

## CHAPTER V

### LUTHER'S ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

REFORMATION, LIKE REVIVAL, HAS TO START SOMEWHERE. More accurately, it has to start in someone, since it is no impersonal phenomenon. It has to do with the Church, and the Church is a body made up of living members. Martin Luther was the chosen instrument through whom God designed to bring renewal in the sixteenth century. The Reformation in that sense began in this man.

But can we determine precisely when it did so? It was neither so soon as the scene on the steps of the Scala Sancta in Rome, where pious legend has overlaid the tale, nor so late as the nailing of the Ninety Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, which was intended to inaugurate a discussion rather than to touch off an explosion. The birthplace of the Reformation was in the tower of the Augustinian monastery at Wittenberg, where Luther sat before an open Bible and met God face to face. This was the divine-human encounter which preceded the movement for reform, and from which it sprang. A man, a Bible – and God: that is how it all began. When God aims to act, it is always through his Word and its impact on personality.

This experience in the tower was at once the climax of Luther's quest for theological clarification, and the issue of his struggle for faith. These two cannot be divorced, as Boehmer reminds us.<sup>1</sup> The inner spiritual experience of Luther and his intellectual enlightenment were intertwined. The event which proved to be the decisive moment in his life involved both these factors. Through it he came to embrace the truth of justification both in the heart and in the head. Luther has left us his own account of the *Türmerlebnis* in his letters and in his *Table Talk*. But the most detailed description is to be found in the preface which he wrote for the collected edition of his Latin works in 1545. He traced his career down to 1519. He continued like this (and we must quote the extract in full because of its significance): "Meanwhile I had already during that year returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skilful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardour for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about

<sup>1</sup> Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, p. 91.

the heart, but a single word in Chapter I (17), 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed,' that had stood in my way. For I hated that word 'righteousness of God,' which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

"Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that He was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, 'As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with His righteousness and wrath!' Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately on Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

"At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live.' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which He makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which He makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

"And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had hated the word 'righteousness of God'. Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when He justifies us. Although this was heretofore said imperfectly and he did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly, it nevertheless was pleasing that God's righteousness with which we are justified was taught. Armed more fully with these thoughts, I began a second time to interpret the Psalter."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> LW. 34. 336-7.

To this account of the tower experience in the preface to his Latin works must be added a further description collected by Conrad Cordatus in the *Table Talk*. "The words 'righteous' and 'righteousness of God' struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified. If God is righteous (I thought), He must punish. But when by God's grace I pondered in the tower and heated room of this building, over the words, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live' (Rom. 1:17) and 'the righteousness of God' (Rom. 3:21), I soon came to the conclusion that if we, as righteous men, ought to live from faith and if the righteousness of God should contribute to the salvation of all who believe, then salvation will not be our merit but God's mercy. My spirit was thereby cheered. For it is by the righteousness of God that we are justified and saved through Christ. These words (which had before terrified me) now became more pleasing to me. The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in this tower."<sup>1</sup> Other versions of the same conversation are almost identical in content.<sup>2</sup>

Another statement by Luther reported by Anthony Lauterbach would also appear to be relevant. "That expression 'righteousness of God' was like a thunderbolt to my heart. When under the papacy I read, 'In thy righteousness deliver me' (Ps. 31:1) and 'in thy truth,' I thought at once that this righteousness was an avenging anger, namely the wrath of God. I hated Paul with all my heart when I read that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel (Rom. 1:16). Only afterward, when I saw the words that follow – namely, that it is written that the righteous shall live through faith (Rom. 1:17) – and in addition consulted Augustine, was I cheered. When I learned that the righteousness of God is His mercy, and that He makes us righteous through it, a remedy was offered to me in my affliction."<sup>3</sup> This excerpt is of particular value and interest in that it harks back to Luther's wrestling with Psalm 30/31, and then shows how "only afterward" in the tower experience did he come to a genuine understanding of God's righteousness. Two more passages in the *Table Talk* corroborate this.<sup>4</sup>

In yet another conversation, recorded this time by Caspar Heydenreich, Luther looked at the same event from a somewhat different angle. "For a long time I went astray (in the monastery) and did not know what I was about. To be sure, I knew something, but I did not know what it was until I came to the text in Romans 1:17, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' That text helped me. There I saw what righteousness Paul was talking about. Earlier in the text I read 'righteousness'. I related the abstract ('righteousness') with the concrete ('the righteous One') and

<sup>1</sup> LW. 54. 193-4. No. 3232c.

<sup>2</sup> WATR. 3. 228. Nos. 3232a and 3232b; cf. WATR. 2. 177. No. 1681.

