

4-1-1982

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Recommended Citation

Grislis, Egil (1982) "The experience of the *Anfechtungen* and the formulation of pure doctrine in martin Luther's commentary on Genesis," *Consensus*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol8/iss2/3>

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THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ANFECHTUNGEN AND THE FORMULATION OF PURE DOCTRINE IN MARTIN LUTHER'S COMMENTARY ON GENESIS

Egil Grislis

The theology of Martin Luther is complex — as complex as its author and as Christian existence itself. While revelation has disclosed to the believers the ultimate intent of God's saving will in Jesus Christ, it has not exempted them from the appropriation of their own salvation in the context of what Luther often designated as the *Anfechtungen*¹ — those inner struggles and deep groanings of faith in the midst of life.

Luther continued to reflect on the essence and the manifestations of the *Anfechtungen* through his adult life. But we shall here restrict ourselves to Luther's Lectures on Genesis (WA 42-44), which comprise the first eight volumes of the American edition of *Luther's Works* and were delivered between June 1, 1535 and November 17, 1545 (LW 8:IX). While the manuscript was edited by others (of which it occasionally shows definite traces), the work as a whole is unmistakably Luther's (cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, 4:XI)² It is vintage Luther, providing us with Luther's reflections on a major text during the last decade of his life.

It should not be overlooked that Luther had the highest regard for the Book of Genesis. He wrote, "There is nothing more beautiful in Holy Scripture than Genesis as a whole" (6:313). Only those with "pigs' eyes," according to Luther, "blindly pass over the greatest virtues" of Genesis (3:210). In this book are recorded, panoramically

1. Helmut Appel, *Anfechtungen und Trost im Spätmittelalter und bei Luther* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius, 1938); Paul Buhler, *Die Anfechtung bei Martin Luther* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1947); Horst Beintker, *Die Überwindung der Anfechtung bei Luther* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1954).

2. Cf. Peter Meinhold, *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Geistesgeschichte*, 8 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936); Erich Seeberg, *Studien zu Luthers Genesisvorlesung* (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1932).

and profoundly over many generations, God's saving ways with His people. The mature Luther — old he never became! — meditated on this record, and searched therein for the certainties as well as the ambiguities laid out before the eyes of faith. This is an attempt to follow him in this venture.

I.

First of all, we need to note that Luther was deeply concerned with the true import of the *Anfechtungen*; his intent was not merely to describe the vicissitudes of life and to measure the resulting human anguish. He did, of course, observe the biblical record of the *Anfechtungen* in detail and compared them to his own experiences, but in the last analysis what mattered most to Luther was not what people learned on their own through the hardships and the horrors of life but rather what God intended to teach them in this awesome manner! The central issue, for Luther, was ultimately soteriological.

In faith and with the benefit of historical hindsight Luther summed up the divine strategy of the *Anfechtungen* when he says, "God does both: He brings down to hell, and He brings back; He afflicts, and He makes glad" (4:4). Elsewhere Luther noted, "The life of the saints is nothing else but a descent into hell and an ascent, since indeed light and darkness and temptation and consolation succeed each other in turn" (6:256). But this was not merely Luther's reading of the past; it was also his own faith and therefore his courageous advice to fellow believers. "Therefore we must trust God . . . Nor should we despair when we are destitute of human wisdom and help. But we should conclude as follows: I BELIEVE IN THE ALMIGHTY GOD, who is able to reduce the finest plans to nothing and to change them into hell, and, in turn, to make heaven out of the most despised plans, because He is the omnipotent Creator. I cannot fall too deep for Him not to be able to lift me up. I cannot sit too high for Him not to be able to throw me down." (7:247).

The courage for such a faith Luther had gained from the realization that there exists a distant and yet noticeable analogy between the cruciform life of the believer and the cross of Calvary. "For Christ Himself entered into His glory only by first descending into hell. When He is about to reign, He is crucified. When He is to be glorified, He is spit on. For He must suffer first and then at length be glorified" (5:202; cf. 3:57, 6:271).

