COMMENT

The Righteousness of Faith in the Earliest Luther

by MARTIN J. LOHRMANN

Martin Luther was a late medieval theologian, who from the beginning of his career showed a particular interest in matters of faith and righteousness. These theological emphases already appeared in writings we have from him as early as 1509, indicating that Luther was studying late medieval sources to understand faith and righteousness better. This gives us the opportunity to view Luther's theology as a consistent development within—not a movement away from—certain theological streams of late medieval Catholicism. Such an approach stands in contrast to the more common way of looking for a *terminus ad quem*: a point (or points) of departure after which Luther's theology broke from the late medieval traditions around him. Without ignoring the insights that come from looking for distinct moments of discovery, we might more clearly understand the Catholic (with a capital 'C') foundations of Luther's early theology by noticing that "the righteousness of faith" functioned for him as a *terminus a quo*: a theological starting point that set the path for the developments that followed.

In this vein, Berndt Hamm—professor emeritus from the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg—has identified a "reorientation" in Luther's theology which took place before 1513.[1] In a 1509 letter, for instance, Luther expressed a "desire for a theology that 'explores the kernel of the nut, the innermost part of the wheat, the marrow of the bone.'" Noting this scholarly quest for a theology that gets to the heart of things, Hamm wrote, "With this, Luther found his life's theme: the sharp contrast between human errors and evils and God's merciful loving-kindness."[2] Early on, Luther was interested in matters of faith and righteousness. Volker Leppin of the University

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of Tübingen has seconded this view, noting that strong statements of justification by faith in Luther's Romans lectures of 1515/16 resonate with ideas expressed in the first Psalms lectures of 1513/14, if not earlier.[3] These recent studies follow the earlier work of Heiko Oberman, David Steinmetz, and others to identify "forerunners" or "headwaters" of the Reformation.[4] By aiming to understand Luther's Reformation theology in light of his late medieval context, such historians have emphasized development rather than discovery.

As refreshing as this emphasis on continuity is, this approach can still leave the effect of differentiating between "before and after" in Luther's theology, as if a medieval starting point gave way to a new evangelical reorientation. But what happens when we examine the early Luther without reference to a "before and after" moment? To borrow from Luther's "kernel of the nut" metaphor, what if the righteousness of faith served as the theological nut Luther had been trying to crack the entire time? Although Luther later described one or more moments of profound breakthrough in which he felt as if the gates of heaven had been opened to him in new ways,[5] these descriptions have the character more of cracking a tough nut than of discovering an entirely new nut altogether. If this is the case, then the "righteousness of faith" might provide a shared starting point for ecumenical conversations about the Reformation.

In addition to the recent work of historians mentioned above, such evidence for the late medieval roots of Luther's theology of faith and righteousness appears in an account of Luther's breakthrough described by his contemporary Johannes Bugenhagen. In a commentary on Jonah published in 1550 (shortly after Luther died), Bugenhagen defended justification by faith alone from its recent condemnation in the Council of Trent. To teach the evangelical doctrine of justification to his audience, Bugenhagen recalled the story of Luther's breakthrough, as Luther had told him. Bugenhagen even slipped into the first person as Luther to tell it, as he wrote:

> I [Luther] used to be amazed at Paul's argument for the justification of the ungodly . . . And therefore this phrase, "the righteousness of God" in the Epistle to the Romans, which Paul wrote to us as a highest consolation against our righteousness . . . was poison to me, and I abhorred it and reluctantly sang from the Psalms, "In your righteousness, deliver me, O Lord" . . .

> But then I read in Augustine, "the righteousness of God, that is through faith in Christ, which God imputes to us unworthy people and so justifies the ungodly freely through grace," as it says in Book IV of *De Trinitate*, which is also quoted in the *Sentences* of the Master [Peter Lombard], Book III, distinction 35: "It is said that the righteousness of God is not only that by which [God] is righteous, but also that which [God] gives humans when [God] justifies the ungodly."[6]

Two main points in this citation stand out regarding Luther's early understanding of the righteousness of faith. First, we know that Luther was reading Augustine's *De Trinitate* and Lombard's *Sentences* as early as 1509 as part of his graduate studies. His notes in the margins of these works are among the earliest writings we have from him. By naming these texts as influential for Luther, Bugenhagen's account suggests that Luther was interested very early in his career in questions of how people become righteous before God.

Second, Luther's monastic context informed his scholarly study of God's righteousness. As a budding graduate student (namely, the licentiate in theology), he could give academic attention to concepts he encountered in the daily worship life of his community, as in biblical passages like "In your righteousness, deliver me, O Lord" from Psalm 31 and 71. Observing the significance of Luther's choice to use the psalms as the subject for his very first lectures, Berndt Hamm emphasized this connection of the spiritual and the academic in the early Luther.