<sup>3</sup> LW. 54. 308-9. No. 4007.

<sup>4</sup> WATR. 5. 26. No. 5247; 234-5. No. 5553.

became sure of my cause. I learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. I lacked nothing before this except that I made no distinction between the law and the gospel. I regarded both as the same thing and held that there was no difference between Christ and Moses except the times in which they lived and their degrees of perfection. But when I discovered the proper distinction – namely, that the law is one thing and the gospel is another – I made myself free.”<sup>1</sup>

These extracts will have sufficed to show that what happened to Luther in the tower was of determinative significance. This was no incidental occurrence. It was an encounter with God which changed both the man and the course of his life. But before we consider its meaning more fully, the minor questions of where and when it took place must be raised. It is not disputed that the location was somewhere in the tower of the Augustinian (or Black) cloister at Wittenberg. But which room was it? The accounts set down by Cordatus and Lauterbach mentioned not only the tower but also a “heated room” or *hypocaustum*.<sup>2</sup> This is also referred to by Luther in a letter to Justus Jonas in 1529.<sup>3</sup> Does it mean that Luther was simply in the monastic calefactory, or communal warming-room, or is it not more likely that the private study which he occupied as sub-prior was supplied with a fire? Schлагinhaufen closed his entry with a mysterious abbreviation which has been the cause of much speculation.<sup>4</sup> This visitation of the Holy Spirit occurred in a place which is indicated only in shorthand as “cl.” Some have thought that it should really be “sl.” – for *solus*, meaning that the Holy Spirit alone had given Luther this exegetical insight. Others have taken it as “cap.” referring to Chapter One in Romans. But it appears to be quite clearly “cl.,” which has been taken by a number of scholars to be an abbreviation of *cloaca* – the toilet. But the context makes this improbable in the extreme. In any case, the pronoun which precedes it is neuter (*das*) whilst the noun is feminine (*cloaca*).<sup>5</sup> The same objection could be raised against the theory that cl. stands for *cella*. The noun *claustrum*, however, is neuter and Saarnivaara thinks this the most likely interpretation.<sup>6</sup> All Luther would then be telling us in Schлагinhaufen’s account would be that his illumination occurred “in this monastery”. Within the cloister was to be found the heated study from which, as he put it, “he had stormed the Pope”.<sup>7</sup> This *Stüblein* is thought to have been situated on the second floor of the old tower seen in the south-west corner of the building in contemporary etchings.

More complicated is the problem of when this encounter is to be dated.

<sup>1</sup> LW. 54. 442-3. No. 5518.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 193. No. 3232c; 308-309. No. 4007.

<sup>3</sup> End. 6. 117.

<sup>4</sup> WATR. 2. 177. No. 1681.

<sup>5</sup> Saarnivaara, op. cit., p. 48 n. 104. Some texts, however, read “dis” (WATR. 2. 177. No. 1681) or “dieser” (Rörer, Cordatus: WATR. 2. 177 n. 1).

<sup>6</sup> Saarnivaara, op. cit., p. 48 n. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Schwiebert, op. cit., p. 287.

Luther's detailed review in the preface to his Latin works does not really make it clear. At first glance it might be imagined that he is referring throughout to the year 1519 when he was in contact with Karl von Miltitz, a Saxon nobleman who was the emissary of the pope. But a closer examination of the text will show that, after speaking about his second set of lectures on the Psalms, begun in 1518, he goes back in his mind still further to his lectures on Romans (1515-1516). "Up till then" he had not grasped the import of righteousness. But "at last" he began to understand, and as he contemplated Rom. 1:17, he felt that he was indeed born again. Now all this seems to point to some time during his lectures on Romans, or his preparation for them, or it could be even whilst he was delivering his first series on the Psalms in 1513 to 1514. It is enough to state here that, whilst this must be regarded as an open question still, the evidence on the whole would appear to favour a date in the period between late 1513 and early 1515 - perhaps most probably in the autumn of 1514. However, as Kooiman wisely cautions us, the last word has not yet been spoken on this matter.<sup>1</sup>

The 'where' and 'when' of Luther's climacteric experience is much less important than the 'what.' That is to say, it is the nature of the event which matters, not its place or time. It is with what happened that we are chiefly concerned. We are warned by the more recent writers on Luther not to rest more weight on the tower encounter than it will bear. We must be careful, so we are told, not to read into it anything like an evangelical conversion. To speak, as Bainton does, about Luther's Damascus road, is regarded with considerable suspicion.<sup>2</sup> The same sort of reticence now inhibits those who examine the evidence relating to John Wesley's heart-warming in Aldersgate Street, London, in 1738. Of course, it may well be argued that the two instances are not altogether parallel, and that Luther's own testimony is much less explicit. Whilst, then, we must be on our guard, as Rupp admonishes us, against reading into Luther's *Türmerlebnis* any preconceived pattern, we cannot disregard the profound effect it indubitably had on his whole life and mission.<sup>3</sup> Without it he would not have become reformer. The significance of what happened to Luther in this formative period must be measured by what he eventually became as a result of it.