Of course, to Luther true believers clearly included the saints of the Old Testament as well as those of the New Testament. Since Luther thought that in their experience of the *Anfechtungen* we may obtain some valuable clues as to just what constitutes the *Anfechtungen*, it was in the saints of the Old Testament that Luther repeatedly searched for the human record of the encounters with the hidden God.³ While he did not doubt that Christ, as true man, also knew the depth of human despair, Luther nevertheless valued the concreteness of the witness that came from those who were only men. Hence, with reference to the Old Testament, Luther wrote, "When there is affliction, we see God from behind; that is, we conclude that God has turned away from

3. Hellmut Brandt, *Luthers Lehre vom verborgenen Gott* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1958), pp. 180-203; Fritz Blanke, *Der verborgene Gott bei Luther* (Berlin: Furche, 1928); John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953).

us, as he says in Isaiah (54:8): 'For a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you'; that is, 'At first I acted as though I did not know you, as though I had abandoned you.' This is the view from behind, when we feel nothing but affliction and doubts; but later, when the trial has passed, it becomes clear that by the very fact that God has showed Himself to us from behind He has showed us His face, that He did not forsake us but turned away His eyes just a little" (3:71,72). Again referring to the encounter with God's "back parts" — an expression which apparently appealed to Luther theologically as well as intrigued his sense of German humour — Luther more succinctly recorded, " 'You shall see my back' (Ex. 33:23), the Lord says to Moses when he asked that His face be shown to him; that is, 'You will see My thoughts after the deed has been done' " (8:30; cf. 6:151,152).

Clearly, Luther did not regard this as a comforting vision of God. Baffled, forsaken and utterly hopeless — such was the human situation while in the midst of the *Anfechtungen*. And such is not merely a relatively rare condition, but the universal experience among the saints. With great vividness Luther recorded the plight of Joseph when falsely accused by Potiphar's wife. "Potiphar does not listen to the words of the youth. No, he listens to what his wife says. Therefore, she is the winner. She inflames the heart of her husband with what seemed to be righteous anger and indignation. And where is God now? Where are those very great promises: that He loves, preserves, and guards His saints as the apple of His eye (Ps. 17:8); that He shows mercy a thousandfold to those who love Him (Ex. 20:6)? Joseph is now deserted and deprived of every protection and consolation. First he was torn from his parents and carried off into servitude to foreigners and idolators. What sort of love is that?" (7:96).

Apart from faith such love does not appear to be loving. Yet again and again, the saints experience what appears to be complete abandonment by the God of love. Jacob's experience was quite similar in its harrowing intensity. Luther observed, "As is stated in Rom. 11:33: 'Unsearchable are His judgments and inscrutable His ways,' not only in His works but also in His words and promises. For this reason nothing in the world seems more uncertain than the Word of God and faith, nothing more delusive than hope in the promise. In short, nothing seems to be more nothing than God Himself. Consequently, this is the knowledge of the saints and a mystery hidden from the wise and revealed to babes (Matt. 11:25)" (4:355,356). The paradox of faith is thus awesome. The greater the faith, the more complete the understanding of God; yet, precisely the greatest saints are haunted by the complete illusiveness of God! The only certainty at times that appears to the individual who is struggling, hoping, and yet almost totally despairing is the uncertainty of the loving presence of God! Luther, obviously deeply moved and filled with empathy, asked, "When God snatches Joseph from the embrace of his parents, his grandfather, father, and the whole household, and he is hurled into prison in a foreign land on the charge of adultery and remains there in constant expectation of death — will anyone interpret this as the good will of God?" (7:175).

Luther's painful point was that Joseph's experience was not an extraordinary and therefore unusual occurrence, but an intensified form of God's rather ordinary way of dealing with the believers. "When God works, He turns His face away at first and seems to be the devil, not God" (7:103, cf. 7:226). To be sure, when the *Anfechtungen* are over it is possible for the believer to interpret these frightening acts

of God in the perspective of divine love, as if God had said, "Killing is not the only thing I do. No, this would be devilish. But I am a God who kills and brings to life. I bring down to Sheol, but in a way that I bring back" (8:10). But while the *Anfechtungen* last, the "killing" is experienced and "hell"⁴ is all around; the agony of faith is not soothed by the insight that will emerge only later. In the meantime, some of life's cruel twists seem to be followed up only by even more cruel twists. Luther felt that the lives of all the saints were distinguished by precisely such experiences. He noted, "But this is how the greatest and saintliest of men are described, namely, that they were subject not only to the sweat of the face and daily thistles and thorns in their households but also to the very worst of bitter vexations at the hands of heathen and ungodly men" (6:191). Indeed, believed Luther, "Life is nothing else than misery itself" (5:191). Therefore, Luther counselled, we are never "to laugh in the midst of the dangers of others" since the very same or a similar calamity may all too soon descend upon us as well. Terence, the Latin poet, knew this when he proclaimed that "nothing human is foreign to me" (6:254).

