

MARTIN LUTHER
AND
THE LONG
REFORMATION



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— AND —
THE LONG
REFORMATION
FROM RESPONSE TO REFORM
IN THE CHURCH



JAMES G. KIECKER

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*Dedicated to the memory of
George H. Kiecker
and
Robert E. Diehm,
two Christian gentlemen
in the truest sense of that term.*

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FOREWORD

Dr. Kiecker has produced an attractive approach to the history of the church and Luther's place in it. His concept of the *long reformation* is ably defended with a history of individuals, groups, and movements arising in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, phenomena which themselves are shown to have had long roots earlier in the church.

Dr. Kiecker invites his reader to "sit back" and (he could have said) enjoy the panorama of God's reforming work with his people. As I read along, I found myself waiting to see how the *long reformation* would play out in the next section. While presenting an enormous amount of accurate information, the style is relaxed and engaging.

The book can be read profitably just for information or as a general church history or as the history of reform (with the concept of *ecclesia semper reformanda*) or as the history of God's work in often unworkable situations or in parts as a reference. In short, *Martin Luther and the Long Reformation* is both edifying and enjoyable.

Prof. Kenneth Hagen
Marquette University

PREFACE

The Reformation—the word still conjures up images and excitement whenever we hear it. We picture that determined German monk nailing his ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg church door and later on taking his stand before the emperor and church representatives at Worms. What he said and did back there in the 1500s quite literally changed the history of the church and the world. Heady stuff.

But the Reformation didn't start with Martin Luther, nor did it end with him. Rather, what happened was this: From the beginning the church faced a host of challenges which threatened to destroy the teaching it had received from its Lord. To these challenges, which more and more became crises, the church responded. Challenge and response, the structure of world history which Arnold Toynbee detected, is clearly obvious in the specific matter of the history of the Christian church.

Even before Luther's time, the church's response to the challenges it faced had become so insistent that response had turned into reformation. With Luther this response reached its high point, and since Luther the church has continued to face even more challenges to which it must respond. Response, then, still leads to reformation, to re-forming in line with God's truth. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*—the church is always in the process of being reformed.

Though any person may observe challenges and responses, deformation and reformation, in the church, only the person of faith will see the hand of God in the whole process. For God is always watching over his church and his truth.

So sit back, relax—or get excited—and watch the challenges and responses develop in the church, as you relive in imagination the Reformation, the whole Reformation—The Long Reformation.

THEOLOGY GONE ASTRAY

Where did things start to go wrong, that is, where did the deforming of Christianity begin?

Was it in theology, particularly in the understanding of how we are saved?

St. Paul said we were saved by God being gracious to us, something which we, prompted by the Holy Spirit, simply believed in or accepted as a gift placed into our hands by God. Both grace and faith then were gifts of God. Salvation didn't come by one's own efforts at all, so that someone could boast and say, "I did it, or at least I did part of it" (see Ephesians 2:8,9).

Paul's words seem clear enough, but there has always been discussion in the church as to exactly what Paul meant, and more recently there has been a lot of scholarly squabbling as to whether or not all early Christians understood salvation in the same way as Paul did. But the fact that Paul's way of describing salvation is so clearly spelled out in the church's official Scripture indicates that this is the method God wanted preserved as true. God saw to this. God saves man.

Augustine (354-430) understood the way of salvation basically the same as Paul. Man was completely sinful and could make no move of his own toward God. Man's will even resisted God's advances. But God's grace through the law aroused in man a knowledge of sin and a desire to be saved. Then God graciously fulfilled that desire. God saved man by grace and then filled man with the further desire to be and do good.

In his discussion of the way of salvation, Augustine unfortunately also used the word "merit." He seems to have done this innocently enough, not wanting to detract from God's

grace. "What merits could we have while we did not love God?" he asks, intending to say that grace would cause us to love God, and love would cause us to do good. Furthermore, "the Holy Spirit breathes where he will, and does not follow merits, but himself produces the merits," and, "if all your merits are gifts of God, God crowns your merits not as your merits, but as the gifts of God" (Schaff III, 846-7).*

For Augustine, merits are always "merits" in quotation marks, merits only in a sense, good things caused by God's grace, in no way able to influence God to save us. Salvation was already taken care of by God's grace. But though Augustine tried to use "merits" in a very restricted sense, still he did use that word, and sooner or later other people would take liberties with it.

Augustine did the same thing with the term "free will." Among his opponents was a monk from England named Pelagius who declared that man had enough spiritual strength or free will to choose to obey God's law. In effect, he was saying that man was capable of saving himself. Augustine found this teaching totally unchristian.