Nevertheless, it has to be recognized that the actual circumstances in which the light broke in upon him were at the last remove from the spectacular. "The third great religious crisis which resolved his turmoil was as the still small voice compared to the earthquake of the first upheaval in the thunderstorm at Stotternheim and the fire of the second

<sup>1</sup> Kooiman, *op. cit.*, p. 43 n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Rupp, *Luther's Progress*, p. 38.

tremor which consumed him at the saying of his first mass," writes Bainton. "No *coup de foudre*, no heavenly apparition, no religious ceremony, precipitated the third crisis. The place was no lonely road in a blinding storm, nor even the holy altar, but simply the study in the tower of the Augustinian monastery. The solution to Luther's problems came in the midst of the performance of the daily task."<sup>1</sup>

Nor in treating the tower experience as decisive do we at all intend to suggest that it was unassociated with what had gone before. This was not something which came out of the blue, as we say. It was a crisis which emerged from a prolonged process, as Luther grappled with the Word of God. What rose to the surface in the moment of illumination had been brewing for a long time. That is why André Jundt can rightly conclude that "the discovery he made of the true sense of God's Word was the outcome not of a sudden inspiration but of long and patient strivings".<sup>2</sup> Imbart de la Tour similarly likens Luther's enlightenment, not to the lightning flash which strikes without warning, but to the brightness of sunrise, gradual and almost imperceptible.<sup>3</sup> Whilst not perhaps being prepared to press those analogies to their limits, we must agree that what happened to Luther in the Black Cloister lay at the end of a long quest as well as at the beginning of a life's work.

Some attempts have been made to draw a line between the religious and theological aspects of Luther's encounters with God. Boehmer warns us very strongly about the danger of doing this.<sup>4</sup> The spiritual and doctrinal crises were inter-related, as the struggles which preceded them had been. For this reason we find it hard to follow Saarnivaara as he separates Luther's personal attainment of faith from his intellectual apprehension of it by as much as six years.<sup>5</sup> The first he would place in 1512 under the influence of Staupitz. The second – the tower event – he postpones to 1518 and interprets primarily as an enlightening of the mind. Whilst preferring to regard Luther's religious and theological emancipation as being achieved in a single experience, we would nevertheless seek to accord due recognition to the intellectual element involved. Luther's own word for what happened to him is *illuminatio*.<sup>6</sup> Light flooded his mind and heart.

When he met God in this way, Luther had no idea where his new insight would lead him, claims Boehmer. "He perceived at first only the liberating and reviving effect it had upon him. The oppression which had weighed so long upon his soul had suddenly vanished. The brazen wall

<sup>1</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, pp. 60–61.

<sup>2</sup> André Jundt, *Le développement de la pensée religieuse de Luther jusqu'en 1517 d'après de Documents inédites* (1905), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> de la Tour, op. cit., Tome II, *L'Église catholique. La crise et la renaissance* (1909), pp. 24–25.

<sup>4</sup> Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, pp. 115–17.

<sup>5</sup> Saarnivaara, op. cit., pp. 34, 121–2.

<sup>6</sup> WA 43. 537; cf. WATR. 2. 177. No. 1681; WATR. 3. 228. No. 3232c.

against which his thought had beaten in vain was finally broken down. Now the stream of his ideas could pour forth unhindered and flow onward in a constantly rising flood. But he was still permitted to mature for four full years without suspecting what his real destiny would be. What he then proclaimed to the world was almost entirely the acquisition or at least, the fruit of those four quiet years in which, still pursuing his own needs, he was able to deepen and extend his new 'insight'.<sup>1</sup>