Luther was aware that rather than being uniform, the shape of the *Anfechtungen* would be variegated. In addition to the experiences of direct misery when the saints would be confronted by apparently hostile circumstances, there would also be times and seasons when the *Anfechtungen* would arrive in the form of complete forlornness. Thus, "Noah had drifted on the waters for so long that God seemed to have completely forgotten him." This experience, too, could be dreadful and harrowing. "The rays of divine grace are withdrawn, and we find ourselves in darkness or in a state of being forgotten by God . . ." (2:103). Nevertheless, even here the truly faithful continue to believe that God will intervene. Grace will be granted and faith will ultimately be vindicated, either in this life or the life-to-come. Thus, it could very well happen that "the death by which the godly and the ungodly perish is the same; indeed, the death of the godly is almost always ignominious, while that of the ungodly is grand and magnificent" (2:154). And in life the saints can be forsaken not only "for a time" (3:8) but almost for a full lifetime, as was the case of Jacob. "His whole life, accordingly, has been beset by disasters, and this is what he means when he says: 'the days of my distress.' For a period of almost 30 years it was necessary to endure one evil after the other. Surely God does not seem to be merciful and kind here, does He?" (6:235). While Luther immediately hastened to assert that God is both merciful and kind, this was an insight of faith, won through the *Anfechtungen*. He did not intend to negate the anguish experienced while in the midst of the *Anfechtungen*. Rather, in the retrospect of both misery and mercy the assessment of God's general method of dealing with the believers became very clear. Luther called it "the game with its continual changes that . . . [God] plays with His saints" (2:369). Luther's own thorough discomfort with such a "game" may be readily sensed from his comment, "Reducing man to nothing, giving him up to death, and affecting him with disasters and troubles without number — this is not playing, is it? It is a game of a cat with a mouse, and this is the death of the mouse" (7:225).

Further doubts came to light within Luther's category of "reason," reflection on the

4. For the role of the devil, cf. Hans Martin Barth, *Der Teufel und Jesus Christus in der Theologie Martin Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967).

meaning of life which proceeds solely on the grounds of empirical evidence and does not rely on faith or the Scriptures. From the point of view of "reason," Luther noted, the presence of a benevolent God is not discernable. Rather, thought Luther, "reason" concluded that "God either plainly does not exist or does not concern Himself with human affairs" (1:123). Or, if God does exist, he is "capricious" (2:64), that is, unreliable and therefore unpredictable. While both faith and doubt co-exist in the believer or, more dynamically, faith struggles with "reason," in the secular world only the judgments of reason are accepted as valid. Therefore when Noah, in obedience to a revelatory command by God, started to build the ark, "the world regarded Noah as exceedingly stupid for believing such things" (2:71) on the grounds that God as Creator could not be expected to destroy his own creation (2:99). An even more striking case of reason's unpreparedness to accept revelatory insight may be obtained from the life of Abraham. Luther wrote, "What can be called more foolish, sillier, more senseless, and, I add, even more disgraceful and more disgusting than Abraham, who is almost a hundred years old, is at once circumcised on this very day with his entire household?" (3:170).

Of course, Luther rejected the vantage point of "reason." In his Commentary on Genesis the *Anfechtungen* brought about by "reason" no longer play a very prominent role. Yet, they are not totally ignored. On several occasions Luther counselled, "Therefore it is ruinous and destructive to think about the way" (3:171, cf. 4:37,38,44,45,46). He noted that the divine promises are "meaningless and empty words" to the counsel of "reason" (5:201) and that "the flesh is compelled to break forth into the words, 'God is a liar!'" (8:92). In the very attempt to formulate the real lesson which God was teaching through the *Anfechtungen*, there arose new *Anfechtungen*. Hence Luther acknowledged them as an authentic, albeit difficult, dimension of human existence. Without the darkness of despair, the light of faith would not emerge. Only in the struggle with unbelief, could faith be won and nurtured. The ultimately positive intent of the *Anfechtungen* could be grasped only as all the options had been wrestled with, and finally only faith was retained.

II.

But how is faith to win out in the midst of *Anfechtungen*? To this problem Luther paid a lot of attention. What Luther said of Jacob might very well have been said of every believer in the midst of the *Anfechtungen*. "He despairs. Yet he does not despair" (7:326).

