambition to become more than a simple monk who, in accord with the beliefs of the time, would be able to merit God's favor through a strenuous life of pious activity. His superiors, however, spotted in Luther the talents required to serve God in the church as a theologian. They drove him into a course of study that eventually led him to the highest of theological degrees, Doctor of Bible, in 1512. On the way to that goal Luther did not find peace. He put his full spiritual weight on his monastic discipline and exercises. They could not bear the weight of his guilt and remorse. He sought in scholastic theology to set aside the burdens which God's law had placed upon him through his own good deeds. The theology of the day could also not release him from those burdens.

His intellectual grandfather, Gabriel Biel (d. 1495), professor in Tübingen, author of at least one of Luther's textbooks and instructor of several of his own instructors, had taught that the sinner must perform works sufficiently

good to merit God's grace "out of his own natural powers." With that gift of grace that was rewarded to works which in themselves were not truly worthy, the sinner could then produce works which were indeed pleasing to God and would thus earn salvation. "Doing what is in you" or "doing your best" seemed possible to most of Luther's contemporaries. However, Luther was too honest in his confrontation with the demands of God's law to believe that he could do even the "unworthy works" which Biel taught God wanted as a condition for granting grace through the sacraments. Therefore, the harder he tried to win God's love by performing good works, the deeper into despair Luther fell.

The medieval system had encountered Luther's type before, and there were even books telling how monks should battle this kind of scrupulosity. One of his monastic fathers counseled him to look to the blood of Christ. The head of his order for Germany, his good friend in the Augustinian brotherhood, Johann von Staupitz, assured him that God had chosen him unconditionally and washed his sins away in Christ's blood. But it took a long time for this message to sink in.

While struggling with despair, Luther did go about the life that was set before him by his monastic superiors. After completing his doctoral studies, he assumed the responsibility of lecturing on the Bible in the place of von Staupitz at the new university of the ruler of Saxony, Elector Frederick the Wise, in Wittenberg. His lectures on Psalms, Romans, Galatians, Hebrews (1513-18) and then Psalms once again (1519) formed the background against which he struggled with his own depression over his alienation from God. With great energy he threw himself into the study of the texts, and he began using the aids to the biblical study which were being prepared by the "Biblical humanists" of his day. (Biblical humanism is the name given to a scholarly movement which called for a return to

ancient sources and a study of the ancient sources through strict grammatical and historical study.)

In preparation for lecturing on the Psalms, Luther turned to works by the pioneer of Hebrew studies north of the Alps, Johannes Reuchlin, whose helps for interpreting the Old Testament had recently become available. He also utilized the Psalms commentary of a French biblical humanist, Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples. Their insights into the meaning of the text strengthened certain elements of the nominalist presuppositions which lay at the base of the scholastic theology he had learned in Erfurt. Nominalism's emphasis on God's sovereignty and upon the authority of His Word helped guide Luther ever deeper into the biblical text.

As a rising young academic theologian, who was also assuming more administrative tasks in the Augustinian Order in Germany, Luther was driven out of the study and into the concerns of the daily life of the church. In the course of functioning as a professor, he began to treat doctrinal topics such as sin and grace and also problems of theological methodology in theses prepared for public disputation (the common method of examination of theological students in the late Middle Ages).

He had already called for a return to Augustinian concepts of sin and grace and for a rejection of the domination of Aristotelian method in the practice of theology when in October 1517 he issued a set of theses for general disputation on the subject of indulgences, the practice of obtaining merits of the saints as credit against obligations in purgatory. The theological content of these *Ninety-five Theses* was not particularly significant (although the first thesis, "When our Lord and master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance"[4] remained a continuing fundamental theme of his theology). Luther was in fact under no obligation to reveal his theological convictions in theses prepared to provoke acad-

emic debate. The genre compelled him only to be controversial so that discussion over his theses could serve as a vehicle for seeking the truth. By calling for debate on issues surrounding the crisis of pastoral care provoked by the reckless sale of indulgences, however, Luther did reveal a central conviction of his manner of serving the world as a theologian, his desire to comfort and absolve despairing sinners like himself. This pastoral concern typified his entire theology.

