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M. Vernon Begalke

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LUTHER'S ANFECHTUNGEN AN IMPORTANT CLUE TO HIS PASTORAL THEOLOGY

M. Vernon Begalke

There are many resources available today for a detailed examination of Martin Luther's "Pastoral Theology". His *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*¹ provide us with theological insights as he counsels the sick, imprisoned, bereaved, despondent, persecuted, and dying. In the intriguing *Table Talks*² Luther gives pastoral advice orally to innumerable questioners on a whole variety of additional topics such as "Illness-Mind and Body"; "Use of Humor"; "Divine-Human Dimensions"; "Pride-Envy-and Sin"; and "Pastoral Care of Self".³ His *Sermons*,⁴ *Devotional Writings*,⁵ *Treatises*,⁶ and *Lectures on the Bible*⁷ are resources which yield exciting dimensions, and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of his Pastoral Theology.

This paper will focus on that dynamic reality of the *Anfechtungen* in Luther's experience of the Christian faith — the trials, the ambivalences, the despondencies, the "ups and downs", the "highs and lows". The experiences of *Anfechtungen* are often referred to, and reflected upon, in most of the above resources. Luther shows openly and candidly how he believes the Gospel whole-heartedly while, at other

¹ For a selection, See Theodore G. Tappert, ed. and trans. *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*. The Library of Christian Classics: Volume XVIII (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955)

² There are six large volumes of *Tischreden* in WA, TR, each containing more than 700 pages . . . For a selection in English, see *Luther's Works, American Edition (LW)*, Volume 54.

³ M. Vernon Begalke, *An Introduction to Luther's Theology of Pastoral Care*. Unpublished Ph.D. in Theology Thesis, St. Paul's University and the School of Graduate Studies, University of Ottawa, 1979).

⁴ E.g. see LW, Volumes 21-24, 51-52

⁵ See LW, Volumes 42 & 43

⁶ See LW, Volumes 26-30

⁷ E.g. see LW, Volume 25, "Lectures on Romans"

times, doubts just as strongly! Yet it is out of this experiential basis with the *Anfechtungen* that he offers a rich variety of pastoral and theological reflection.⁸

DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION

Roland Bainton has given a comprehensive definition of an *Anfechtung*. "It may be a trial sent by God to test man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy man. It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of man."⁹

To this definition, Paul Buehler adds an interesting classification.¹⁰ He shows that Luther classified the *Anfechtungen* first of "low" degree, coming from the "left" and from the "right", according to their differing origins and subsequent attacks upon the inner man. By trials on the "left", Luther had in mind all those troublesome situations that engender hostility, hatred, bitterness, discomfort and impatience. Such situations might be illness, poverty, dishonor, or anything that causes us physical or emotional pain.¹¹

Along with the trials on the "left" are all those on the "right". These are the temptations to lust, honours, and pleasures, that Luther says we experience in times of good fortune. "Here too, one's existence is endangered and one can be lost. Precisely he who would escape the temptation of misfortune, easily falls into the temptation of good fortune and is then in greater danger; because this temptation is not so easily felt."¹² In short, Luther sees mankind attacked periodically from both sides, the "left" and the "right".

Buehler illustrates what Luther considered as the most devastating of all the *Anfechtungen*, and that has to do with spiritual distress, or those attacks from on high.¹³ By this classification Luther refers to the devil and all things that challenge our very faith, so that we end up in doubt rather than with assurance of our salvation. "These are sadness and heaviness of spirit, terror and fear of God's wrath, judgment, eternal death and such poisoned darts of hateful Satan."¹⁴

It is important to note, though Luther classifies the various experiences of *Anfechtung* as "high" and "low" as well as from "right" and "left", this is not an evaluative scale whereby the temptations can be rated objectively from lesser to greater degrees of anxiety. Rather, at the time of an assault from whatever direction, each trial is felt to be especially severe and taxing in its own way. Within each one, "the whole

⁸ To a large extent, this paper is a revision of Chapter IV of my doctoral thesis, "The *Anfechtung* Analyzed Theologically", pp. 91ff.

⁹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon - Cokesbury Press, 1950), p.42

¹⁰ Paul Buehler, *Die Anfechtung bei Martin Luther* (Zuerich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1942), pp. 3ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.3-4

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4

danger resides and the battle is always for faith".¹⁵ This is a significant principle, for Luther, in all struggles with the *Anfechtungen*.

LUTHER'S TEMPTATIONS

In regard to Luther's own experiences of *Anfechtung*, one can readily observe how these struggles lasted all of his life. At various times he was sorely tempted by those from on "high" and on "low", from the "left" and the "right." The *Anfechtungen* in the monastery were largely those from on "high"; that is in his failure to enjoy the assurance of saving faith, new life and salvation.¹⁶

With his discovery of the Reformation faith,¹⁷ Luther found at least temporary release from his monastic *Anfechtungen*. However, in leading the Reformation movement, the *Anfechtungen* from on high returned with renewed vengeance. Early in 1527, he began to suffer one of his longest and most intense states of spiritual anxiety and depression.¹⁸

One of the first direct clues about this internal crisis is his report of a haunting inner voice that plagued him with soul-searching questions. " 'Du bist allein Klug? You alone know everything? But what if you were wrong, and if you should lead all these people into error and into eternal damnation?' " ¹⁹ Self-reproach plummeted him into the utter depths of despair where he was forced to reflect upon his having survived the turmoil of the Reformation this long. Hundreds of martyrs died for

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 64: "Luther's monastery temptations were a reaction to the failed attempt of work righteousness. At first things went well with Luther in the monastery; the devil was peaceful and quiet. But then he soon noticed that his striving was a crab-like progression, in which one only became ever more insecure in spite of all attempts to lead a holy life. So that he, as others, almost became insane in his desire to no longer have sin in him."