What contributes to the not despairing, or to the overcoming of the despair? Here Luther ordinarily provided two sets of answers. First, Luther noted that there were numerous cases, where the *Anfechtungen* went into remission. "If there were perpetual struggles and perplexities when trials come, and no intervals of comfort, faith would be shaken" (2:325). Of course, what the believer really desires is not remission but rescue. "God places His own under the cross; and although He delays their deliverance, nevertheless in the end He gloriously snatches them out of their dangers and makes them victorious . . ." (2:369). Unfortunately, according to Luther, such a rescue was not necessarily permanent. Therefore he recorded the "general rule" that "God makes His saints sad again after they had been gladdened, lest they become proud and smug; that after they have been made alive, He leads them down to hell, in order that He may lead them back from there" (3:9). In other words,

summed up Luther, "these are the divine successions: Comfort follows affliction, hope follows despair, life follows death" (3:63, cf. 5:77, 6:256). Thus, in reference to this life Luther felt it was not possible to count on a permanent rescue from the *Anfechtungen*. Such a hope was to be left for the life-to-come.

Second, Luther also acknowledged in a long-range perspective the ultimate and complete victory of faith and observed as well how faith succeeded to persevere through the *Anfechtungen*. Luther stated, "He who can say in affliction: 'God sees me' has true faith and can do and bear everything; yes, he overcomes all things and is triumphant" (3:70). In other words, Luther saw that the reality of faith was often expressed by a courageous reliance on God. A good case-in-point is the occasion when Abraham "reminds God of His duty to spare the righteous and, because of the righteous, even the wicked" (3:235). This courageous trust or faith Luther regarded not as the autonomous achievement by the believer, but as the effect of his encounter with the Gospel. Luther testified from intimate personal experience, "If I myself had not been delivered by the comfort of Christ through the Gospel, I would not have lived two years" (5:156). Similarly, Luther observed that the believing Abraham "submits to the Word" (2:251), an act which in turn has been made possible through faith. "If he had been weak in his faith, he would have been overwhelmed by his impatience, would have abandoned the Word, and would have put an end to his roamings" (2:281, cf. 2:307). Likewise, Sarah "submits everything to God" (3:212), as does Joseph who says, "My father has taught me. No matter how long God wants to forsake me, I will hold out. My father has taught me to believe and to wait patiently for God's help, no matter how long He postpones or delays" (7:56, cf. 2:230 and 8:47).

Having pointed to courageous trust and faith in their sustaining role throughout the *Anfechtungen*, Luther also spent a considerable amount of time delineating what may very well be designated as the perspective of reason redeemed by grace in contrast to "reason," the embodiment of doubt and unbelief. With the assistance of reason-redeemed-by-grace,⁵ Luther thought that the believer should be able to recognize several distinctive benefits which arise on account of the *Anfechtungen*.

On the one hand, insofar as the *Anfechtungen* are recognized as the result of God's direct intervention in human affairs, they attest that it is God who determines the course of events in the world. In this way "God tests" (2:241) or, more precisely, puts "faith to a test by this very trial" (2:289, cf. 2:290, 319; 3:248; 5:12). Similarly, God "governs" (2:289) as He "places His own under the cross" (2:369). He "rules His saints in a wonderful manner" whereby He both gives and takes away their security (3:4). Thus, in all His dealings with mankind, God controls the actions which He has initiated (5:10). As well, he overcomes resistance as when, for example, "Abraham is forced simply to give up his opinion and to cast out his son" Ishmael (4:23; cf. 4:37,38,44,45,46). In this perspective God is seen to be in absolute control of human destiny; the echo of *The Bondage of the Will* is powerful and clear.

On the other hand, God's control of the *Anfechtungen* can also be expressed

5. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 70-71; Bernhard Lohse, *Ratio und Fides: Eine Untersuchung über die ratio in der Theologie Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), pp. 98-105.

indeterministically, as when God “permits” the various subordinate powers in the world, notably the devil, to bring the *Anfechtungen* to the believers (1:328; 3:333, 334; 5:26; 6:223; 8:29).

Yet, whether God is said to “order” or to “permit” the *Anfechtungen*, God’s omnipotence and goodness are more assumed than explained. Luther was quite aware that he also needed to explain why God preferred the way of the *Anfechtungen* to some other means. On one occasion Luther noted, “God kept His promise, but He did not keep it in the manner in which the world wanted it kept” (2:100). Even more striking was the story cited by Luther of “a peasant who, when he heard this consolation from his pastor, that the afflictions and troubles by which God afflicts us are signs of His love, replied: ‘Ah, how I would like Him to love others and not me!’ ” (6:152). Whether Luther had a particular conversation in mind or was attributing his own sentiments to an imagined peasant is not certain. In any case, Luther concluded, “Therefore in all temptations it affords great comfort to be able to conclude that God is present and favoring us. But the human heart finds it difficult to embrace this comfort when our Lord presses a person to His bosom in such a way that his soul wants to depart” (6:271).