In spite of the fact that they are not of great theological significance, these *Ninety-five Theses* became a cultural event of utmost importance, for they were the first modern media event. Local printers recognized their provocative nature, which touched raw nerves in the late medieval spiritual concerns of lay people and clergy alike, and so these enterprising publishers distributed them widely in their original Latin form and in German translation. Almost immediately Luther became a public figure. He was challenging one of the most important practices in the piety of the late Middle Ages. That evoked, of course, a reply from the ecclesiastical establishment.

Immediate reaction came from the papal court in Rome. Pope Leo X commanded the Augustinian Order to investigate Luther and discipline him as it found appropriate. Luther's friend, the Order's German Vicar General, von Staupitz, summoned his successor at the Wittenberg faculty to Heidelberg in April 1518 to explain his views to his fellow Augustinian monks. There, in a series of academic theses, Luther set forth his *theology of the cross*. The first theses read:

> (1) The Law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance human creatures on their way to righteousness but rather hinders them. (2) Much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end. (3) Although human works seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins. (4) Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless eternal merits.

Luther went on to write: "(20) He deserves to be called a theologian, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. . . . (28) The love of God does not find but creates that which is pleasing to it. Human love comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."[5] In these theses and the debate which followed Luther laid out what came to be called his *theology of the cross*. It can be summarized in four basic points.

Luther insisted we look only to the "revealed God," who has presented Himself in human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, and who speaks to us from the words of the Bible. In His incarnation and in the inspired Scripture, Luther believed, fallen human creatures find all they need to know about their God, who wants to save them.

First, Luther's theology of the cross treated God Himself. Luther rejected speculation about "the hidden God,"

who lies beyond human grasp. When we speculate about this hidden God, we create a god in our own image rather than acknowledging God as He really is. Luther insisted we look only to the "revealed God," who has presented Himself in human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, and who speaks to us from the words of the Bible. In His incarnation and in the inspired Scripture, Luther believed, fallen human creatures find all they need to know about their God, who wants to save them.

That means, second, that we must crucify all attempts to understand God apart from that revelation. For Luther the theology of the cross is a theology which relies on trusting the Word of the Lord alone and rejects every kind of rational or empirical proof as insufficient. For rational and empirical proofs are those which are developed under human domination (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16), and Luther wanted only to listen to that Word which comes from above, from outside human experience. Therefore, he rejected all mystical attempts to search for God "inside us." He believed that the Word of God is the power of salvation (Rom. 1:17); his nominalist philosophy enabled him to understand that God can be present in, with, and under human words as well as human flesh, in sacramental elements, and in the voice of the people of God, so long as they stand under the discipline of the biblical text. Therefore, he relied on what he called "the means of grace," the Word in all its oral, written, and sacramental forms. Just as God had revealed Himself in "crib and cross," so He speaks to us with the power to change our lives in His Word as He joins it to water in baptism (John 3:3-8; Titus 3:7), in that Word as it comes with Christ's body and blood in bread and wine, as it comes in the pronouncement of absolution and the proclamation of the sermon which delivers the benefits of Christ.

Third, Luther understood the benefits of Christ through the cross, which has taken the sins of all sinners into the

body of Jesus, and buried them in His tomb. For Luther, the cross was the place where the Lamb of God became substitute for sinners and died their death. Luther could not, however, separate his view of the cross from the resurrection of the dead which took place for our justification (Rom. 4:25). The Reformer often spoke of the "joyous exchange," by which God has buried our sins in Christ's tomb and raised us up to new life in Christ, an exchange of human sinfulness for the righteousness of the crucified and risen Savior.

This act of restoring sinners to righteousness, which takes place in human lives through the power of the Word in its various forms (the means of grace) places sinners now before God as His children, restored to righteousness and innocence in His sight. Trusting that His word has indeed rendered them righteous, believers, according to Luther, act on the reality on their being pronounced righteous. They live out their lives as children of God, in conformity to His plan for human life. In a sinful world, Luther was convinced, that means bearing the cross of others. Luther saw that Christians bear crosses, not in special and spectacular works of religious devotion, but in the self-sacrifices necessary in living out the daily life of love for one another in the various situations or settings to which God has called His people.