¹⁷ See Luther's description of his "Tower Experience" in his "Preface to Latin Writings": LW 34, *Career of the Reformer* IV, pp. 337ff.

¹⁸ Some scholars have postulated that in each occurrence of Luther's prolonged depressions, including 1527, there was an intense physical illness that actually precipitated the emotional upheaval. An exhaustive analysis in support of this theory is Wilhelm Ebstein, *Dr. Martin Luthers Krankheiten und deren Einfluss auf seinen koerperlichen und geistigen Zustand* (Stuttgart, 1908). In more recent years, another work in favour of this same interpretation has appeared: Annemarie Halder's *Das Harnsteinleiden Martin Luthers* (Trier, 1969)—a study of Luther's stones in the bladder between 1537 and 1546.

No doubt there is a direct connection between Luther's physical, emotional and spiritual health. However, to presuppose only physiological roots to the *Anfechtungen* is not accurate and certainly not comprehensive in my view. In fact, Luther observed that it often worked in the reverse for him; his worries and anxieties precipitated bodily illnesses—. . . You know the proverb, 'Imagination produces misfortune'. Therefore, you ought to take pains to divert rather than to entertain such notions. I too must do this. For our adversary, the devil, walks about seeking not only to devour our souls but also to weaken our bodies with thoughts of our souls in the hope that he might perhaps slay our bodies, for he knows that our physical health depends in large measure on the thoughts in our minds. This is in accord with the saying, 'Good cheer is half the battle', and 'A merry heart doeth good like medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones' . . ."—to Conrad Cordatus, May 21, 1537, Tappert, p. 99 *Weimarer Ausgabe*. Br, VIII, 79.

¹⁹ Quoted by Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1952/1962), p. 241.

their faith. Thousands died in the peasant tumult. "I was not worthy to shed my blood for Christ as many of my fellow confessors of the Gospel have done. . . ." ²⁰

There is little actual symptomatology recorded of Luther's melancholy during this prolonged period of time. This is no doubt due in part at least to the general nature of the depressive state. There is often great agitation or extreme lethargy, so much so that very little, if anything, coherent or rational is produced by the sufferer. Luther once commented, "If I live longer, I would like to write a book about *Anfechtungen*, for without them no person is able to know Holy Scripture, nor faith, the fear and love of God; indeed he is not able to know what the Spirit is, having never been in temptations." ²¹

Nevertheless, there are a few descriptive pieces of information from which to draw together something of what Luther endured during this severe and lasting trial of body and soul. He reports initially of experiencing severe anxiety with cardiac complications: "*Mein Herz zappelt*", (My heart quivers). ²² He then broke down with intense crying spells and periods of profuse sweating. He was convinced that his death was imminent and that he must pass over that fateful threshold without any hope, or faith, or justification. "For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy of God." ²³

In addition to a complete loss of self-confidence, Luther's state of despair was aggravated by his run-down (physical) condition. He suffered severe bouts of indigestion, constipation, and painful kidney stones. He also mentioned *Ohrensausen*, an annoying ringing or buzzing in his ears, probably caused by an infection in the middle-ear. ²⁴

Given these symptoms, it is not too difficult to imagine some of the physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering of Luther during this time. The distasteful physical ailments, the loss of conscious faith and self-esteem, and the foreboding question, "*Was hast du gepredigt?*" (What have you preached?) became a disparaging aggregate hounding him day and night. "The devil has often troubled me by saying, 'Who commanded you to teach against monasteries?' Or again, 'Before there was glorious peace, but now you have disturbed it, and who ordered you to do so?' " ²⁵

"Above all, we must be certain that this our teaching is the Word of God. When this is established, we shall be sure that the cause must and will remain and that no devil can suppress it. God be praised, I am certain that it is the Word of our Lord God. I have driven from my heart all other beliefs in the world, whatever they may be, and I have almost overcome that most difficult of all thoughts which arises in the heart, 'Do you claim to be the only one who has the true Word of God and no one

²⁰ Quoted by Bainton, p. 360.

²¹ WA, TR, No. 4777

²² WA VIII, 482, quoted by Erikson, p. 243. I wish to acknowledge Erikson's help in extracting this clinical information about Luther's chronic state.

²³ Quoted by Bainton, p. 361.

²⁴ Erikson, p. 244

²⁵ LW 54, No. 525, Spring, 1533, p. 96.

else has it?' In this sense — that is, in the name of the church — they are now attacking us most severely. . . ."²⁶

This report by Luther was given some four years after 1527. In it he still refers to this one question as the most difficult and the one he has yet to master: "Do you claim to be the only one who has the true Word of God . . .?" It is little wonder that when he was overtaken by despair, this inner question would completely overwhelm his consciousness with great force and accusation, without any of the usual defense on his part.