That the cause of such a procedure was not mere cruelty but rather redemptive love, Luther thought to recognize from the vicarious suffering of Christ wherein “Christ was strongest when He was dead and weakest” (5:227). Yet, although His suffering was undoubtedly the greatest, Luther felt it often did not impress humankind as much as the *Anfechtungen* of the patriarchs. Christ was, after all, also the Son of God, while the patriarchs were merely human and therefore more like the rest of us (5:177; 6:271). In their acceptance and the overcoming of *Anfechtungen* Luther saw a standing lesson for everyone desirous to reach a similar recognition. “When you think that our Lord God has rejected a person, you should think that our Lord God has him in His arms and is pressing him to His heart. When we suppose that someone has been deserted and rejected by God, then we should conclude that he is in the embrace and the lap of God” (6:149).

That such pressing causes dire pain is not due to an oversight on the part of God, nor surely to cruelty, but to God’s attempt to heal human pride through suffering. Therefore “to keep this sin [of pride] from destroying the saints, God gives Paul an angel of Satan to harass him . . .” (3:5). Luther’s personal experience apparently has been similar. He noted, “God kept me free from this temptation [of pride], although not so free that I did not feel it. He kept me occupied to such an extent with responsibilities, worries, perils, and hardships that all ambition was readily shut out of my mind” (3:6, cf. 3:7). As a result, Luther was prepared to supply as a general rule, “God makes His saints sad again after they had been gladdened, lest they become proud and smug; that after they have been made alive, He leads them down to hell, in order that He may lead them back from there” (3:9, cf. 3:329). Or, even more concisely, God sends the *Anfechtungen* in order to “get rid of sin” (8:5). Luther elaborated, “For when there is peace and quiet, we do not pray. Nor do we meditate on the Word, but we treat the Scriptures and all things that belong to God coldly or finally slip into fatal smugness” (8:7) . . . “For when that game of God is lacking, we snore and are cold. Therefore with this goad, as it were, God pricks and

drives the stupid and lazy ass, our flesh, which oppresses us with its huge bulk" (8:15).

This means that the *Anfechtungen* are not to be regarded as occasions of God's wrath (2:321) but rather than as assignments of redemptive suffering. Luther appealed to the ways of educating one's children in his age as fitting illustrations. "Those who are good and faithful fathers chastise their sons severely" (6:150). He quoted a contemporary proverb, "The dearer the child, the sharper the rods" (7:231) and explained, "Thus a pupil whom his teacher spares will never make progress but will remain a stump and a log, for without the discipline or chastisement of the teacher he has no knowledge of his stupidity and his evil plight" (7:254). What Luther had in mind was clearly not some mild scolding but a rather severe handling. "Thus if a boy is beaten with switches because of his negligence in doing his lessons, he surely feels pain, cries out, and howls" (8:9). This is also how God disciplines the saints (cf. 8:74).

Of course, such examples, however vivid, cause problems today; they seem to implicate God in acts of sadism. In his defense, Luther was prepared to acknowledge the brutality of life with striking realism, but he also took note of the compassion and tenderness of God. These were likewise revealed in the *Anfechtungen*. Luther wrote, "For horrible darkness, ignorance, and aversion to God are innate in us. Then the Lord says: 'I pardon you freely, without any merits on your part . . . I shall make you an heir and child of the kingdom of God, that I may declare My love toward you in such a way that I first wash away your filth. First I must wipe and wash you. Thus a mother does not put her baby into a cradle without first washing and cleansing it. Nor does the baby's wailing and weeping prevent her from washing it'" (7:234). Similarly non-sadistic is Luther's analogy (borrowed from Tertullian) of the physician who "proceeds with purging, burning, and cutting, even though this is not done without pain" (7:238, cf. 7:256). And even where Luther's analogies are not completely and explicitly compassionate, their context is. For example, it was in the larger setting of Joseph's forgiving relationship to his brothers that Luther introduced the observation, "These coarse fellows are unrepentant. These pieces of flint, these diamonds, must be broken and crushed, and their eyes must be opened, in order that they may see the atrociousness of their crime" (7:236).

