PART ONE

Absolutism and the Lutheran Reformation
I

The principles of Lutheranism

To begin the story of the Lutheran Reformation at the traditional starting-point is to begin in the middle. Luther's famous act of nailing up the Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on the Eve of All Saints in 1517 (which may not even have happened) merely marks the culmination of a long spiritual journey on which he had been travelling at least since his appointment over six years before to the chair of Theology in the University of Wittenberg. One of the main achievements of Lutheran scholarship in the past generation has been to trace the course of Luther's intellectual development during this formative time. The basis for this reinterpretation has been provided by the rediscovery of the materials he used in giving his lectures on the Psalms in 1513–14, on the Epistle to the Romans in 1515–16, and on the Epistle to the Galatians in 1516–17. The outcome has been the suggestion that it would only be a 'slight exaggeration', as Rupp puts it, to claim that 'the whole of the later Luther' can already be discerned in the pages of these early lecture-notes (Rupp, 1951, p. 39). The implication is that it may be best to begin the story where Luther himself began: with the development of his new theology, which provided him with the framework for his subsequent attack not just on the Papacy's traffic in indulgences, but on the whole set of attitudes, social and political as well as religious, which had come to be associated with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

THE THEOLOGICAL PREMISES

The basis of Luther's new theology, and of the spiritual crisis which precipitated it, lay in his vision of the nature of man. Luther was obsessed by the idea of man's complete unworthiness. To a modern psychologist this may appear as evidence of a particularly severe crisis of identity, an 'integrity crisis' in which the sufferer comes to have a total mistrust in the value of his own existence (Erikson, 1958, p. 254). Luther's more

1 For this allegation see Iserloh, 1968, esp. pp. 76-97.
conventional biographers, however, have been content to see this simply as a case of ‘pitting one type of Catholicism against another, Augustinianism against Thomism’ (Bainton, 1953a, p. 36). Luther’s vision caused him to reject the optimistic view of man’s capacity to intuit and follow the laws of God which the Thomists had characteristically emphasised, and led him back to the earlier and more pessimistic Augustinian emphasis on man’s fallen nature.

This doctrine not only represented a break with Thomism, but an even sharper rejection of the elevated view of man’s virtues and capacities which, as we have seen, the humanists had more recently popularised. Luther was thus prompted to mount a violent attack on the humanist ideal of a *philosophia pia*, and in particular on the ‘heathen and publican’ Erasmus, the most dangerous exponent of their arrogant creed. The occasion for this definitive breach with the humanists was provided by the publication of Erasmus’s discourse *On the Freedom of the Will* in 1524. Erasmus had at first appeared as a cautious ally of the Reformation, applauding the Ninety-Five Theses and helping to ensure that Luther was not condemned unheard by the Imperial authorities (Rupp, 1953, pp. 264–7). He soon became more evasive, however, especially after Luther had been excommunicated. We find him writing to Wolsey in 1519 to deny that he had read Luther’s works, and to Luther himself at the same time to urge him to proceed more cautiously (Allen, 1906–58, iv, pp. 589–606). By 1521 he was insisting a trifle mendaciously that he had ‘opposed the pamphlets of Luther more than any other man’, and two years later he finally yielded to the demand – voiced by the Pope and Henry VIII amongst others – that he should compose an anti-Lutheran tract (Allen, 1906–58, iv, pp. 536–40). Luther’s doctrine of man presented the obvious target for his humanist talents, and the outcome was the treatise *On the Freedom of the Will*, in which he not only opposed Luther’s views with copious citations from the scriptures and Church Fathers, but also prefaced his discussion with the characteristically dismissive remark that he would ‘prefer men to be persuaded not to waste their time and talents in labyrinths of this kind’ (p. 41).

