Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Week #3: Luther's Early Life, His Criticism of Indulgences and His Development of a Theology of the Cross at the Heidelberg Disputation (1518)

Last week we reflected upon Luther's shifting views on justification by faith and his repudiation of late medieval models of justification, which required the individual to first do what was in their own power to do before they could receive (or merit receiving) God's action and be justified. No, Luther argues, if we are dead in our sins, then our own activity will be of no help to us, since even our best works are tainted by the sinful motives of the heart which leave us looking to ourselves and not to God, which is a sign of our unbelief and unwillingness to place our trust in God and Christ.

This week we will begin by looking at Luther's response to a related issue, namely penitential works and indulgences.

You will recall that the church has asked Christians, when they sin, to repent and that this repentance, if it is genuine, will have three components:

(1) Repentance must involve <u>contrition</u>, i.e. a sorrow for sin which
   a. emerges from a regret at having acted against the God whom one desires and loves and
   b. includes a commitment to renounce the sinful action or disposition in question.

   (This differs from *attrition*, which is simply a fear of the painful, shameful or humiliating consequences for oneself when one's sin is disclosed and punished.) Contrition may be externally evidenced by tears.

(2) Repentance must involve open <u>confession</u> of sins (i.e. full acceptance and admission of one's sin without attempting to defend or excuse one's action or lessen or deny one's responsibility for the sin in question).

(3) Repentance must involve <u>reparation</u> (i.e. an attempt to set right what has been damaged or lost through sin). This may be externally evidenced by an apology and (where possible) restoration of (or compensation for) what was taken, damaged or lost.

Thus, although there was an increasing tendency over the centuries to move from public practices of repentance to a conception of repentance as largely a private mater, repentance inevitably retained certain public actions by the individual (confession may include confession to another; reparation may involve interpersonal transactions).

If one is not careful, however, ,there is a question of whether the performance of certain penitential works is necessary for one to draw near to God and become acceptable to God.

Penance and Indulgences in Medieval Theology

Within the medieval church, the threefold account of repentance became institutionalized. The second aspect, confession, was to be made verbally to a priest who interrogated the penitent about his or her sins (auricular confession) and would subsequently prescribe penances appropriate to the sin(s) confessed, thus fulfilling the third aspect of repentance mentioned above, namely, satisfaction. Penances had a pastoral function—namely, to get the penitent to

(a) make apology or offer reparation where this was fitting and could effect reconciliation with the injured party
(b) engage in spiritual disciplines (prayer, fasting, almsgiving) that could help the penitent to resist the power of sin

Thus, for example, the stingy needed to learn how to give to those in need, which in turn would help to break the power money had over him. The gluttonous needed to learn how to fast, which in turn would help to break the power food had over him.

Late Medieval Abuse of Penances

Unfortunately, the noble aims of this system were eventually subverted by a number of abuses. One problem was the introduction of vicarious penance, i.e. someone else could perform the penance in one's place. Another was the acceptance of cash (fines) as a substitute for the performance of penance.

The Concept of Merit and Supererogation

Other abuses were linked to the ways (noted above) in which concepts of merit and good works were introduced into discussions of justification in the late Middle Ages. For example, it was argued that when a person went beyond the divine command in pursuing righteousness, by such works one acquired a merit beyond that required for salvation. (For example, by renouncing ordinary worldly pleasures to enter the monastic life and taking vows of poverty and chastity.) The merit of such works of supererogation performed by Christ and the saints was regarded as the common property of the Church (since the body of Christ is one) and potentially transferable to others. The Church is thus the custodian of the "treasury of merit" and it was possible that under certain conditions, the merits could be credited to a person.

Purgatory and the Rise of Indulgences

Since it was commonly believed that not all minor (venial) sins could be remembered or fully dealt with through penance within this life, it was assumed that most ordinary Christians would need to be purified of their remaining sins after this life before they would be fit to enter into God's presence in Heaven, hence the idea of a purifying fire in Purgatory.

To reduce one's time in purgatory, one needed to be able to draw on the merits of others (the "treasury of merit" idea), reducing one's own need to do penance by crediting what others had done to one's own self (the notion of "vicarious penance")

In the later middle ages, at the time of the Crusades, the Papacy raised money for building projects and various special needs by authorizing the sale of indulgences, i.e. **letters remitting the temporal punishments due to sin** (the guilt of which has already been forgiven through absolution; see Mt. 16:19; 18:15-20; Jn. 20:22-23; Rev. 1:18 on the power given by Christ to the Church to be agent of grace in announcing the forgiveness of sin), so that one need not perform the acts of penance or endure the suffering in purgatory that would otherwise have been required. (By "temporal punishments," one means being deprived for a time of some temporal good.) Indulgences are thus ways of drawing on others' merits to avoid having to perform penance oneself.

Luther criticized the indulgences which were issued in the Castle Church in Wittenberg, where those who piously viewed the relics on All Saints' Day (these included a veil sprinkled with the blood of Christ, a twig from the burning bush and a piece of bread from the Last Supper) and made a financial contribution could receive indulgences which would shorten one's time in purgatory by thousands of years. Technically, Luther could have gotten into big trouble over this, since the university (in which Luther taught) was partly funded by the sale of indulgences at the Castle Church, but Frederick the Wise did not attempt to silence Luther.