LEARNING TO COPE

Luther tried at first to respond to the accusations of this inner voice by pointing to his achieved status as a distinguished Doctor of Theology, but without success. In his confusion, he could no longer properly distinguish between Law and Gospel.²⁷ Despite heroic efforts, he could not pray.²⁸ In his desperation he requested someone to read the Lord's Prayer "*mit hellen Worten*"²⁹ (loud and clear). Slowly he began to hear the Word of the Lord speak to him again. ". . . (When) Christ comes and talks to you as if to a sinner and tortures you like Moses: 'What have you done?' — slay him to death. But when he talks to you as God does, and as a savior, prick up both ears."³⁰

As Luther began to allow his heart and mind to bask in the revealed Word of Christ, recorded in the Scriptures, his mood of despondency and self-accusation gradually began to lift. "The true Christian pilgrimage is not to Rome or Compostela, but to the prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospels." In turning his thoughts to God, he recalled the promise of the First Commandment, "I am the Lord thy God". "In such a case we must say, 'Let go everything in which I have trusted. Lord, thou alone givest help and comfort. Thou hast said that thou wouldst help me. I believe thy Word. O my God and Lord, I have from thee a joyful and comforting Word. I hold to it. I know thou wilt not lie to me. No matter how thou mayest appear, thou wilt keep what thou hast promised, that and nothing else'."³¹

In addition to the Scriptures as objective aids in his spiritual struggles, Luther prized highly Baptism and the Lord's Supper. "Heaven is a gift that has been freely given me. I have documents and a seal to prove it. That is, I have been baptized and partake of the Sacrament. Therefore, guard your documents well, lest the devil tear them up; that is, remain in the fear of the Lord and pray the Lord's Prayer . . ."³² ". . . Our Lord God is so hostile to such disputation [re: predestination] that he instituted Baptism, the Word, and the Sacrament as signs to counteract it. We should rely on these and say: 'I have been baptized. I believe in Jesus Christ. I have received the Sacrament.' . . . If we despise this foundation and in the devil's

²⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 130, between November 30 and December 14, 1531, p. 18.

²⁷ See Erikson, p. 244

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Enders VI, 298, quoted by Erikson, p. 244

³⁰ WA, TR 11, 2655a, quoted by Erikson, p. 244

³¹ Quoted by Bainton, pp. 365-367

³² WA, TR 11, No. 1924, 1530

name start building at the roof, we shall surely fall . . .”³³

The fellowship of the church is also seen by Luther as extremely valuable in this regard. “No one should be alone when he opposes Satan. The church and the ministry of the Word were instituted for this purpose, that hands may be joined together and one may help another. If the prayer of one doesn’t help, the prayer of another will.”³⁴

At another time, Luther suggested, “Having been taught by experience I can say how you ought to restore your spirit when you suffer from spiritual depression. When you are assailed by gloom, despair, or a troubled conscience, you should eat, drink, and talk with others. If you can find help from yourself by thinking of a girl, do so.”³⁵ Of course, everyone must guard against eating and drinking too much. “Copious drinking benefits me when I am in this condition. But I would not advise a young person to drink more because this might stimulate his sexual desire. In short, abstinence is beneficial for some and a drinking bout for others.”³⁶

A revival of music and good exercise was also recommended. “I especially admire these two noble exercises, music and gymnastics. The first of these pertains to the spirit and serves to drive away care, while the second pertains to the body and practises the limbs by jumping and wrestling.”³⁷ As Bainton observes, “In all this advice to flee the fray Luther was in a way prescribing faith as a cure for lack of faith. To give up the argument is of itself an act of faith akin to the *Gelassenheit* of the mystics, an expression of confidence in the restorative power of God, who operates in the subconscious while man occupies himself with extraneous things.”³⁸

HELP FROM OTHERS

In his experiences with the *Anfechtungen*, Luther often requested the personal assistance of others. The value of this kind of personal help was profoundly impressed upon him early in his career, beginning with his sojourn in the monastery.

A professor of Ecclesiastical History, James MacKinnon, has observed that during those early years, Luther was well acquainted with the “mystical-evangelical element in medieval thought”³⁹ as represented by such authorities as St. Bernard,⁴⁰ Bonaventure,⁴¹ and Gerson.⁴² However, of the three, only Gerson proved to be of some initial help during Luther’s experience of the *Anfechtungen* in the monastery. He discovered in Gerson, one who knew about “the temptations of the spirit”.⁴³ Ger-

³³ WA, TR 11, No. 2631b, Autumn, 1532, trans. Tappert, p. 122

³⁴ LW 54, No. 469, Spring 1533, p. 78

³⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 122, November 30, 1531, pp. 17-18

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18

³⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 3470, October 27, 1536, p. 206

³⁸ Bainton, p. 364

³⁹ James MacKinnon, *Luther and the Reformation*. Vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1925), p. 123

⁴⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux (ca. 1091-1153).

⁴¹ “Bonaventure (1221-1274) was a Franciscan whose mystical and dialectical writings occupy an important place in the history of medieval thought.” LW 54, p. 112, n. 388.