Yet, Augustine allowed for free will. In a sense, since the Fall, man does have a free will, said Augustine, but a man's free choice leads him only to sin. . . . When it is plain to him what he should do . . . even then, unless he feels delight and love in it, he doesn't do his duty. . . . So that he may feel delight and love, "the love of God [that is, grace] is shed abroad in our hearts," not through the free choice which springs from ourselves, but "through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (Bettenson, 77)

Again, Augustine uses the term "free will" in a very restricted sense, the ability to choose only evil unless the will

*Here, and frequently elsewhere, I have reworded and sometimes paraphrased quotations in contemporary language.

is healed by God's grace. But the bare use of the term was bound to cause trouble later on. As Luther later said, if free will can only choose evil anyway, the will isn't really free, and it would be better not to use the term at all.

Still and all, Augustine emphasized salvation by God's grace to the exclusion of man's efforts. He even went so far as to teach that God's grace was irresistible, meaning, that when God decided to bestow his grace on someone, that person couldn't resist it. Though this idea goes far beyond Scripture, it does show how much Augustine insisted that salvation depended on grace alone. Later Christians, assigning titles to great teachers, called Augustine the "doctor of grace."

Jerome, who lived at the same time as Augustine (about 342-420), took a position similar to Augustine on what humans, in spite of their sin, could still do by their will. Jerome, like Augustine, came down hard on the Pelagians. But though he maintained grace was necessary for salvation, he, nevertheless, said that the human will had a share in conversion. He writes to an opponent:

It is vain that you misrepresent me and try to convince the ignorant that I condemn free will. . . . We have been created and endowed with free will. . . . Free will . . . depends upon the help of God and needs his aid moment by moment, a thing which you and yours do not choose to admit. (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers VI, 278, Letter CXXXIII)

This again was an attempt to restrict human ability by saying it really didn't amount to anything unless it was aided by God. Still, human ability was present, and Jerome emphasized grace much less than Augustine. The road was paved for people to start stressing the abilities man allegedly had rather than the grace of God.

Even while Augustine and to a lesser extent Jerome were trying to take the edge off the merits and the spiritual free-

dom of fallen man by stressing the importance of God's grace, others were not quite so careful. Later generations would call these people semi-Pelagians. As their name implies, they found Pelagius' talk about man saving himself far too radical. But they couldn't bring themselves to believe in salvation by God's grace alone either. So they wound up in the middle: they believed that by nature each person had a will spiritually strong enough to start choosing good over evil, to start keeping God's laws, but not strong enough to go all the way to perfection. Not to worry. At some point, they believed, God would smile on their efforts and give them a shot of grace to help them along to salvation. God's grace would help man's will.

During the 400s, southern France was a hotbed of semi-Pelagianism. Notable theologians like Vincent of Lerin (died before 450) and John Cassian of Marseilles (about 360-435) defended it. "The will always remains free in man, and it can either neglect or delight in the grace of God," wrote Cassian (Walker, 188). Notice what he's saying. While Augustine and Jerome believed the human will, unaided by God's grace, to be helpless, Cassian has the human will, even without the aid of God's grace, contributing to salvation. It can either reject God's offer of grace or accept it and use it. The balance is being tipped farther away from God's grace and more in the direction of man's alleged abilities. Though other theologians like Prosper of Aquitaine (about 390-463) condemned Cassian, semi-Pelagianism continued to be the dominant teaching in southern France for several generations.

Late in the 400s the controversy broke out anew. Faustus of Riez (about 408-490) got things rolling with a strong restatement of semi-Pelagianism. He admitted the existence of original sin in man. However, he went on to insist that man, in spite of sin, had a will strong enough to start out on the road to goodness and to accept God's gracious help when God offered it.

Faustus was immediately countered by Fulgentius of Ruspe (about 462-527) who, unfortunately, only confused the issue. Fulgentius started out all right, denying that the will of sinful man was strong enough to take the first step toward goodness, to be followed by help from God's grace. He believed God's grace was much more necessary than that. So far so good. But Fulgentius didn't opt for grace alone as the foundation of salvation. Rather, in spite of the importance of God's grace, he considered the human will able to contribute something toward goodness, apart from God's grace. Man's will would help God's grace. In reality, this was just a twist on semi-Pelagianism.

While some in the church were wandering away from Paul's inspired teaching of salvation by grace alone, tending toward some combination of God's grace and man's abilities, others saw this dangerous drift and responded to it. Such a person was Caesarius of Arles (about 470-542), who set out to condemn all Pelagian and semi-Pelagian views. Together with the pope, Caesarius drew up a list of twenty-five canons ("statements") and a short confession of faith. Then, in 529, on the occasion of a church dedication at Orange in southern France, Caesarius had this document reviewed by the church leaders in attendance. In the end, fourteen bishops and eight laymen signed it. The document was then relayed to Rome, where the pope approved it. This was now official church teaching.