Luther's challenge to the theological system of the academic establishment compelled its defenders to enter the lists against him. One of the brightest and best of his contemporary theologians, Johann Eck of the University of Ingolstadt, challenged the Wittenberg faculty to debate. Led by Luther's senior colleague Andreas Bodenstein of Karlstadt, Wittenberg theologians set out for Leipzig in June 1519. There the cousin of Luther's prince, Duke George of Saxony, had offered to host a public academic confrontation between Eck and his Wittenberg opponents. In that debate Luther quickly took over the podium from

Karlstadt, and it became clear that the younger Wittenberg professor was not content to let the authority of popes and councils stand as a primary or ultimate authority in the church. He placed even the church fathers in a secondary position, under the absolute authority of Holy Scripture.

Such public utterances regarding papal authority only heightened the opposition to him in the higher circles of the ecclesiastical establishment. Pressure from Rome was brought to bear upon his prince, Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, to deliver him over to papal forces for trial and burning. German national feeling and Frederick's own integrity militated against that kind of solution, and in the course of 1519 and 1520 public games over Luther's fate dominated much of the public life of the German empire.

Luther went about his business as a university instructor under the storm of controversy. He continued to present his ideas to the public through the new medium of the printing press. In 1520 and 1521 he set forth a program for reform in five great tracts. In *The Freedom of the Christian* he set forth his doctrine of the justification of the sinner in God's sight around two short theses, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."[6] These two statements are not quite a paradox, for they refer to different aspects or dimensions of the believer's life. God's action of bringing sinners to righteousness in His sight through His Word of forgiveness frees believers from every kind of oppression—from the condemnation of the law, from sin and guilt, from death and the Devil. Freed from the domination of every evil by God's love and power, the Christian is bound to live a truly human life. For Luther, that meant being free to serve the neighbor according to God's plan for human life with joy in the midst of the peace God alone gives.

Luther attacked a reliance on a magical view of the sacraments and reasserted his understanding of the living,

powerful nature of the Word of God in another work of 1520, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church.*[7] In this work Luther redefined the term "sacrament" as a form of God's Word which works with external elements at Christ's command to deliver the promise of the forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ. The Reformer limited his list of sacraments to baptism and the Lord's Supper, at first defining absolution as another such form of the Word which could be called a sacrament, then restating his definition in such a way that absolution repeats the baptismal word which kills and makes alive (Rom. 6:3-11).

In his *Open Letter to the German Nobility* Luther called on governmental officials in the countryside and in municipalities to set aside abuses in the church and to restore the free practice of a life centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ.[8] Because of attacks that accused him of promoting licentiousness and libertinism with his teaching of salvation through faith alone, Luther wrote a treatise, *On Good Works.* In it he set forth his understanding of how faith in God's promises makes believers His children and then produces in them the practice of love toward the neighbor in daily life in us.[9] Finally, in 1521, Luther completed his sketch of his program for reform by emphasizing the life lived on the basis of God's re-creation of sinners through baptism in an attack, *On Monastic Vows.*[10]

Luther's prince, Elector Frederick, held his office within the constitutional structure of the "Holy Roman Empire," which was led by the young duke of Austria, Charles V, since 1519. Charles was the most powerful man in Europe since Charlemagne because he had inherited the Spanish domains of his mother as well as the Netherlands and south German territories from his father. Charles had been influenced by the reform ideas generated in the circle around Erasmus of Rotterdam and sincerely sought institutional and moral reform of the church. However, he saw

Luther's challenge to papal authority as a challenge to his own authority and believed that Luther's understanding of salvation by grace through faith in Christ threatened the moral order. Therefore, he summoned Luther to the imperial legislature, the Diet, when it met in the city of Worms in 1521. Although Luther may not have said, "Here I stand," there (the first reports of his using these words were recorded a generation later), he did indeed stand modestly but firmly before the emperor, insisting that he had to remain bound in his exposition of God's Word to the Word itself and to his conscience as it was governed by the Word.

He did not convince his emperor of the rightness of his cause, and while he was en route home, after the formal close of the Diet, Charles summoned a rump session of his faithful followers among the princes of his empire. They declared Luther an outlaw. Elector Frederick "kidnapped" his now famous professor before he arrived in Wittenberg and hid him from imperial police at his own castle at the Wartburg. There Luther began a program of publishing which would carry the teaching of his five great tracts mentioned above to pastors and people.