⁴² Jean Gerson (1363-1429)

⁴³ MacKinnon, p. 123

son also helped him to reflect theologically about his experience. "Distrust of self and all its works, humility and suffering constitute the condition of the operation of God's mercy and goodness. Only such does God save as turn to Him in their impotence, doubt and fear."⁴⁴ But Luther could find no comfort in the speculative, mystical writing of Bonaventure. "He (Luther) was unable by force of will and intellectual abstraction to reason himself out of his spiritual trouble into the higher plane of mystical speculation."⁴⁵ In Luther's words, "I have read Bonaventure on this, and he almost drove me mad because I desired to experience the union of God with my soul (about which he babbles) through a union of intellect and will. Such theologians are nothing but fanatics."⁴⁶

In the considered opinion of another historian, Julius Koestlin, the most influential person to guide Luther through his early *Anfechtungen* was John Staupitz, Vicar-General of the Augustinians.⁴⁷ Though he did not always fully understand or appreciate Luther's spiritual struggles, Staupitz did not abandon him. He offered a great deal of pastoral interest and counsel, assuring Luther these trials were necessary. "The self-reliant heart fails to find the grace of God as it is in its essential nature and as it is freely offered to all."⁴⁸

Luther always remembered the advice that Staupitz gave him early in his career. "Finally, when I was sad and downcast, Staupitz started to talk to me at table and asked, 'Why are you so sad?' I replied, 'Alas, what am I to do?' Then he said, 'You don't know how necessary this is for you; otherwise nothing good will come of you.' He himself didn't understand [what he said], for he thought I was too learned and that I would become haughty if I remained free of spiritual trials. But I took his words like Paul's, 'A thorn was given me in the flesh to keep me from being too elated; my power is made perfect in weakness' [II Cor. 12:7,9]. Therefore I accepted his words as the voice of the Holy Spirit comforting me."⁴⁹

Philip Watson, a systematic theologian, gives an excellent summary of the wise theological counsel that Staupitz offered to Luther. "First, that love for God and righteousness was only the beginning of true penitence, not its end and completion. This made clear to him the vanity of 'making pretences to God' with the 'forced and feigned love' that was all he could himself produce; for if repentance meant a complete change of heart, then only God could effect it by His prevenient grace. Secondly, when he spoke of distress he felt at the thought of predestination, Staupitz sought to lead him away from such thoughts. 'In the wounds of Christ [he said] is predestination understood and found, and nowhere else; for it is written: Him shall ye hear (Matthew 17:5). The Father is too high, therefore He says: I will give a way by which men may come to Me . . . in Christ you shall find what and who I am, and what I will; otherwise you will not find it either in heaven or on earth.' Lastly, Staupitz urged

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124

⁴⁶ LW 54, *Table Talk*, No. 644, p. 112

⁴⁷ Julius Koestlin, *The Theology of Luther*, trans. Charles E. Hay (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publishing Society, 1897), 1, p. 63

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69

⁴⁹ LW 54, *Table Talk*, No. 518, pp. 94-95

Luther to study his Bible, to know it chapter and verse, and become a good *textualist et localis*; and he helped him to do so, moreover, by overcoming his reluctance to take his Doctorate and inducing him to accept a Professorship in Biblical exegesis.”⁵⁰

With this kind of pastoral direction and his disciplined study of Scripture, particularly of the Book of Romans, Luther finally found deliverance from his intense distress from on “high” — about a righteous God in relation to sinners such as himself.⁵¹ Upon gaining a new spiritual relationship with God, based not upon his own, but on God’s righteousness in Christ, Luther gained a whole new “lease” on life during those early years. Christ no longer appeared only as a stern judge or task-master to him, but also as a compassionate friend and Saviour, ready to accept sinners. Through this experience of spiritual renewal with the help of others, Luther confesses he was inwardly warmed by the immense love of God and filled with new hope even in the midst of trial and opposition.⁵²

NECESSITY OF TRIALS — GOD’S VISITATION

How does Luther understand his experiences of *Anfechtung* theologically? The first principle he reiterates in earlier and later writings, as well as in the *Table Talk*, is rather startling. Rather than assert that the *Anfechtungen* are something for a Christian to fear and avoid, he concludes precisely the opposite. The most dangerous state of all for the Christian, he asserts, is the time when there is no distress.⁵³ In spite of the physical pain, the emotional agony or the spiritual turmoil that is involved to a greater or lesser degree, Luther believes strongly that the *Anfechtungen* are a natural dimension of the Christian experience. In his view, these repeated experiences are definitely opportunities for God to reveal something more of Himself within the Christian

⁵⁰ Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God!* (London: The Epworth Press, 1947), pp. 19-20

⁵¹ See Horts Beintker, *Die Ueberwindung der Anfechtung bei Luther* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1954). This work is based on a study of Luther’s early commentary on Psalms 1519-21. Beintker offers the following conclusion: “The security of the heart—which is in the forgiveness of sins where hope rules—stands and falls with faith . . . The sinner in the sight of God has fear only and he is driven still farther into it by the devil and held captive therein! But God does not hate the sinner, only those who will not acknowledge that they are sinners. The victory over our fear consequently consists in the insight that God justifies sinners; and Luther knows only one danger that leads away from the certainty of salvation, when justifying faith itself is lost from view.” pp. 194-195.