Luther clearly felt g osed as well as alarmed by this somewhat unexpected attack from such an influential quarter. He quickly produced an elaborate and exceptionally violent reply, in which he developed a comprehensive statement of his own theological position, and included a definitive presentation of his anti-humanist and ultra-Augustinian doctrine of man. This was published in 1525 as *The Bondage of the Will*. Gerrish has emphasised that it would be a mistake to characterise this assault on the idea of a *philosophia pia* as a completely ‘irrationalist’ one
(Gerrish, 1962, p. 25). Luther certainly never seeks to deny the value of natural reason, in the sense of man's reasoning powers, nor does he condemn the use of 'regenerate reason' when it is 'serving humbly in the household of faith' (Gerrish, 1962, pp. 25–6). He even makes a residual use of the concept of natural law, although he usually equates this source of moral knowledge simply with the promptings of a man's conscience (McNeill, 1941). He is implacably opposed, however, to Erasmus's central and typically humanist contention that it is open to a man to employ his powers of reasoning in order to understand how God wishes him to act. He repeatedly insists that in this context all man's reasoning powers are simply 'carnal' and 'absurd' (pp. 144, 224). We have all 'fallen from God and been deserted by God', so that we are all completely 'bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead' (pp. 130, 175). This makes it ridiculous as well as sinful to suppose that we can ever hope 'to measure God by human reason' and in this way to penetrate the mysteries of His will (p. 172). The true situation, as Luther seeks to indicate in the title of his tract, is that our wills remain at all times in total bondage to sin. We are all so 'corrupt and averse from God' that we have no hope of ever being able to will 'things which please God or which God wills' (pp. 175–6). All our actions proceed from our 'averse and evil' natures, which are completely enslaved to Satan, and thus ensure that we can 'do nothing but averse and evil things' (pp. 98, 176). The result is that 'through the one transgression of the one man, Adam, we are all under sin and damnation', and are left with 'no capacity to do anything but sin and be damned' (p. 272).

This vision of man's bondage to sin commits Luther to a despairing analysis of the relationship between man and God. He is forced to acknowledge that since we cannot hope to fathom the nature and will of God, His commands are bound to appear entirely inscrutable. It is at this point that he most clearly reveals his debt to the Ockhamists: he insists that the commands of God must be obeyed not because they seem to us just but simply because they are God's commands (p. 181). This attack on the Thomist and humanist accounts of God as a rational lawgiver is then developed into the distinctively Lutheran doctrine of the twofold nature of God. There is the God who has chosen to reveal Himself in the Word, whose will can in consequence be 'preached, revealed, offered and worshipped' (p. 139). But there is also the hidden God, the Deus Ahskommitätus,1 whose 'immutable, eternal and infallible will' is incapable of being comprehended by men at all (pp. 37, 139). The will of the hidden God is omnipotent, ordaining everything that happens in the world. But it is also beyond our understanding, and can only be 'reverently

1 The reference is to Isaiah, Chapter 45, verse 15.
ABSOLUTISM AND THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION

6

adored, as by far the most awe-inspiring secret of the divine majesty’ (p. 139).

Luther is also forced to accept a second and even more despairing implication of his doctrine of man. Since all our actions inexorably express our fallen natures, there is nothing we can ever hope to do which will justify us in the sight of God and so help us to be saved. This is really the chief point at issue between Erasmus and Luther, and the main theme of *The Bondage of the Will* (Boisset, 1662, pp. 38–9). The debate with Erasmus is not about the freedom of the will in the ordinary philosophical sense. Luther is quite prepared to concede that men can freely ‘eat, drink, beget, rule’, and even that they can freely perform good acts by following ‘the righteousness of the civil and moral law’ (p. 275). What he is concerned to deny is Erasmus’s definition of the freedom of the will in terms of ‘a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation’ (p. 103). Luther insists on the contrary that ‘since men are flesh and have a taste for nothing but the flesh, it follows that free choice avails for nothing but sinning’, and that all men are ‘condemned to perdition by ungodly desire’ (pp. 214, 226). The despairing conclusion of *The Bondage of the Will* is thus that ‘free choice is nothing’ and virtuous acts are of no value in relation to salvation (p. 241).

These conclusions suggest to Luther a further implication which, as he goes on to tell us, at one time brought him ‘to the very depth and abyss of despair’ (p. 192). He has conceded that man’s impotence is such that he can never hope to be saved by his own efforts. He has argued that God’s omnipotence is such that the hidden God who ‘works all in all’ must already have a complete foreknowledge of all future as well as past events. (Luther even takes sides at this point in the scholastic debate over the nature of God’s foreknowledge, affirming (p. 42) that ‘God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably’.) The implication of these claims, as he is forced to admit, is a doctrine of double predestination – the contention that some men must already be predestined to be saved while others are predestined to be damned. And this thunderbolt, as he calls it, seemed to open up an unbridgeable gulf between God and man (p. 37). God appears terrifyingly inexorable: it is entirely for Him to decide, and He must already have decided, which of us is to be spared. And man is left completely helpless: it is possible that we are all damned, and it is certain that no one can ever hope to change his fate.