Moreover, Luther almost went out of his way to refer to divine compassion on such occasions where ordinarily it might have been overlooked. Luther called particular attention to the various sinful lapses of the patriarchs described in Genesis and noted that here all sinners may take comfort in the realization that even great saints have transgressed, but have been forgiven. Thus, Luther analyzed in some detail Noah's drunkenness (2:166-170) and noted that Abraham, a former idolater, was nevertheless chosen by God to become a patriarch (2:247). But even as a patriarch Abraham wavered, so that his "faith gave away to some extent" (2:293). Lot was guilty not only of drunkenness but also of incest. Luther commented, "You will ask: 'But why does God permit His own to fall in this manner?' Although we are not at liberty to inquire too eagerly into God's doings, yet here to answer is easy. God wants us to be well aware of our feebleness, lest we lapse into smugness" (3:311). A similar observation is recorded about Judah. "Judah, the very eminent patriarch, a father of Christ, committed this unspeakable act of incest in order that Christ might be born from a flesh outstandingly sinful and contaminated by a most

disgraceful sin. For he begets twins by an incestuous harlot, his own daughter-in-law, and from this source the line of the Saviour is later derived" (7:12).

In these and other situations, Luther savored not the punitive retaliation, but the merciful assistance that through sin one may grow in grace. Luther wrote, "When a godly person is aware of his fall, he becomes ashamed and is perturbed. Thus his fall leads first to humility and then also to fervent prayer" (3:334). Therefore, Luther underscored, "Great comfort is set before us, namely, that the very saintly fathers and the sons of such great patriarchs, Judah and others, are described as men full of the weakness and the very great blemishes to which this wretched nature is subject, and that God guided them in a wonderful manner by His Holy Spirit, yet in such a way that He permitted them to bare their own inclinations, that is, the sin and fruit of the original sin" (7:10). "Great saints must make great mistakes in order that God may testify He wants all men to be humiliated and contained in the catalog of sinners, and that when they have acknowledged and confessed this, they may find grace and mercy" (7:44; cf. 7:273).

In this way, since each believer is also a sinner, the *Anfechtungen* serve a painful yet in the final analysis a very merciful and salutary function: the believer has been sustained in grace, in humility, and in loving concern for the neighbour.

III.

But how helpful were the *Anfechtungen* in the task of interpreting the Holy Scriptures and formulating pure doctrine? Three autobiographically significant statements of Luther may help answer this question.

First, Luther wrote, "Yes, even we ourselves, who renounced the doctrine of the pope long ago, still have to struggle often and hard to overcome this wretchedness, which has been doubled by habit; for we are born as hypocrites, and afterwards we are confirmed in our hypocrisy by ungodly teachers" (2:251).

Without question, according to his own self-evaluation, Luther ultimately overcame his Catholic background to the extent that he viewed it as theologically erroneous. It is equally clear that the overcoming was not immediate; even in later life he "often" found himself holding what he subsequently recognized as an incorrect Catholic position and only gradually struggled out of it. What is not clear is whether Luther did any substantial exegesis and formulating of doctrine while he was in his struggles, or whether he turned to theologically creative tasks only when the struggle was won.

Luther's second statement was, "And even now it is difficult for me to strip off and cast aside the doctrine of the pope, not only according to the old man but also on account of the weakness of my faith. Because of this weakness I am still afraid to look at Christ. And certainly we have barely begun to hope and to call upon Christ as our Savior that He may come through death, famine, and war and set us free. Under the papacy we surely did not dare ask for this. Yet because of the pestilential and accursed doctrine of the pope I still think and long for this liberation through the coming of Christ in great weakness" (8:256; cf. 8:54).

Here Luther humbly confessed his own weakness. Indeed, we can hardly expect him to have written otherwise; does one ever in humility outline one's own strength?! Yet, it is worth noting that Luther did not merely confess his weakness. He also supplied a

point of reference by which he judged himself to be weak. This point of reference, of course, was the trustful longing for the necessary *Anfechtungen*, such as "death, famine, and war" which can set us free in Christ. Insofar as Luther confessed himself to be on the way, rather than having arrived at the full freedom in Christ reached through desired *Anfechtungen*, he certainly classified his own existence as a believer to be at this time incomplete. But what of exegesis and pure doctrine at this level? Here an immediate response was absent.