This Second Council of Orange, as it is officially known, has been called "one of the most important provincial [local] councils in church history" (McSorley, 118). In many respects it was right on target. It decreed, for example, the following:

We are sinners, and the desire to be cleansed of our sins doesn't come from ourselves, but from the Holy Spirit. The beginning of faith, the desire for faith, the increase of faith—none of this belongs to us by nature, but is a gift of God's grace. By relying on our own natural pow-

ers and not relying on God's grace we cannot be saved.
(Hefele, 155-7)

Pelagianism—the idea that man, in spite of Adam's sin, is not fallen but can by natural powers choose to obey God's law and thus save himself—was soundly repudiated. The worst kind of semi-Pelagianism—that man has fallen into sin but still has enough strength of will to start pleasing God while still needing God's grace—was also thumbed down.

But the response of the Second Council of Orange was not as firm as it might have been. The document also included statements like these:

The free will, weakened [note, not "lost"] in Adam, can only be restored through the grace of baptism. [Note, man would again have a free will in spiritual matters.] Unmerited grace precedes meritorious works. [Note, in some sense works are meritorious, meaning, works would influence God to grant salvation.] Through the grace of God, all may, by the cooperation of God, perform what is necessary for their soul's salvation.
(Hefele, 159-65)

In short, God's grace would help man's will, and then man's will would help God's grace.

The framers of the decrees of Orange probably felt that, by making God's grace the motivator of the human will, rather than letting the human will motivate itself, they were avoiding semi-Pelagianism. In fact, Roman Catholic theologians would argue that way to this day. They would deny that Roman Catholics are semi-Pelagians. But somehow, the "cooperation of God" takes away something from God alone, and a definite kind of semi-Pelagianism results.

In effect, the council took back with its left hand what it gave away with its right. Granted, God's grace was important. Man's will and man's actions were motivated by it. But then man's will and his actions became meritorious, cooper-

ating with God. In the final analysis, then, the council left some ability to man in spiritual matters and blew a golden opportunity to come down solidly in favor of salvation by grace alone. This hardly seems to be what Paul had in mind when he spoke about God choosing people by grace: "If by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Romans 11:6).

With Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) the church is clearly stuck in its semi-Pelagian ways. Gregory was a remarkable man. As a political leader he raised an army to defend Rome against an invasion of Lombards. Forced against his will to become pope in 590, at the age of fifty, Gregory made a lasting impact on the papacy. While he believed that he, as bishop of Rome, stood in a direct line from Christ and St. Peter, and, therefore, had preeminence over all other bishops, he, nevertheless, insisted that he was only the "servant of the servants of God." According to tradition Gregory gathered and systematized the church's liturgy and supposedly developed the so-called Gregorian chants. It is more certain that Gregory was responsible for missionary activity in England and Germany. Quite impressive.

But as a theologian, Gregory swallowed uncritically the semi-Pelagian theology of his time: God bestows his grace on man; man is moved by God's grace to do good; God is both impressed and influenced with this use of his grace and finally saves man on the basis of what man, moved by God's grace, has done. On top of this, in Gregory's writings, the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice offered to God to (hopefully) cancel sin; sinners are also aided by the saints; and purgatory offers the dead another chance to still make it to heaven. Such ideas became the mainstay of Roman Catholic theology for the next 500 years, and many have endured to the present. They have deformed Christianity.

About the year 1000, when Europe started to come alive intellectually, the thinkers tended to follow the paths laid down by both Augustine and the Second Council of Orange.

For example, Anselm of Canterbury (about 1033-1109) believed that infants were completely inactive in their salvation and thus saved by grace alone, but that in older people grace aided the alleged natural free will of man. It was the same old idea: man's will wasn't strong enough to take the first step toward God by itself, but God's grace worked on the will, and then it could; thus man and God together effected man's salvation. People actually felt that this was giving enough credit to God.

Bernard of Clairvaux (clair-VO, about 1090-1153) believed that after the Fall man's will was still free, but, as Augustine had already said, it could only choose evil. However, if it was "graced" by God, it could choose good, and so man would be on the way toward salvation. In Bernard's mind it wasn't a matter of grace being half responsible for salvation and human will the other half. This would be synergism, the teaching that grace and will would "work together" as equal partners in bringing salvation. Rather, Bernard felt it was all grace—but also all human will, once the person was moved by grace. Whether this is logically possible is debatable. Yet Bernard was trying to stress grace alone as it hadn't been stressed since Augustine and Paul, and for this Luther later on appreciated him.