This conclusion at first induced in Luther a prolonged spiritual crisis.

\footnote{For a discussion of this debate, as conducted at the University of Louvain in the fifteenth century, see Baudry, 1950, esp. pp. 27–46.}
THE PRINCIPLES OF LUTHERANISM

His affliction appears to have begun as early as 1505, when he suddenly abandoned his proposed career in law after a series of traumatic personal incidents and decided instead to enter the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt (Fife, 1957, p. 73). The crisis seems to have deepened in 1510, after he returned from a visit to Rome which seems to have left him, as Fife suggests, ‘disillusioned and to some extent disheartened’ about the state of the Church (Fife, 1957, p. 176). Luther himself gives an account of his spiritual condition during these years in the autobiography which he published in 1545 as a Preface to the Wittenberg edition of his Latin works (pp. 336–7). He tried the traditional monastic remedies of fasting and prayer, but these failed to bring him any solace. He turned to the study of Augustine, but this merely confirmed his sense of hopelessness. He found himself driven to the frightening blasphemy of cursing and hating God for providing men with a law which they are unable to keep, and then righteous in damning them for failing to keep it. He speaks of coming to hate the very word ‘righteousness’ (iustitia), which he understood to refer to the justice of God in punishing sinful men, and he found himself unable even to look at those parts of the New Testament – especially the Epistles of St Paul – in which the concept of God’s righteousness is assigned a central place (Boehmer, 1946, p. 110).

Then, after years of deepening anguish, Luther suddenly attained a tremendous new insight which brought him permanent relief. The moment evidently came to him while he was engaged in the mundane academic task of preparing a new lecture-course, working in the tower-room of the monastery at Wittenberg.1 While reading over and paraphrasing the Psalms, he was struck by a completely new interpretation of the crucial phrase in Psalm 30, ‘Deliver me in thy righteousness’ – in iustitia tua libera me (Boehmer, 1946, p. 109). It suddenly occurred to him that the concept of the righteousness of God referred not to His punitive powers, but rather to His readiness to have mercy on sinful men, and in this way to justify them by delivering them from their unrighteousness. After this, as Luther himself reports in his autobiography, he felt that he had been ‘altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates’ (p. 337).

Luther himself speaks of his ‘tower-experience’ (Turmerlehnis) both in his autobiography and in the Table Talk recorded by Conrad Cordatus (pp. 193–4). A number of commentators have recently sought to show

---

1 But folklore tells a less polite story at this point, as W. H. Auden reminds us in the appropriate section of About the House (London, 1965, p. 117):

Revelation came to
Luther in a privy.
ABSOLUTISM AND THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION

that the outcome, his ultra-Augustinian doctrine of justification, was in fact the product of a gradual evolution in his thought. But all the scholars who pioneered the study of Luther’s intellectual development – in particular Vogelsang, Bornkamm and Boehmer – agreed in seeing this doctrine as the fruit of a sudden epiphany, which they all dated to some time in the year 1513. The dating will doubtless continue to be a subject of learned debate,1 but the crucial significance of the episode in Luther’s development is not in doubt: it suddenly enabled him to bridge the agonising gap between God’s omnipotence and man’s unrighteousness. It was at this point that he at last felt able, under the promptings of his spiritual adviser, Johann von Staupitz, to turn to the intensive study of St Paul’s Epistles, and to compose his commentaries on Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. The outcome was the complete new theology in terms of which he then turned and rent the Papacy and the whole Catholic Church.

The core of Luther’s theology is constituted by his doctrine of justification sola fide, ‘by faith alone’. He continues to stress that no one can ever hope to be justified – that is, granted salvation – by virtue of his own works. But he now argues that it must be open to anyone to perceive God’s gratia – the ‘saving grace’ which He must already have granted as a totally unmerited favour to those whom He has predestined to be saved. He is thus able to propose that the sole aim of the sinner must be to achieve fiducia – a totally passive faith in the righteousness of God and in the consequent possibility of being redeemed and justified by His merciful grace.