In his third significant observation Luther wrote, "Therefore I often complain and am sorry that I cannot believe, even though I know that what is offered in the Word is true, since I have been taught and strengthened in this faith not only from Holy Scripture but also from experience in trials. Therefore I often wish that I were permitted to depart from this filth of my flesh and be freed from so many impediments to faith, whether through the Last Day, which I eagerly desire and long for, or in some other manner. For I am ashamed of and annoyed by my exceedingly disgraceful lack of faith amid such wealth of promises by which we have been overwhelmed and made drunk, when I consider and see that the saintly fathers had such great faith in promises not yet fulfilled. Other saintly men also make use of the same complaint. In them nature fights against faith" (8:309, 310).

While continuing to assert in faith and humility his own imperfection, Luther now introduced a distinction which is to be noted. What wavers in the midst of the *Anfechtungen*, according to Luther, is one's believing or the act of faith (the *fides qua creditur*)! At the same time Luther did not record any difficulties about the faith which is believed, namely, our Christian doctrine (the *fides quae creditur*). Such a distinction was in accord with Luther's earlier description of the condition of the patriarchs. Concerning them he said, "But the weakness of great men, like Jacob and other saints, consists not in the Word or doctrine but in temptation when they seem to have nearly lost faith" (6:241).

Thus, the principle is clear: In the midst of *Anfechtungen* what is assailed is one's faith in the pure doctrine, not the pure doctrine itself! It is from such a perspective that we may begin to understand Luther's two criticisms of Roman Catholicism. His first criticism, which has received the most scholarly attention,⁶ is, "The pope's doctrine left us uncertain about salvation. Indeed, it was an act of piety to doubt whether you were in grace or not" (3:124). By contrast, Luther's own powerful emphasis on the *Anfechtungen* clearly necessitated an affirmation of the certainty of salvation. Here faithful trust was expressed through the courage of believing even in the midst of the darkest of life's despairing moments.

In his second criticism Luther scored the "scholastic theologians, and the professors of law, who are always toiling with ambiguities" (8:209). Here Luther apparently assumed that the Word of God⁷ is clear and that therefore the doctrinal formulations

6. Stephen Pfurner, *Luther and Aquinas on Salvation* (N.Y.: Sheed and Ward, 1964); Otto Hermann Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias Grunewald Verlag, 1967), pp. 262-282, 748-757.

7. Of course, even the principle included in the dialectic of clarity and hiddenness, cf. Friedrich Beisser, *Claritas Scripturae bei Martin Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), pp. 120-122.

which proceed from it must also be clear and pure.

Thus, according to Luther, the theologian always lives as a *simul iustus et peccator*. While certain of his salvation, his measure of faithfulness varies, as it grows through doubt and despair. At the same time, at least in principle, his theology as a statement of doctrine is both clear and pure. The implications of this important statement are seen in the period of Lutheran orthodoxy where attempts were made to construct a grand system of absolutely correct Lutheran doctrine; so at least it has often been claimed by subsequent generations of Lutherans. Without a doubt, insofar as Luther in principle asserted the possibility of obtaining absolutely pure doctrine, he clearly stimulated the search for the same.

At the same time, what Luther espoused in principle he did not in practice offer within easy reach. Luther did not think that just anyone who reads the Holy Scriptures and immediately makes weighty doctrinal pronouncements is a theologian. Educational pre-requisites aside — which Luther did not take lightly but did not outline in the Genesis commentary — Luther did record the essential ingredient for being an authentic interpreter of the Bible. “To understand the meaning of Scripture the Spirit of Christ is needed” (2:15,16). Indeed, thought Luther, only those who have faith turn to the Scriptures in the first place. He wrote, “Divine prophesies are trustworthy only to faith” (2:175). In other words, the presence of the Spirit of Christ and of faith were synonyms, since faith was present only in those who had been transformed by the Holy Spirit. “Faith is a change and renewal of the entire nature, so that the ears, the eyes, and the very heart hear, see, and feel something altogether different from what everyone else perceives” (2:266).

But even with faith present the actual interpretation of Scripture was not easy. Without attempting to provide a complete account, we should note that in his commentary on Genesis Luther was deeply aware of several weighty problems that confront the interpreter. For one, the Scriptures contain statements that describe realities “beyond our comprehension.” An example is the “waters above the heavens” (Gen. 1:6). Here, counselled Luther, “we must believe them and admit our lack of knowledge rather than either wickedly deny them or presumptuously interpret them in conformity with our understanding” (1:30). In addition, Luther noted, “There are many obscure passages and, as they are sometimes called, ‘crosses of philologians’ in secular writers too. Ingenious people may try their skills on these without peril. In the Sacred Scriptures, however, nothing should be defended tenaciously except what is definite; about dark and doubtful matters people must be allowed their own judgment” (2:237). That Luther generally followed his own sound advice may be seen on several occasions (2:277; 2:294).