> Because it is so striking, I want to make absolutely clear that Luther first developed this new understanding of faith in a course on the Psalter. He, the professor of Holy Scripture and observant Augustinian monk, chose the prayer book of the canonical hours to be his teaching text. He understood the Psalms to be very much both christological and existential, as words of Christ and words about Christ, which (in their tropological or moral sense) should relate to faith's perceiving, comprehending, and believing way of life.[7]

Early in his scholarly career, then, Luther showed an interest in connecting personal spirituality with theological analysis of what it means to be righteous.

Signs of this prior interest in the righteousness of faith appear in Luther's handwritten notes on Augustine and Lombard, including

notes Luther wrote on Augustine's *De Trinitate*, as mentioned, a text named in Bugenhagen's account. There Luther wrote that Christ "is our life, our righteousness, and our resurrection through faith in his incarnation . . . Thus it is shown that this text speaks of life and resurrection which comes through faith in him."[8] Here major concepts of the Reformation—life in Christ, righteousness, and faith—appear together in Luther's reading of Augustine.

This and other marginalia need not prove that Luther somehow discovered evangelical theology in 1509. They do, however, show that the themes of righteousness and faith interested Luther from the beginning. Bugenhagen's citation of Augustine and Lombard connects these theological interests with texts that Luther encountered early in his career. In them, Luther learned that the righteousness of God is not only God's intrinsic righteousness but also the righteousness God gives freely to sinners through faith in Christ; that is, God's righteousness is the same as God's mercy.[9] This is consistent with the gospel message that Luther spent his career preaching and teaching as a reformer.

Moving to Luther's first Psalm lectures, we notice that the phrase "the righteousness of faith" [*iustitia fidei*] is indeed present. At the outset of those lectures, Luther identified the righteousness of faith as a positive tropological goal of interpretation, that is, as a spiritual teaching that believers should apply to their own lives from the biblical text. For Luther, this righteousness of faith already stood in clear contrast to the righteousness of the law.[10] Luther demonstrated this interpretive method in comments on Psalm 64:9. Discussing what it means to understand the "work of God" in that verse, Luther wrote, "The works of God are intelligible, that is, perceptible only by the understanding and by faith, in hope, not in reality. For the one who only follows the sense is necessarily offended by the cross of Christ and by the way of His church, since one sees in it nothing but the penalties and privations of this life."[11] Seeing Christ's cross as the pre-eminent "work of God," Luther differentiated between the outward appearance of that action—death and condemnation—and faith's ability to understand the crucifixion as the source of salvation. This is an example of how the righteousness of faith informed Luther's early interpretation of the psalms: faith grasps the saving

righteousness of God which reason and the physical senses cannot comprehend.

Despite such evidence of Luther reflecting upon faith and its righteousness in the Psalms lectures and elsewhere before 1517, scholars like Martin Brecht, Oswald Bayer, and Alister McGrath have problematized the meaning of faith in Luther's early works. They point out that in late medieval theology faith meant assent to the content of Christian teaching and did not include the sense of personal trust in God's word that Luther would later give it. [12] From that perspective, the appearance of the word "faith" in Luther's earliest works must be read through the definitions of medieval theology and not in continuity with Luther's evangelical theology, expressed more fully around 1518.

While granting this point, such a view unnecessarily minimizes the significant theological work Luther had already done to seek out "the kernel of the nut" with respect to the righteousness of faith. For instance, Luther reflected precisely on the multifaceted meaning of faith as he read Book III of Lombard's *Sentences*.[13] Following Lombard himself, Luther pondered the difference between believing things about God, believing in God, and believing God.[14] In the same place, Luther considered the relationship between faith and hope (another important technical term in medieval theology). He concluded that hope depends upon faith, "without which no one would be able to hope and, consequently, do what is good."[15] Faith is the raw material—the *substantia*, as Hebrews 11:1 says in Latin—upon which Christian hope is built. Without imposing Luther's later views onto these early texts, we can clearly see Luther pondering the meaning of faith as he encountered it in the late medieval sources he was studying.

An insight from humanism shows that Luther's theology of faith developed in conversation with—not apart from—his context. Luther had access to recent biblical studies published by Erasmus of Rotterdam, Johannes Reuchlin, and Faber Stapulensis, which he used early in his career. While Luther's strong claims for justification by faith alone in the Romans and Galatians lectures of the 1510s are well known,[16] Stapulensis had already made equally striking statements in his edition of the Pauline epistles (published in 1512;

reprinted in 1515). Commenting on Galatians 2:16, for instance, Stapulensis wrote, "a person is not justified by works or observance of the old law; rather justification pours in through faith alone in Christ."[17] Such passages in Stapulensis show that Luther was not unique in his questions but was participating in the theological conversations about faith and righteousness of his time, including the language of "faith alone." Although Stapulensis lived out his career in relative peace under the royal protection of Marguerite de Navarre, Luther's study of God's righteousness landed him in high-profile controversy.