⁵² MacKinnon, pp. 151-156. Luther never regarded himself as all sufficient and from time to time would seek out colleagues such as John Bugenhagen, Justus Jonas, Philip Melancthon for help. Even his wife Katy was particularly helpful to him during some of his struggles with the *Anfechtungen*.

⁵³ LW 44, *The Christian in Society I*, “Treatise on Good Works—1520”; p. 47: “For who lives an hour without trials? I will make no mention of the trials of adversity which are countless. The most dangerous trial of all is when there is no trial, when everything is all right and running smoothly . . . That is when a man tends to forget God, to become too independent and put his time of prosperity to a wrong use. In fact, at this time he has more need to call upon God’s name than in adversity.” Cf. WA TR No. 3678: “The temptation of faith is the gravest, for faith ought to conquer all other temptations and calamities. If faith succumbs to temptation, all the others, even the smallest, attack the human being. But where faith is healthy, all other temptations must decrease. That is the thorn of Paul (II Cor. 12:7), the temptation against faith, a great spit and post that go through spirit and flesh. It is not a temptation of the carnal libido as the papists dream, who have felt no other temptation other than fleshly lust; they have not experienced such great sorrows of faith.” Cf. Beintker, p. 194.

dimension to life. "Therefore, we should willingly endure the hand of God in this and in all suffering. Do not be worried; indeed such a trial is the very best sign of God's grace and love for man."⁵⁴ Here Luther is alluding to such passages of Scripture as, "Blessed is the man whom thou dost chasten O Lord"⁵⁵; "For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives"⁵⁶; and "Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent."⁵⁷ Hence, a Christian should ". . . thank God for deeming him worthy of such a visitation, of which many thousands of people remain deprived."⁵⁸

Though the *Anfechtungen* were considered necessary, equivalent often to personal revelations from God, Luther admits they are not easily accepted as such. "Now even if He hides His love from me, and it seems so to you also, that is His way . . . As He says in the Book of Moses, He wishes to dwell in darkness . . . We may see only His back. We indeed become cast down, but we are not deserted."⁵⁹

This common experience within *Anfechtung* points to an additional theological principle taught by Luther about the "hidden" and "revealed" God. "God is incomprehensible and invisible, and hence whatever is comprehended and seen is not God. It can also be expressed another way. God is both visible and invisible. He is visible through His Word and work. Apart from His Word and work one should not look for Him."⁶⁰

This unique understanding of God's revelation is based ultimately upon the cross, the death and resurrection of Christ. "Because the revelation of God takes place on the cross everything depends upon the Word and upon faith. The Word and faith are the marks of the revelation which is concealed under its contrary."⁶¹

There is a more complete and systematic treatment of that which is "hidden" and "revealed" in Luther's *Work On the Bondage of the Will*.⁶² Faith has to do with things which are not readily visible or discerned.⁶³ "Thus that there may be room for faith, everything which is believed must be concealed; but it cannot be more deeply concealed than under the contrary appearance, sensation, and experience. Thus when God brings to life, he does it by killing; when he justifies, he does it by making guilty; when he exalts to heaven, he does it by leading to hell . . . Thus he conceals his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal anger, his righteousness under unrighteousness."⁶⁴

Not only are the experiences of *Anfechtung* valuable to make "room" for faith,

⁵⁴ LW 42, *Devotional Writings* 1, p. 184.

⁵⁵ Psalm 94:12.

⁵⁶ Hebrews 12:6.

⁵⁷ Revelation 3:19.

⁵⁸ LW 42, p. 143.

⁵⁹ WA, TR, No. 3669; cf. Beintker, p. 195: "Temptation, yes, but also consolation. This is the way it has to be. Our Lord God assails us vigorously, by He does not desert us."

⁶⁰ LW 54, *Table Talk*, No. 257, p. 35.

⁶¹ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 236. See also Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), "Luther's Doctrine of the Hidden God", pp. 27-49.

⁶² LW 33, *Career of the Reformer*, pp. 62ff.

⁶³ Hebrews 11:1

⁶⁴ LW 33, p. 62.

they also help teach total dependence upon the promises of God and His sustaining power.⁶⁵ Certainly this was part of the reason why the patriarchs had to endure such crushing annoyances at times.⁶⁶ In short, all of these challenges to our welfare mean for Luther, "To hold firm!"⁶⁷

What Luther advised others, in their times of despondency, was not always easy to put into practice in his own life. There were times, particularly during prolonged instances of anguish, when he found himself arguing rather impatiently with God, because no satisfactory answers to his dilemmas were apparent. "I dispute much with God with great impatience and I hold him to his promises."⁶⁸ With this attitude of faith, as Bainton points out, Luther found a great deal of comfort from such Biblical accounts as the Canaanite woman who gained her wish, when she was bold enough to argue with Christ on the basis of His Word.⁶⁹ Luther's commentary on this passage is, "All this is written for our comfort that we should see how deeply God hides his face and how we must not go by our feeling but only by his Word. All Christ's answers sounded like no, but he did not mean no. He had not said that she was not of the house of Israel. He had not said that she was a dog. He had not said no. Yet all his answers were more like no than yes. This shows how our heart feels in despondency. It seems nothing but a plain no. Therefore it must turn to the deep hidden yes under the no and hold with a firm faith to God's Word."⁷⁰