At the Wartburg in 1521-22 the Reformer produced a book of sermons on the texts for the first half of the church year. These model sermons—the genre is called the *postil*—were undoubtedly read aloud from the pulpit on occasion by pastors who got behind in sermon preparation, but even more they instructed their clerical readers in the new evangelical way of treating biblical texts for the edification of their congregations. Throughout the 1520s Luther continued to bring his message into other literary genres in order to spread his message and build a new form of church life, shaped by his understanding of the gospel. He began writing hymns for congregational singing, and in 1523 he issued a reformed text for Sunday morning worship. In 1526 he composed a liturgy in German, on the basis of German

hymns. He helped his colleague and friend, Philipp Melanchthon, prepare a kind of handbook for pastoral care and congregational life in articles for governing the visitation of Saxon congregations launched in 1527.

The crowning point of his efforts to change the lives of Christian people and congregations through print came in 1529 when he revised sermons on the texts of the medieval catechetical program of instruction into his own handbook or *Catechism*. In fact, he prepared three forms of the catechism: a wall chart summary, a *Small Catechism* for memorization by the young, and a *Large Catechism* which served as something of a teacher's guide for pastors and heads of households. Luther's catechisms centered instruction of the core of the medieval catechism, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, supplemented with Bible passages on baptism, absolution, and the Lord's Supper. Because he conceived of this text for instruction as a handbook for Christian living, not merely a handbook for Christian teaching, he added plans for daily devotional life, for meditation and prayer in the morning, at mealtime, and in the evening. He also provided Bible passages which treated the responsibilities or callings of daily life in family, economic service, political and ecclesiastical life.

Luther accomplished all this while carrying on normal professorial duties, which he resumed when he returned to Wittenberg from the Wartburg in 1522. At the same time he was engaged in the defense of his theology and reform against foes of various kinds. One of the most critical of those battles was in defense of his understanding of God's Word and how it worked against his own senior colleague, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, and later Ulrich Zwingli, reformer in Zurich, and others. Karlstadt was quickly filled with enthusiasm for the idea of reform by his younger associate's early call for a return to the biblical roots of the faith. But he placed this enthusiasm in an old

medieval model, which had viewed reform as not only Bible-based but also moralistic, anticlerical, antisacramental, and millennialistic. He failed to comprehend the Johannine and Pauline basis of Luther's theology. Their differences came to a head over Karlstadt's failure to understand Luther's view of the sacramental action of God in the Lord's Supper. The elder Wittenberger, with his training in medieval Realism, was particularly confused by Luther's belief that God is able to make the very body and blood of Christ present in the elements of bread and wine and to use word and elements to convey the forgiveness of sins.

Luther was certain that God had been able to design a world in which he could and did place Christ's body and blood in bread and wine, using these elements as means to convey the forgiving and recreating word of the gospel. At the root of this conviction lay his belief that God's Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms does not merely impart information or point to the heavenly reality of God's love.

On the basis of his reading Scripture and his training in nominalist categories based on the Old Testament understanding of God's way of working through the Word in the

created order, Luther was certain that God had been able to design a world in which he could and did place Christ's body and blood in bread and wine, using these elements as means to convey the forgiving and recreating word of the gospel. At the root of this conviction lay his belief that God's Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms does not merely impart information or point to the heavenly reality of God's love. He was convinced that God actually effects forgiveness and new life in those who received the Word, from reading the authoritative, inspired Scripture, from hearing the Word preached or told in conversation, from absolution, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Therefore, he found those who opposed his understanding of the word in sacramental form demonically deceitful. He reacted against Karlstadt, Zwingli, and others in a series of treatises in the 1520s[11] and continued to defend his position until his death.[12]

In an attempt to reconcile the differing Protestant parties, Landgrave Philip of Hesse brought Luther and some of his followers together with Zwingli and his Swiss comrades in a colloquy at Marburg in 1529.[13] The two sides could agree on most issues, but on the definition of Christ's presence in the sacrament they could not come to a meeting of minds. Zwingli steadfastly asserted that Christ's body remained in one fixed place, at the Father's right hand in heaven, since the Ascension; Luther insisted that by God's will and power it could be present in different forms, also in sacramental form in the Lord's Supper.