Peter Lombard (about 1095-1160) devoted a major portion of his life trying to clarify the relationship of God's grace to man's will. In the end he fell right in line with most other thinkers: man's will is by nature free; God's grace aids the free will of certain people, and then it can will good, which is pleasing to God; this makes the free will of good people "freer" than the free will of bad people who haven't experienced God's grace. Not to be facetious, but Peter Lombard's teaching makes it sound as if all wills are free, but some wills are freer than others.

Bonaventure (about 1217-1274) maintained that the human will was free, but like Bernard he tried to stress the need for God's grace strongly enough to avoid having the

will and grace working together, each partly responsible for salvation. What's continually amazing is that all these theologians, no matter how they struggled to stress the need for grace, always felt it necessary to give some credit to man.

Earlier we suggested it would be only a matter of time before people would start stressing the abilities man allegedly had rather than emphasizing the grace of God. That day finally came. Sometime during the 1100s or 1200s—it's hard to trace it to a particular person and a particular date; the basic idea, in fact, may go back to the 300s—the saying became prominent that “to those doing what is in themselves, God does not deny grace.” (The Latin has a compelling swing to it: *Facientibus quod in se est, deus non denegat gratiam.*) The idea was that human beings, as they come into the world, have by nature, in spite of the Fall, enough spiritual power or freedom of will to exercise themselves in the direction of good. When God sees human beings doing this, God is pleased and impressed and on the basis of their good deeds gives them grace. Though the way in which it was stated was new, the idea was as old as semi-Pelagianism.

Not all theologians went along with this idea that God gives grace to those who do as much as they can by themselves. The greatest medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas (about 1223-1274), put it this way: “A man cannot prepare himself for grace without the help of grace,” and “that some do what is in them, that is, by turning themselves to God, is made possible by God moving their hearts to good” (McSorley, 168-9). So Thomas, too, is in line with the decrees of Orange: man's will is free; it is acted on by God's grace, whereupon it wills what is good, and this is meritorious (worthy of reward) in God's sight.

Some less well-known theologians who opposed the idea that “God helps those who help themselves” (you still hear that phrase nowadays) became quite evangelical—so much so that some people see a connection between them and Luther. For example, Thomas Bradwardine (about

1290-1349) specifically rejected the following statements: "Man cannot properly merit grace by himself, but he can prepare himself duly and then God will give him grace freely," and "God always precedes by knocking and inciting us to grace . . . and man follows by opening and consenting, and he does this by his own powers" (McSorley, 193). In opposing all this, Bradwardine claimed he had an illumination that everything pertaining to salvation depended on the merciful grace of God.

Similarly, Gregory of Rimini (died 1358), an Augustinian friar like Luther later on, denounced those who said "that man, by his natural powers alone, with the general concurrence of God, can perform a morally good act in the present state of fallen nature, as for example, to love God above all things, to be sorry for and to detest one's sins, etc." (McSorley, 196-7). Rather, for Gregory, everything depended on God's grace. Like Augustine, Gregory said that man's will was free, but invariably man was only free to sin. Perhaps he would have agreed with Luther that man's will isn't really free after all.

Thus we see how Thomas Bradwardine and Gregory of Rimini responded to the continuing challenge posed by those who wanted to make some part of salvation, be it ever so small, dependent on man. Their voices, however, were drowned out by their opponents.

William of Ockham (about 1285-1347) and closely followed by his disciple, Gabriel Biel (about 1420-1495), were such opponents who stressed what man could allegedly do before receiving God's grace. Biel declared:

He does what is in himself who, illuminated by the light of natural reason . . . recognizes the depth of sin, and, proposing to lift himself from sin, desires divine help by which he is able to be freed from sin and to cling to his creator God. To the one doing this, God necessarily gives his grace. (Oberman, 133, my translation)

To be properly shocked by this statement and to realize just how far the church had gotten away from the teachings of Scripture, all one has to do is think of what Paul wrote in Romans 7:14-19: “. . . I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. . . . What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”

Note that when Biel died in 1495, Luther was about twelve years old. There is a connection between Biel and the University of Erfurt which became Luther's alma mater. Biel studied there, and though he later on taught at Tuebingen, not Erfurt, his teachings were discussed very prominently at Erfurt. They were especially favored by one of Luther's professors, Bartholomew von Usingen. Luther's mentor, John Staupitz, had also studied at Tuebingen under Biel's associates.

The point is that this is the kind of theology that held sway in the church when Luther came on the scene. At its best, when it said that God's grace moved the human will to do good, which goodness earned God's salvation, it was wrong. At its worst, when it said that the human will could do good by itself and thus earn God's grace, it was frighteningly unchristian. Though there had been a few responses to this challenge, the responses had fallen far short. The pure theology of grace, as proclaimed by the scriptural writers, had been little by little deformed.