In relating to God and in searching for inner peace, Luther is hereby offering the profound religious insight that one must ultimately reach underneath the apparent "no's" of life, all the way through to the eternal "yes's". Having accepted this kind of "in depth" theology, it is understandable how Luther could eventually work through his prolonged identity crisis in 1527, with renewed conviction of Christian faith and self-affirmation. To attest to this remarkable victory, one need only recall that it was out of this period of his most intense and agonizing depression that he composed the glorious Reformation Hymn that has been sung and resung countless times from that fateful year of suffering to the present time, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott". (Psalm 46)⁷¹

ASSAULTS BY THE DEVIL

In Luther's view there is a continual struggle between God and the devil — be-

⁶⁵ WA, TR No. 835. "But such temptations are not only necessary for us, but they are good and useful for us. Otherwise, we would continue to go along without any fear of God; would not call upon Him for help; for whoever is healthy and happy does not need a physician nor comforter. Thus the devil could easily deceive him. In addition, temptation is also useful in making us live in the fear of God, walk circumspectly, pray without ceasing, grow in the knowledge of Christ and learn to understand the power of His Word. And even though we as yet are weak, yet the power of our Lord Christ is strong in the weak (II Cor. 12:9)."

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, TR No. 1333.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Quoted by Bainton, p. 362.

⁶⁹ Matthew 15:21-28. Other examples are 1) Mary's response to Jesus' rebuke at the Marriage feast at Cana, John 2:1-12 and 2) Jacob's wrestling with the angel, Genesis 32:24-31.

⁷⁰ WA 17, 11, p. 202, quoted by Bainton, p. 363.

⁷¹ See *Service Book and Hymnal*, Authorized by the Lutheran Churches cooperating in The Commission on the Liturgy and Hymnal (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1958/1964), trans. Frederick H. Hedge, No. 150, cf. LW 53, pp. 284-285.

tween the Holy Spirit and the force of evil. "God makes alive; the devil kills . . . as Jeremiah says; He has pleasure in life, but death came into the world because of the devil's jealousy and malice."⁷² Or, put in reference to the Son of God, "Christ says, I am the truth and the life — the devil, I am death and lies."⁷³ Ultimately, it is Christ alone who can overcome the cunning of the devil. "The devil indeed is not a recognized doctor of theology, but otherwise highly learned and experienced, for after all he has now been practising his art, tested and exercised it, carried on his trade for almost six thousand years! Against him, Christ alone can prevail. Nevertheless, he tried his art and cunning on Him also when he lustingly said to Him: 'If you fall down and worship me, I will give you all the kingdoms of the whole world, etc.' He no longer says as previously: 'If thou be the Son of God', but simply, 'I am god, you are my creature, for all of the might and glory of the world is mine, and I give them to whom I will; if you worship me, I shall give them to you.' Christ cannot stand this blasphemy, and calls him by his right name, saying: 'Get thee hence Satan, etc'."⁷⁴

Therefore, as the devil attempted to dissuade Christ, likewise he attacks Christ's followers with every form of suffering. "All despondency and sadness come from the devil, for he is the Lord of death [Hebrews 2:14], especially when a person is sad and afraid as if God were an ungracious God. This is certainly the work of the devil and his machination."⁷⁵

Hence many vexations of body, mind, and spirit are not to be interpreted as visitations from God. A fundamental principle of Luther's theology allows definite space for influences by the devil. Hans-Martin Barth reminds us that Luther's position on the devil flows from his understanding of God in Christ and must be evaluated in this context. Natural man without Christ cannot distinguish the devil from God. The devil seems divine and God seems evil to unenlightened man. But with the revelation of God in Christ, God and the devil can be properly distinguished.⁷⁶

If the devil can be differentiated from God in Christ, and his ways from God's ways, why is it that we still tend to believe the devil more readily than in God? Luther

⁷² WA, TR No. 6826.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, No. 5940. For a more complete theological examination of Luther's teaching on the devil, see Harmannus Obendiek, *Der Teufel bei Martin Luther* (Berlin: Furche-Verlag G.m.b.H., 1931). Obendiek states that the importance of Luther's concept of the devil must be drawn from many different sources, as Luther does not give a systematic presentation of his concepts on the devil, p. 33.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* No. 724.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 832.

⁷⁶ Hans-Martin Barth, *Der Teufel und Jesus Christus in der Theologie Martin Luthers* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), p. 209: One cannot do justice to the theological facts if we consider the devil with Luther to be only a rudiment of the world of faith of the Middle Ages . . . Luther meets the devil where he meets Christ. He recognizes him as the one who strives to take the place of Christ. While for Luther Christ is essentially mediator, connector, and reconciliator with God the Father, essentially the devil for him is the interrupter of this connection, instigator of all separation from the Father, indeed by seeking to eliminate the true mediator . . . Now since God can act in a devilish way and the devil in a godly way, for man without Christ—God and the devil are impossible to differentiate . . . Only in looking to Jesus Christ do God and the devil step apart for the believer. Therefore, the devil makes every effort to hinder and bann people from looking up to Jesus Christ. This is why for Luther, the devil has his necessary theological place in opposition to Christ, against His Word and against the working of His Word."