Another serious challenge to Luther's evangelical insights came in the form of an attack on his doctrine of the bondage of the will by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, in 1524. The most prominent of the biblical humanists in his time, Erasmus had influenced and aided the work of the Wittenberg professor, providing the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament as well as other lin-

guistic and theological helps. In the late 1510s Erasmus had welcomed Luther's call for reform as a kindred voice and had actually adapted some of Luther's interpretations of biblical texts for use in his own work, the *Paraphrases*. However, the Dutch Humanist also grew increasingly uncomfortable with the specifics of Luther's interpretation of Scripture and with his polemical replies to his equally polemical opponents within the Roman party. That party pressed Erasmus, as the leading intellectual of his day, to decide between them and Luther. In 1524 the Humanist finally made a public break with the Wittenberg Reformer. He chose as the reason for that break Luther's view of the bondage of the human will, as he had enunciated it already in replies to papal criticism as early as 1521.

Erasmus expressed his concern for the general moral order and for individual human responsibility in his treatise *On Freedom of Choice* (*De libero arbitrio*). Luther replied to this attack in 1525, in a treatise labeled *On the Bondage of Choice* (*De servo arbitrio*).[14] His view of the fallen human creature arose out of his own experience and out of his reading of the biblical text. His strong doctrine of creation drove him to understand God as the one who without condition shaped human life and reshaped it as he called sinners out of the death of sin. Luther had tried to exercise his will and turn his life to God, but his own honesty prevented him from ignoring the remnants of sin in the best of his actions. He believed that Erasmus' position could only make the burden of God's demands for human obedience more weighty, finally crushing the tender conscience as Luther's had been crushed. Luther also believed that Erasmus' position on free choice detracted from the honor and glory of God as well as from His gift of grace in and through Jesus Christ.

The two men were operating from fundamentally different paradigms. Erasmus viewed the human creature first of all as a being capable of adult interaction with God and

paired God and human creature in a relationship of mutual obligations toward the other. Luther viewed the fallen human creature first of all as a creature; he used the analogy of a beast of burden to describe the situation of the sinner, ridden either by God or by Satan, with no neutral ground in between the claims of these two masters. Luther viewed the believer as a new creation, created anew by God's good news in Jesus Christ through a word as powerful as the creative word of Genesis 1. No more than Adam and Eve had contributed to their own becoming human could fallen human creatures contribute to becoming a child of God through forgiveness of sins once again. Luther believed that new life in Christ was purely and only a gift of God, without the least human contribution.

Luther expected that believers would live as God's forgiven children, His new creatures, and that they would display their new nature in the righteousness of love performed in behalf of other creatures. Two events of 1525 help illustrate Luther's understanding of the Christian's practice of love and their role in society. The first of these events was the rebellion of peasants which began in 1524, exploded during 1525 in several areas of Germany, and died away in 1526. Luther had sharply criticized the tyranny of princes and their abuse of their subjects. He insisted that God had placed governing officials in their offices in order to punish evildoers and to promote the good (Rom. 13:1-7). But he also feared social chaos, and so he condemned the peasant revolt in sharpest terms, limiting his actions against the princes to the pronouncement of God's judgment upon their tyranny. By the late 1530s he came to justify armed opposition by lower magistrates to the emperor if the emperor abandoned the proper exercise of his office and persecuted the gospel. In1525 it was impossible for him to imagine that a rebellion could improve the situation of society; he believed deeply in the necessity of

law and order. Therefore, he urged peasants to be obedient to their lords and to fight against them with prayer and appeals for justice.

Peasant groups ignored his admonition and pressed their rebellion against their noble overlords. In spite of some initial success, the peasants were defeated and occasionally slaughtered on the field of battle. Luther remained faithful to his principle, expressing his conviction even after their defeat that all suffer when disorder breaks out in society. His opposition to the revolt was intensified by his belief that the end of the world was near and that the revolt was no more than a trick of Satan to distract from the preaching of the gospel and to discredit the Reformation. His criticism was based on his understanding of how God had ordered human society by bestowing responsibilities on each person—in the civil realm the responsibilities of ruler or subject.

The second event of 1525 which highlights his view of the social order is his marriage. His wife, Katherine von Bora, had read his works in the cloister where she lived. She fled the cloister and abandoned her life as a nun in 1523. The two were married in June 1525. Together Katherine and Martin made a home for themselves and their six children as well as for a large group of relatives and students. They provided a model for loving companionship and spiritual care of each other for the Wittenberg students and for generations thereafter. Luther's marrying reflected his belief in the goodness of God's created order and made concrete advice he had been giving other celibate clergy for several years. The two aided each other in deepening their understanding of Scripture. Luther was a devoted father and the deaths of two daughters, at ages nine months and fourteen years, deeply saddened him.