What did get Luther in big trouble (in a way his earlier polemics on justification vs. works and against the Castle Church indulgences had not) was when he criticized Johannes Tetzel. Tetzel was a Dominican monk brought in by Albert, Archbishop of Mainz to raise money through the sale of indulgences. Tetzel was a rather dramatic showman who would build a huge bonfire, preach an emotional sermon urging people to be contrite, confess and contribute, receiving an indulgence for the sake of their departed ones languishing in purgatory. Tetzel is credited with the motto, "As soon as the coin rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Frederick the Wise had forbidden Tetzel to enter Wittenberg (his presence would decrease sales of indulgences at the Castle Church), so Tetzel set up shop outside the city. Luther found Tetzel odious and corrupt and felt safe criticizing Tetzel since Frederick the Wise had no fondness for Tetzel, either.

What Luther didn't know is that other, very powerful people had an interest in Tetzel's sale of indulgences. Albert of Brandenburg (a nobleman of the Hohenzollen line) had borrowed a largue sum from the Fuggers of Augsburg to purchase the Archbishopric of Mainz. Albert was 23 and already held 2 other sees, so Pope Leo X demanded a higher price for that lucrative and important office. To help Albert fund the purchase of the Archbishopric, the Pope authorized Albert and his agents to sell indulgences that were supposedly in support of the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Actually, the money from the sale of indulgences was divided—half went to the Pope for St. Peter's, while half went to Albert so he could pay back the loan he had taken out to purchase the Archbishopric.

In criticizing Tetzel, Luther attacked the concept of a treasury/storehouse of merits

(1) as a crude form of financial exploitation;
(2) as something which increased people's sinning and so kept them from knowing God
(3) as giving people a false assurance, which might lead them to damnation.

Cf. Thesis 62 of the 95 Theses: "The true treasure of the Church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."

Luther nailed a copy of these 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg (a standard announcement of a disputation, which never occurred) and mailed a copy of Albert, asking him to intervene and deal with Tetzel. Albert sent a copy to Pope Leo X, who was not initially inclined to intervene.

Luther's criticism of indulgences was widely circulated and led to a drop in the sale of indulgences. Luther had also challenged the Pope's ability to issue indulgences remitting sins:

- WA 1,233: The Pope can remove only those penalties that he himself has imposed on earth.
- Thesis 82 (WA 1,237): Why doesn't the Pope redeem all the souls in purgatory for free, evacuating purgatory for the sake of holy love if he redeems an infinite number for the sake of mere money to build a basilica or for such frivolous reasons? The Pope could build the basilica (an unnecessary expenditure) out of his own funds.

Luther's request to defend his views before the annual meeting of his religious order (German Augustinians), led to the Heidelberg Disputation (Apr. 1518) in which Luther

- attacked scholastic theology as a theology of glory,
- began his public attack on the medieval doctrine of justification, and
- argued that the human will was enslaved to sin (the law doesn't save but condemn; good works are futile because man can do nothing goof in himself).

All this led Luther to

- emphasize God's hiddenness and
- develop the theology of the Cross (see Thesis 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation on Forde, p. 81).

Luther received a surprising level of support from many of those at the disputation and in Oct. 1518 was summoned to appear in Rome before Cajetan (the papal legate) on charges of heresy. Frederick the Wise protected Luther and got the place changed to Augsburg, where the German Diet was favorable to Luther's protest. Cajetan argues that the concept of the treasury of merit had been defended by the papal bull *Unigenitus* (Clement VI, 1343). Luther responded that the Pope was not above Scripture and could and did make mistakes. Luther was released from the vows of the Augustinian order and rushed out of the city in the middle of the night, back to Nuremberg, while the papacy tried to woo Frederick and Luther and get them to capitulate and conciliate; a reform of indulgences was promised, while Tetzel was sent to a monastery.

A pamphlet war then broke out between Luther and the polemical theologian Johannes Eck, with Luther being defended by his former teacher Karlstadt. This led up to the Leipzig Disputation of July 1519. Luther, Karlstadt, and Philip Melanchthon went to Leipzig, accompanied by Nichoas Amsdorf, Justus Jonas and 200 Wittenberg students armed with spears and halberds (to protect Luther's life). Luther argued that the Church is founded upon Christ, not the Pope and rejected the idea that the Pope is the vicar of Christ. This resulted in Luther being excommunicated on June 15, 1520 and the students and professors at Wittenberg responded by building a bonfire and tossing in copies of the papal bull, the works of Eck and the pseudo-Isidoran Decretals (forgeries made to support claims of papal primacy).

By autumn 1520, the point of no return had been reached and the split with Rome became final. Luther then produced his three most famous treatises:

- the *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* (August; a sort of manifesto);
- *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (October; an attack on the medieval sacramental system); and
- *The Freedom of a Christian* (November; treats justification by faith vs. works; criticizes the abuses of the Roman Curia; argues for 3 sacraments, baptism by immersion and the priesthood of all believers).