To this period of preparation for his reforming task we must now turn. We shall see how his encounter with God and his theological realignment in terms of justification by faith was to be reflected in the lectures he continued to deliver in the discharge of his professorial obligations. He had obtained the key to the Scriptures. There now shines through his expositions, declares Schwiebert, "the rich soul-experience through which he understood St. Paul better than had been the case for a thousand years. The God of the New Testament, who had been lost in the maze of medieval fusion of pagan and Christian elements, was once more brought to the light of day. The Bible once more became Christocentric, and Luther's lectures breathed the atmosphere of first-century Christianity".<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this did not happen all at once. There is no dramatic and unmistakable transition. If that were so, then we should be in less doubt as to when exactly the illumination took place. Whilst the discovery of justification by faith crystallized in the tower, the actual change which came over Luther's articulated thinking was not immediate. After all, as Karl Holl explains, he had to undergo a radical reappraisal of his whole conception of God.<sup>3</sup> Assuming, as we have done, though tentatively, that the *Türmerlebnis* took place sometime in the autumn of 1514, we should expect to see the first signs of Luther's new outlook in his lectures on Romans, on which he embarked in November 1515. That this is in fact the case may be judged from James Mackinnon's description of this notable commentary as "a Reform manifesto".<sup>4</sup> It is indeed a declaration of theological independence.

Henri Strohl regarded it as a work of genius "of very great span, of remarkable clarity and vigour".<sup>5</sup> Holl went even further and judged it to be Luther's greatest achievement along with his Galatians in 1535, and thought it still unsurpassed.<sup>6</sup> In his *Romans*, Luther shows that what Anders Nygren called his Copernican revolution has been effected.<sup>7</sup> The centre of gravity in his theology has been transferred from subject to

<sup>1</sup> Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, Bd. I (1921), p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> James Mackinnon, *Luther and the Reformation*, Vol. I, *Early Life and Religious Development to 1517* (1925), p. 176.

<sup>5</sup> Strohl, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Holl, *op. cit.*, Bd. I., p. 420.

<sup>7</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agapé and Eros*, Part II, *The History of the Christian Idea of Love* (E.T. 1939), Vol. II, pp. 463-6. Cf. Heinrich Boehmer, *Luther and the Reformation in the Light of Modern Research* (E.T. 1930), p. 80; Watson, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-38.

object, from man to God. *Soli Deo gloria* was the motto of Luther no less than of Calvin. "Let God be God!" he cried.<sup>1</sup> This Godward reinterpretation of theology is the theme of his lectures on Romans, sounded out like a trumpet in the introduction, and reiterated throughout.<sup>2</sup> "The sum and substance of this letter is: to pull down, to pluck up, and to destroy all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh. . . , no matter how heartily and sincerely they may be practised, and to implant, establish, and make large the reality of sin. . . . For God does not want to save us by our own but by an extraneous righteousness which does not originate in ourselves but comes to us from beyond ourselves, which does not arise on our earth but comes from heaven."<sup>3</sup> The whole relationship between God and man thus rests on a divine basis, not a human one. Luther's revised view of righteousness stems from his God-orientated approach.

Other noticeable features in the lectures on Romans include a more thorough-going treatment of sin, although, as Paul Tschackert points out, Luther has not yet fully worked out his theory of concupiscence.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean sensuality so much as self-love. It is the essence of that egocentricity which thwarts the gracious overtures of God at every turn. Luther parted company with Augustine in recognizing no justifiable self-regard. Original sin is interpreted as implying more than mere deprivation in a purple passage without even a Rembrandtian ray of light to relieve the picture, as Mackinnon put it.<sup>5</sup> "The central motif of these lectures," according to Kooiman, "is that God's Word causes us to see our sin."<sup>6</sup>

In his comments on Romans, Luther plainly interpreted the gospel in terms of grace. The glory of God is seen in His grace.<sup>7</sup> Salvation hangs solely on His merciful will. It is beyond the scope of human effort.<sup>8</sup> The whole root and fount of redemption is in God.<sup>9</sup> Luther agreed with Augustine that grace is not grace unless it is free. Gift and grace are almost interchangeable terms. Grace is creative and regenerative.<sup>10</sup> It is always to be thought of as the personal action of God, and never as the infusion of an abstract quality. In his teaching on justification itself – the crux of his new theology – Luther deviated from Augustine and remained strictly biblical. He preferred to insist rigorously on imputation, which, as Seeberg showed, was for Luther just another name for forgiveness.<sup>11</sup> The imparting of righteousness does not properly belong to justification, but to the resultant process of sanctification. The place of faith is recognized

<sup>1</sup> WA. 10. i. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Skevington Wood, "The Theology of Luther's Lectures on Romans", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 3 (1950), pp. 1-18, 113-26

<sup>3</sup> WA. 56. 157-8. LCC. 15. 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Tschackert, *Die Entstehung der lutherischen und der reformierten Kirchenlehre* (1910), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Mackinnon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> Kooiman, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> WA. 56. 520.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>11</sup> Seeberg, *op. cit.*, Bd. IV, p. 113.



without jeopardizing the sovereignty of grace. Luther defined faith as confidence in God, or belief in the reality of His promises in the Word.<sup>1</sup>