Once Luther attained this fundamental insight, all the other distinctive features of his theology gradually fell into place. He was able first of all to give a complete account of the concept of justification underlying his pivotal doctrine of faith. This was first fully stated in the sermons and disputations of 1518–20, and in particular in the sermon of 1519 entitled Two Kinds of Righteousness (Saarnivaara, 1951, pp. 9–18, 92–5). Here Luther moved decisively beyond the traditional patristic idea of justification as a gradual process of eradicating the believer’s sins. He now sees it as an immediate consequence of fides apprehensiva – ‘a grasping and appropriating faith’ which enables the sinner suddenly to seize Christ’s righteousness for himself, so that he becomes ‘one with Christ, having the same righteousness as he’ (p. 298; cf. Althaus, 1966, p. 230). The result is an intensely strong emphasis on the idea that the righteousness of the

---

1 The evidence in favour of an evolutionary interpretation has been best presented by Saarnivaara, 1951, pp. 59–120. The original interpretation has been powerfully restated, however, in a reply to Saarnivaara by Bornkamm, 1961–2. The debate is well surveyed by Dickens, 1974, pp. 83–8, who inclines cautiously to Saarnivaara’s side.
believer is never *domestica* – never achieved by himself, and still less deserved. It can only be *extrae**na* – an ‘alien righteousness, instilled in us without our works by grace alone’ (p. 299). The believer is at all times seen as *simul justus et peccator* – at once a sinner and justified. His sins are never abrogated, but his faith ensures that they cease to count against him.

Luther next proceeded to relate this account of faith and justification to the process by which the life of the sinner comes to be sanctified. This further theme also emerges clearly for the first time in the sermons of 1518–20 (Cranz, 1959, pp. 41–3). The Christian is now pictured as the simultaneous inhabitant of two realms – that of Christ and that of worldly things. The justification of the sinner comes first, and happens ‘not piece-meal but all at once’ (Cranz, 1959, p. 126). As Luther phrases it in his sermon on *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, the redeeming presence of Christ ‘swallows up all sins in a moment’ (p. 298). The process of sanctification then ‘follows gradually’ once the sinner has acquired his faith (Cranz, 1959, p. 126). The result is a distinction which is central to Luther’s social and political thought, and also underlies Melanchthon’s influential doctrine of *‘adiaphora’*: the distinction between a primary and passive concept of justice which Christians are able to attain in the realm of Christ, and an active or civil justice which is not a part of salvation, but remains essential to the proper regulation of worldly affairs.

Luther’s pivotal belief in God’s redeeming grace next enabled him to resolve the cruel dilemma posed by the Old Testament, with its law which no one can hope to follow and its threat of damnation for those who fail to follow it. His answer, first explicitly stated in *The Freedom of a Christian* in 1520, takes the form of marking a sharp antithesis between the message of the Old and the New Testaments, an antithesis between God’s impossible commands and his redeeming promises (p. 348). The purpose of the Old Testament is now said to be to ‘teach man to know himself’, in order that ‘he may recognise his inability to do good and may despair of his own inability’ – as Luther himself had so profoundly despaired (p. 348). This is ‘the strange work of the law’. The contrasting purpose of the New Testament is to reassure us that although we may be unable to attain salvation ‘by trying to fulfil all the works of the law’, we may be able to attain it ‘quickly and easily through faith’ (p. 349). This is ‘the proper work of the gospel’. The implication of this ‘law–gospel dialectic’, as McDonough has labelled it, is thus that it corresponds exactly to the individual’s ‘despair–faith’ experience of sin and grace. And with Luther’s contrast between these two positions, as McDonough adds, we return to ‘the very heart and core of his basic convictions’ (McDonough, 1963, pp. 1–3).
10 ABSOLUTISM AND THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION

The relation between these doctrines serves in turn to illuminate a further characteristic feature of Luther’s theology: his account of the significance of Christ. It is Christ who transmits to men their knowledge of God’s redeeming grace. It is thus through Christ alone that we become emancipated from the impossible demands of the law and receive ‘the good news’ that we may be saved. This means that in spite of Luther’s emphasis on the powers of the hidden God, there is nothing mystical about his outlook, in the sense of inviting us merely to contemplate God’s remoteness and infinity. Luther is always at pains to present his theology as a theologia crucis, in which Christ’s sacrifice remains the key to our salvation. Christ is ‘the only preacher’ and ‘the only saviour’, who not only lifts us from the burden of our moral worthlessness, but also serves as ‘the source and the content of the faithful knowledge of God’ (Siggins, 1970, pp. 79, 108).