Both his stance in the Peasants Revolt and his marriage reveal his fundamental convictions regarding the nature of

human life in its horizontal dimension. The Reformer overturned the medieval church's understanding of the relationship between what modern anthropologists call the realm of the sacred and the realm of the profane. Like most cultures, that of Catholic medieval Europe believed that sacred or religious activities are more godly than those of the profane realm (the tasks of everyday life). The medieval church taught that sacred activities were able to merit God's favor in a way that the activities of daily human life could not. Luther overthrew this correlation between sacred activities and what is truly godly, between everyday activities and an inferior spiritual way of life. He believed that too often the sacred activities of the medieval church were based on human commands, not God's command. He sensed that these sacred activities were being performed less to please God than to please the person doing them by earning God's favor. He noticed that the sacred activities of the church often distracted people from the service to the neighbor which God had ordained by engaging them in ritual practices designed to appease God and thus save the person doing them. Luther believed that human activities are good when they are performed by those who trust God and find their identity in being His children through Christ.

The Wittenberg Reformer adopted the medieval analysis of society which divided human life into three *estates* or situations: those of the household (including both family and economic activities), the civil community, and the congregation of God's people. In each of these estates he taught that people had *offices*—responsibilities which they were given by God to carry out in behalf of their neighbors. Luther believed that all human creatures have received such responsibilities from God, but Christians recognize these responsibilities as not mere duties but rather *callings* or *vocations* entrusted to them by their Lord for the care and welfare of His world.

Luther continued to exercise his own callings, as husband and father, as instructor of his students, as leader of reform in the church, until his death on February 18, 1546. He worked together with Wittenberg colleagues, particularly Philipp Melanchthon, and other leaders in church and society from various parts of Germany and beyond. Among the most important of his series of biblical lectures were given in the last fifteen years of his life, a second time on Galatians (1531) and on Genesis (1535-45). These lectures combined scholarly analysis of the text with theological observations, often of a homiletical nature, which helped students make God's Word concrete for the lives of parishioners. The commentaries printed on the basis of these two series of lectures remained among Luther's most popular and influential works during the following century.

At the same time he and his circle in Wittenberg were engaged in many ways in the spread of his message and its institutionalization in the life of the church. Melanchthon's summary of the Wittenberg program of teaching and reform, formulated for Emperor Charles at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530—the *Augsburg Confession*—particularly delighted Luther. He himself composed an agenda for evangelical theologians to take to the papally-called council which provided his followers with a similar synopsis of their faith and their plans for the reform of church life. These *Smalcald Articles*, composed around New Year 1537, served also as a kind of doctrinal last will and testament for the Reformer, plagued by illness as he was.

He lived, in fact, until February 18, 1546. While in his birthplace, Eisleben, on a mission to restore peace between brothers, the counts of Mansfeld, he fell ill. In the presence of his son, a former colleague, Justus Jonas, and the local pastor, Michael Coelius, he confessed his faith with the words of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him

shall not perish but have eternal life," and of Psalm 68:20, "We have a God who saves, a Lord, who rescues us from death." After repeating Psalm 31:5, "Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth," he died, confident in the gift of righteousness he had received through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Author

Robert Kolb is Professor of Systematic Theology and director of the Institute for Mission Studies at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, Missouri. He has authored eight books, some of which are *Confessing the Faith, Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580, For All the Saints,* and *Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation.*

Notes

1. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis, Missouri, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Concordia and Fortress, 1958-1986) [hereafter LW] 34:336.
2. LW 34:337.
3. LW 26:7-8.
4. LW 31:25.
5. LW 31:39-41.
6. LW 31:344; see 327-377 for the entire tract.
7. LW 36:3-126.
8. LW 44:115-217.
9. LW 44:15-114.
10. LW 44:243-400.
11. E.g., his "That These Words of Christ, 'This Is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics" of 1527, LW 37:3-150, and his "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" of 1528, LW 37:151-372.
12. See his "Brief Confession Concerning the Holy Sacrament" of 1544, LW 38:279-319.
13. Reports on the Colloquy are found in LW 38:3-89.
14. LW 33:3-295.