We have been able to do no more than touch and glance upon the salient features of Luther's theological *bouleversement* as evidenced in the pages of his lectures on Romans. He was still advancing toward his fully developed position, for he was one who, as he himself confessed, made progress whilst he wrote and taught. But, as Wilhelm Pauck observes, "we can clearly recognize in these writings the thinker who was to become the reformer of the Church and, as such, the one who introduced a new biblical theology into Christendom."<sup>2</sup>

We can only mention the other lectures belonging to this period. They do not, however, stand in quite the same outstanding category as those on Romans. They continue all the same to bear the stamp of a growing appreciation on Luther's part of what is meant by the evangelical message. The series on Galatians is rather disappointing, and not to be compared with the classic commentary on this epistle published in 1535.<sup>3</sup> Luther himself tended to discount his earlier work. Yet it is not altogether without value, and the recent English translation in the American edition makes it easier for us "to examine at first hand the engagement with Sacred Scripture out of which Luther's reformatory work and thought emerged".<sup>4</sup> The distinction between law and gospel is more comprehensively suggested – partly, of course, because the text of Galatians demands it. The law tells us what must be done and left undone, or rather, it exposes what has been done or left undone. The gospel, on the other hand, announces that sins have been remitted and that all that is needed has been effected.<sup>5</sup> The law says: "Pay what you owe;" the gospel says, "Your sins be forgiven you."<sup>6</sup> In this tension, the centrality of Christ becomes apparent. It was as the law made its full demand on the Son of God as He endured the cross for us that the way to forgiveness was opened. Hence our sins are no longer ours, but Christ's; and Christ's righteousness is no longer only His, but ours.<sup>7</sup> The extent of Luther's emancipation from medieval distortions may be measured by his stress on the fact that "in the Scriptures the righteousness of God is almost always taken in the sense of faith and grace, very rarely, in the sense of the sternness with which He condemns the wicked and lets the righteous go free, as is the custom everywhere nowadays."<sup>8</sup>

If the lectures on Galatians are not in Luther's best vein, those on Hebrews (1517-1518) contain some of his most noteworthy comments. Here he was almost out of the chrysalis. His theology is about to take flight. James Atkinson claims that it is all in view, even though not yet

<sup>1</sup> WA. 56. 46, 225-6.

<sup>2</sup> LCC. 15. xxxviii.

<sup>3</sup> Holl, op. cit., Bd. III (1923), p. 134.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 27. x.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 183-4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 242.

completely worked out and coordinated.<sup>1</sup> The major themes are unmistakably evident: the centrality of Christ, the Word of God, the doctrine of the cross, faith and works, law and gospel, and, of course, his fundamental principle of justification by faith alone. The primacy of Scripture is everywhere implied – there are over a thousand biblical references. God works all things only by the Word, and no-one can cooperate with Him who does not hold fast to the Word by faith. It is “over and above all things, beyond all things and within all things, before all things and behind all things,” and therefore inescapable.<sup>2</sup> Faith is nothing else but adherence to the Word. It is the Word which breaks down the sinner by the law and which raises up the believer in the gospel.

Luther's second series of lectures on the Psalms – *Operationes in Psalmos* – stand at the end of this formative period, just as the first series – *Dictata super Psalterium* – stand at the beginning. Although Luther himself was later to deplore its immature theology in some places, what he had said about faith and the Word in expounding Hebrews is here considerably amplified, and his theology of the Cross is movingly set forth. “To know Christ is to know the cross, and to understand God in the midst of the crucifixion of the flesh: this is the design of God, this is the will of God, yea, this is God.”<sup>3</sup> Some of the comments are unmistakably autobiographical. Luther must have been recapitulating his own spiritual journey when he wrote: “For a man is not truly converted until he has tasted both of hell and heaven: that is, until he has experienced what an evil and miserable creature he is in himself, and how sweet and good God is.”<sup>4</sup> It was as one who had gone through the mill in this way, that Luther was destined to become the prophet of his age. As he confessed in the *Table Talk*, he did not learn his theology all at once. He had to search deep for it, where his trials took him.<sup>5</sup> But he found a firmer faith his own as a result, and his ministry was the more effective because of what he had endured. Hence he could declare in a classic dictum: “For a man becomes a theologian by living or rather by experience, death, and condemnation, not by mere understanding, reading, and speculation.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> LCC, 16, 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 95–96.

<sup>3</sup> Cole, 1, 148; cf. 260 – “The theology of the cross is our theology”.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 510.

<sup>5</sup> LW, 54, 50. No. 352.

<sup>6</sup> Cole, 1, 243.