Moreover, Luther was always deeply conscious that matters divine are always and necessarily somewhat beyond the gaze of sinful mortals. Luther observed, “I follow this general rule: to avoid as much as possible any questions that carry us to the throne of the Supreme Majesty. It is better and safer to stay at the manger of Christ the Man. For there is very great danger in involving oneself in the mazes of the Divine Being” (2:45). Of course, Luther had learned from St. Augustine and therefore he knew that God accommodates Himself to human capacity. “God lowers Himself to the level of our weak comprehension and presents Himself to us in images, in coverings, as it were, in simplicity adapted to a child, that in some measure it may be possible for him to be

known by us" (2:45).

Yet, a God who accommodates Himself, though truly known, is obviously not fully comprehended. Our doctrine, though pure, is obviously a very finite and partial statement about God. A good instance is Luther's own doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Luther interpreted this doctrine with force and clarity but then with great caution and thoughtful reticence turned to its structural framework. Luther wrote, "And it is truly wisdom above all wisdom to be able to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel and to be a good dialectician in this matter" (3:125).

Luther himself had the good sense not to claim this ability for himself, though without doubt he often succeeded in distinguishing between Law and Gospel in a remarkably insightful way. Lutheran theologians have also often been remarkably successful in the same regard, but glaring exceptions are also known to us.

When Luther warned against philosophical theology (which he had been accustomed to designate as "speculation") and directed his readers to biblical theology instead, he incorporated the careful observation that God "wanted us to learn the revealed Word painstakingly . . ." (3:139). Here was an old man's seasoned advice to the young to be somewhat cautious in the display of their exegetical brilliance and doctrinal perfection. Indeed, Luther was counselling very deep humility when he wrote, "I myself hate my books and often wish that they would perish, because I fear that they may detain the readers and lead them away from reading Scripture itself" (3:305,306). Had Luther regarded the formulation of pure doctrine as a task which he had completed, or could readily assign for others to complete, there would have been little point in maintaining the necessity to wrestle with *sola Scriptura*!

Last but not least, we should pay some attention to the sort of exegesis and formulation of pure doctrine for which Luther's own commentary on Genesis gave special encouragement. Repeatedly, Luther stated, "Since the coming of Christ we have holy Baptism, the Eucharist, and the Keys; by these signs God reveals Himself and saves those who make use of them by faith" (3:111). "It is a great gift that the divine mercy is again kindling for us this light of the Word, in order that we may know where God must be sought and truly found: not at Rome, not in the farthest parts of Spain, but in Baptism, in the words of the Gospel, in the use of the Keys, and indeed also with any brother who with me confesses and believes in the Son of God" (3:168).

Perhaps the intent of the above formulae is most clearly expressed in Luther's statement, "Separate the Word from Baptism, from absolution, and from Lord's Supper, and they will be nothing" (3:272; cf. 5:23; 5:247; 5:250). I take this to be a serious warning against worship and life apart from Scripture — and *vice versa*! Yet where word and life intersect, is not a measure of ambiguity inevitable?

In conclusion, there is no doubt at all that Luther was prepared to affirm in principle that even in the midst of the *Anfechtungen* the faithful succeeded in proclaiming pure doctrine even as they wavered in their own faith and life. Yet, at the same time, in practice Luther appeared to be ready to record numerous occasions, of which we have listed some, where he saw the purity of doctrine affected by the exigencies of life. In Luther's considered opinion while such situations did not mitigate against the theoretical possibility of a doctrinal purity, they gave occasion to immense caution and deep humility in stating what this pure doctrine was in each specific instance. Thus, in his own life

Martin Luther succeeded in creatively balancing the above principle with its practice. To illustrate this, before the Diet of Worms Luther proclaimed stalwartly, "Here I stand!" But in a thoughtful prayer Luther later wrote, "Lord, I am a lazy ass, therefore I come in order that you may help me and set my heart on fire."⁸

Lutheran theologians at times appear to have admired Luther's principled confession of doctrinal purity more than his practical exercise of confessional humility in the face of ambiguity and despair.

8. "Herr, ich bin eyn fauler Esel, darumb komme ich, das du mir helffest und mein Hertz anzundest." W A 10, 1,2, p. 222 and Frieder Schulz, *Gebete Luthers* (Gutersloh: Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1976, nr. 321), p. 227.