Given this view of Luther’s christology, it seems somewhat misleading to suggest – as Troeltsch has done in his classic account of Luther’s social thought – that Luther found ‘the objective revelation of the moral law’ entirely in the Decalogue, and took this law to be ‘simply confirmed and interpreted by Jesus and the Apostles’ (Troeltsch, 1931, p. 504). This judgment certainly holds good for Calvin, who always laid a strong emphasis on the immediate moral relevance of the Old Testament. When applied to Luther, however, it appears to obscure the transforming role he assigned to Christ’s sacrifice. For Luther, far more than for Calvin, Christ is perceived as coming not only to fulfill the law, but also to release the faithful from its demands by His redeeming merit and love. The consequence is that for Luther, though not for Calvin, it is always essential to understand the commands of the law in the light of the gospel, not the gospel in the light of the law (Watson, 1947, p. 153).

Finally, Luther’s solifidianism – his doctrine of justification ‘by faith alone’ – leads him to enunciate the two main features of his heretical concept of the Church. He first of all devalues the significance of the Church as a visible institution. If the attainment of fidelitas constitutes the sole means by which the Christian can hope to be saved, no place is left for the orthodox idea of the Church as an authority interposed and mediating between the individual believer and God (Pelikan, 1968). The true Church becomes nothing more than an invisible congregatio fidelium, a congregation of the faithful gathered together in God’s name. This Luther saw as a sublimely simple concept, completely encapsulated in his claim that the Greek word ecclesia, which is habitually used in the New Testament to denote the primitive Church, should be translated simply
THE PRINCIPLES OF LUTHERANISM

as Gemeinde or congregation (Dickens, 1974, p. 67). Despite his assurance, however, that ‘a child of seven knows what the Church is’, his apparently simple doctrine was widely misunderstood, especially by those who took him to be saying that he wished ‘to build a church as Plato a city, which nowhere exists’. In his mature theological writings he sought to counter these misconstructions by adding that while the Church is merely a commumio, it is also a republic, and as such needs to have a visible embody-ment in the world (Watson, 1947, pp. 169–70; Cranz, 1959, pp. 126–31). His treatise On the Councils and the Church, first issued in 1539, even includes an influential enumeration of the ‘marks’ or signs which are taken to be necessary (though never sufficient) for distinguishing a fellowship which genuinely constitutes ‘a Christian holy people’ from a mere group of papists or ‘Antinomian devils’ (Luther was thinking of the Anabaptists) who might claim to have received the divine light (p. 150). While introducing these later concessions, however, Luther continued to insist that the true Church has no real existence except in the hearts of its faithful members. His central conviction was always that the Church can simply be equated with Gottes Volk, ‘the people of God living from the word of God’ (Bornkamm, 1958, p. 148).

The other distinctive feature of Luther’s concept of the Church is that, in stressing the idea of the ecclesia as nothing more than a congregatio fidelium, he also minimises the separate and sacramental character of the priesthood. The outcome is the doctrine of ‘the priesthood of all believers’ (Rupp, 1953, pp. 315–16). This concept and its social implications are most fully worked out in the famous Address of 1520 directed ‘To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation’. Luther argues that if the Church is only Gottes Volk, it must be ‘a piece of deceit and hypocrisy’ to claim that ‘Pope, bishop, priests and monks are called the spiritual estate, while princes, lords, artisans and farmers are called the temporal estate’ (p. 127). Luther wishes to abolish all such false dichotomies, and to insist that ‘all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate’, since they belong to it not in virtue of their role or rank in society, but simply in virtue of their equal capacity for faith, which makes them all equally capable of being ‘spiritual and a Christian people’ (p. 127). He deploys this argument partly as a way of claiming that all believers, and not just the priestly class, have an equal duty and capacity to help their brethren and assume responsibility for their spiritual welfare. But his main concern is clearly to reiterate his belief in the ability of every faithful individual soul to relate without any intermediary to God. The result is that throughout his

1 For these references, and for an account of Luther’s response to these misunderstandings, see Spitz, 1953, esp. pp. 131ff.