Instead of hindering evangelical theology, Luther's active engagement with late medieval materials—to say nothing of humanist scholarship—provided key sources for the insights that led to a Reformation of the church in sixteenth-century Europe. In that sense, these sources might even be said to have profoundly succeeded in their goals of Christian formation by leading the young Luther to an important spiritual and intellectual understanding of what it means that "the righteous shall live by faith." Although serious ecclesiastical controversy and conflict attended these insights, Luther's knowledge and application of these sources followed medieval precedents. Yes, Luther himself later criticized his earlier monastic striving and the scholastic theology he learned, but his critique focused on the content of that striving rather than the quest to understand the righteousness of faith as inspired by his medieval context in the first place.

This year's 500th anniversary of the Reformation confronts Christians with challenging questions about Luther's continuities with and breaks from medieval Catholicism. Based on the sources studied here, a potentially instructive narrative appears. As a young monastic brother and eager scholar, Luther worked hard to identify the "kernel of the nut" of what it means for people to be reconciled with God. For Luther, the righteousness of faith was the particularly tough nut that needed cracking. In his quest for understanding, he turned especially to the theology of St. Augustine—as handed on through medieval sources—and the spiritual resources available to him as an observant Augustinian. Although the Catholic magisterium eventually rejected his conclusions and corollaries about the righteousness of faith, Luther could always point to acknowledged

predecessors for foundational support of his views. Despite the monumental impasse that the Reformation represents, concerned Protestant and Catholic Christians rightly continue to ponder the meaning of church reform for our world today. In that quest, the "righteousness of faith" stands out as an exceptionally worthwhile nut to try to crack together, because it both precedes Luther and also remains at the heart of his enduring witness.

NOTES

1. Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, translated by Martin Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 45.

2. Hamm, 32 and 46. *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1930–1985) [hereafter WA Br], 1:17.

3. Volker Leppin, *Transformationen: Studien zu den Wandlungsprozessen in Theologie und Frömmigkeit zwishcen Spätmittelalter und Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 338. See also Volker Leppin, *Martin Luther: A Late Medieval Life*, translated by Rhys Bezzant (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

4. Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 3–49; and Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 102f. David C. Steinmetz, *Staupitz and Luther* (Durham, NC: Duke, 1980). Steinmetz, a former student of Heiko Oberman, examined the similarities and differences between Luther and Johann von Staupitz, his mentor and the head of his order in Germany.

5. For instance, *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [*Schriften*], 65 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-1993) [hereafter WA], 1:525 and *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, 6 vols., (Weimar: Böhlau, 1912–1921) [hereafter WA TR], 3:228. In English, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, 55 vols., edited by J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86) [hereafter LW], 48:65 and 54:193–94.

6. Martin Lohrmann, *Bugenhagen's Jonah: Biblical Interpretation as Public Theology* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012), 124-25; see also Martin Lohrmann, "A Newly Discovered Report of Luther's Reformation Breakthrough from Johannes Bugenhagen's 1550 Jonah Commentary," *Lutheran Quarterly* 22 (2008): 324–334.

7. Hamm, 79–80.

8. WA 9:17.

9. As mentioned in Bugenhagen's account above. See also, Lohrmann, *Bugenhagen's Jonah*, 127–30. It is possible that this connection to *De Trinitate* has been missed in scholarly literature, because when Luther referred to Augustine on this point in the Romans lectures of 1515/16 he used a similar citation from *De spiritu et littera* rather than *De Trinitate* (WA 56:36; LW 25:30).

10. WA 3:11; LW 10:4.

11. WA 3:367-68; LW 10:310, amended for inclusive language; see also Luther's conclusion to this interpretation of the "work of God" (which includes the tropological application of the "righteousness of faith" [*Iustitia fidei*]) in WA 3:369; LW 10:312.

12. As in Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521*, translated by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 94–6, 221–37; Oswald Beyer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971); and Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, Volume II: From 1500 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1986), 1–20. For another approach to the problem, see James S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1969).

13. WA 9:90–92.

14. WA 9:92.

15. WA 9:91.33.

16. For instance, WA 56:171–72; LW 25:151 (Romans) and WA 2:515; LW 27:258 (Galatians).

17. Jacobus Faber Stapulensis [Jacque Lefevre d'Etaples], *S. Pauli Epistolae xiv. ex vulgata editione, adjecta intelligentia ex Graeco cum commentariis* (1512 and 1515), 144. A 1515 edition belongs to the rare books collection of Wartburg Theological Seminary, in which this phrase is underlined and "sola fide" is written in the margins by hand. A similar handwritten marginal note appears in conjunction with Stapulensis' discussion of Romans 4, on page 72.