gives a very interesting answer to this question in terms of one's natural disposition. "We are better skilled and lean more to doubt than to hope. Hope comes from the Holy Spirit and is His work; but doubt comes from our spirit and is our doing."⁷⁷ In another place he reminds us that each person must wrestle with his own peculiar temptations. "For no one is content with his lot. The married man wishes to be single; the single man to be married; the master to be servant, and servant master; the pauper rich, and the rich man desires even more!"⁷⁸

Since the devil is "lord of death", he often uses anxiety about the reality of death as one of the most intense threats to the well-being of people. "He has more vials full of poison than all drug-stores, and if one won't do it another will!"⁷⁹

As mentioned, Luther holds the devil responsible for the very existence of death; ". . . for death came into the world as a result of the satanic seduction into inherited sin."⁸⁰ Since it is impossible to trace death back to God, this conclusion is logical for Luther. The source of death and destruction must be none other than the devil. Therefore, in all cases of fear over impending death or bereavement, Luther would accuse the devil as the author behind the scene of this most severe form of *Anfechtung*.

Ultimately, the devil and all forms of the *Anfechtungen* are seen as subordinated to God and are active only in accord with His permissive will. "For it is now recognized that the devil in spite of all his power is in fact nothing. Even if he were to gain all things, he is nevertheless only a creature of God."⁸¹ Therefore, in one way at least, it appears everything we experience in our lives comes from God, whether that is good or evil.

How can this be understood? Reflecting Luther, Buehler points back to the difference between God's permissive will and immediate or direct cause. "The devil is permitted, so to speak, only to cast snow-balls at us in a way that approaches the burden of what we can well bear, yet not overcome us."⁸² This permission by God is granted without his actually causing the suffering directly.

With this kind of a formulation, an impression of dualism might be aroused, God and the devil as equals. But this is not the teaching of Luther. As already noted, there is a strict subordination of the devil to God. "The devil is nothing else than a tool of God . . . He is a bad instrument but God can use such too, in order to advance that which is good through that which is bad. The superiority of God is shown in this that the devil, in all his raging, must remain within the limits of the will of God."⁸³

LAW — GOSPEL AND MOOD DEFLATION

Another dimension to Luther's theological analysis of the *Anfechtungen* has to do with the Law-Gospel paradox. At first glance we might conclude the concept "Law

⁷⁷ WA, TR No. 388.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 3816.

⁷⁹ Buehler, p. 53.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

and Gospel” belongs solely to doctrinal theology and has little place in experiential Christianity. However, upon further reflection, and with Luther’s help, we can begin to appreciate the broad application of this Biblical theme and how it relates closely to daily life. . . . The Law makes its demands, accusations, and condemnations leading to feelings about falling short of the mark. The Gospel offers grace and blessing freely, resulting in forgiveness of sins and new life.

It is often during a time of severe trial or temptation that the Law adds additional guilt, accusation and blame: “It is difficult to dismiss the burden and curse of the Law in times of temptation. . . . When the Law . . . threatens you with the wrath of God and death, then you must take courage.”⁸⁴ For Luther, it is one of the devil’s cunning and insidious ways to use the Law to terrify us when we are down. “. . . (The devil) makes beams out of small splinters, something that is probably no sin or very small ones, and makes a real hell out of them (Matt. 7:3).”⁸⁵

To take a case in point: someone arrived at Luther’s home where-upon the visitor was questioned: “Why are you so down-hearted?” Answer: “Oh, dear doctor, I find myself dwelling on thoughts that are sour and I cannot do anything about it. I am unable properly to distinguish between Law and Gospel.”⁸⁶ As the conversation unfolded, Luther concurred with the self diagnosis of the visitor and attempted to reassure the young man that these trials were necessary but also that God’s grace and His Word were sufficient to hold him even in this time of testing.

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

One of the first positive outcomes of experiences with *Anfechtungen* through the years, Luther claimed, was that it helped him learn more about theology. “I didn’t learn my theology all at once. I had to ponder over it ever more deeply, and my spiritual trials were of help to me in this, for one does not learn anything without practice.”⁸⁷

Along with learning more theology in depth, Luther gained a tremendous awareness and acceptance of the basic human condition. Troubled persons could sense in him, a humble fellow-sojourner who experienced many of the same depressive anxieties as they did. One “objective” factor in appraising the significance of this identification is the large numbers of people who sought out his spiritual counsel. The volumes of *Table Talks* alone attest to this fact.

Bainton gives a further assessment of his genuine appeal among the people at Wittenberg. “Luther was equally great in sermons preached from the pulpit, the lectures delivered in the class hall, and the prayers voiced in the upper room. His versatility is genuinely amazing. No one in his own generation was able to vie with him.”⁸⁸

Another indication of Luther’s deep understanding of the human condition and his meaningful spiritual insights can be seen in the far-reaching appeal of his *Devotional*

⁸⁴ WA, TR No. 6699.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 6629.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 1557.

⁸⁷ LW 54, *Table Talk*, No. 352, Fall, 1532, pp. 50-51.

⁸⁸ Bainton, p. 348.

Writings. Gerhard Ebeling has concluded, "Of about 30 works of this nature which Luther published between March 1517 and the summer of 1520, we know of 370 impressions by 1520 . . . There is evidence extant that every popular devotional work which Luther published up to the summer of 1520, that is, until the appearance of the 'Letter to the Nobility', was reprinted an average of twelve times, sometimes less, sometimes more, and in most cases as often as twenty-four times."⁸⁹ No doubt there were many different factors that combined in producing this effect, such as ecclesiastical abuses, political ferment, social upheavals, and not least, a deep religious discontent. However, in response to these factors, Luther spoke new words of comfort and hope, ". . . with the liberty of one who is completely absorbed by what he has to say, and with the practicality of one who is hitting the nail right on the head."⁹⁰

Another group of extant writings (in addition to his *Sermons Devotional Writings* and *Biblical Commentaries*) that graphically illustrates Luther's popularity in pastoral care is his *Letters*. There are some 2,580 *Letters* in existence of which Luther's authorship is certain.⁹¹ These *Letters* often address a wide range of matters from personal private concerns to matters of national interest. Most of them portray Luther's pastoral counsel drawn from his immediate experience and study of the Word.

Horst Beintker concludes that Luther had gained an exceptional theological understanding in and through the *Anfechtungen*. He says, "It belonged to the central purpose of his theology and sermons, to set in true perspective the meaning of temptation and sorrow for the Christian life."⁹² He explains further Luther's position that *Anfechtung* has to do with God and man. As such it is "part and parcel" of justification through which God refines and cleanses man. "Thus the question has less to do with temptation in itself as precisely with the help issuing from God in overcoming temptation through faith."⁹³ Not only did people flock to Luther because he could identify with them, but they came for the specific spiritual help, direction, and insight he could offer.

All of this "objective" evidence, i.e. *Sermons*, *Table Talks*, *Devotional Writings* and *Letters* shows Luther relating intimately to the human condition. The words he shares pastorally are drawn from the Scripture, tempered by his own deep and varied experiences with the *Anfechtungen*. In his dialogues with others, he offers essentially what he has found helpful himself. "It is therefore the greatest gift of God to have a text and to be able to say, 'This is right. I know it!'"⁹⁴

In addition to his identification with the human condition, there are many other implications for pastoral care that can be drawn from Luther's experience with *Anfechtungen*. Examples alluded to earlier are the resources of Word and Sacraments, prayer, pastoral help of others, value of music and Christian fellowship. But one of the most profound implications for pastoral care, not at all obvious to a casual observer, is the spiritual motivation to keep going! Luther's personal struggles

⁸⁹ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther*, pp. 57-58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁹¹ LW 48, *Letters I*, p.xiii.

⁹² Beintker, "Vorwort"

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ LW 54, *Table Talk*, No. 352, Fall, 1532, p. 51.

challenged him to make a much more profound examination of suffering that comes from the "left" and "right" from the "low" or "high" places.⁹⁵ Our challenge, too, is to look through or beyond the pain and realize with Luther, that each serious experience of *Anfechtung* is unique and calls faith into question. To help troubled parishioners or ourselves, we should also include a recognition of this vital faith dimension. This requires a deep inner spiritual motivation and serenity to look "through" the turmoil, to the true cause of the anxiety at hand.

In John's Gospel Jesus says to his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; . . ."⁹⁶ In a *Sermon* on this specific passage of Scripture, Luther begins by explaining what Jesus means by using the term friend. "This friendship — the fact that I call you my friends — you do not have from yourselves; you have it because I chose you as friends through my suffering and death, and because I acknowledge you as my friends."⁹⁷

Later in this sermon, Luther continues this theme. While it is true that we do nothing to merit forgiveness of sins or eternal life, yet we must not be idle. "You need not go to Rome or to Jerusalem, but you are to go to your neighbour. You are not to sit still without fruits and works; but you are to come into the open and let other people benefit from you and also gain from your message, confession, service and help."⁹⁸ All of these things we should freely offer others out of a deep inner motivation, a voluntary response to the One who calls us friends.

To conclude, we note the assessment by two historians of Luther's enduring, positive contributions as a pastor. Gerhard Ritter has said, "The most general and permanent achievement of his life lies in his own personal secret: in his life with God and in the direct relationship of all his thinking and willing with him. . . . It is in his simple religious insights that we find the true meaning of the man."⁹⁹ John T. McNeill adds that it is rather surprising to learn about the amount of time Luther spent in helping troubled people. "(He) exhibits human warmth and reality in these matters, the product of his own vivid experience and emotional force . . . not as one conscious of superior attainment, . . . but as a sinful and tempted Christian who is glad to bring such spiritual remedies as he has learned from Scripture and experience to the aid of those who ask, or need, his brotherly help."¹⁰⁰ No doubt, one of the fundamental reasons for his willingness to share was the fact that Luther's pastoral theology was so directly tempered and refined by his own intense and sometimes prolonged experience with the *Anfechtungen*!

⁹⁵ For an explanation of these terms, see the "Definition and Classification" of *Anfechtungen* at the beginning of this paper.

⁹⁶ John 15:14 (R.S.V.)

⁹⁷ LW 24, *Sermons*, p. 258.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁹⁹ Gerhard Ritter, *Luther, His Life and Work*, trans. John Riches (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row Publishers, 1959), p. 210.

¹⁰⁰ John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1951), p. 174.