# The "Heidelberg Theses" of 1518: A Milestone in Luther's Theological Maturation

***Robert Kolb***

Robert Kolb is Professor of Systematic Theology emeritus at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. Among his many published works are the translation of *The Book of Concord* (co-edited with Timothy J. Wengert), and *The Oxford Handbook to Martin Luther's Theology* (co-edited with Irene Dingel and L'ubomir Batka, Oxford University Press, 2014). Dr. Kolb has also written *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Baker Academic, 2016), *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Baker Academic, 2012), and *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

## Luther's Path to Reform

Martin Luther's perception of what it means to be Christian and how the discipline of theology should be practiced underwent an "evangelical" maturation process that had begun already as he received his doctorate "in Biblia" in 1512 and began his lectures on the Psalms in 1513. The beginnings of this process may be dated from as early as 1509. Because at that point he was a young theologian near the beginning of his study of theology, this means that his mature theology does not constitute a break with his own considered views but rather is the culmination of the learning process that all theologians experience from the time at which they begin to digest, amalgamate, and formulate their teachers' insights into their own system of thinking. Luther's process of theological maturation was, as Alister McGrath has pointed out, "a

continuous process, rather than a series of isolated and fragmented episodes." McGrath further notes "that one aspect of this development—namely, his discovery of the 'righteousness of God'—is of fundamental importance within this overall process."[1]

The process came to completion a decade later, in the years between 1519 and 1522.[2] His presentation of his theological orientation and method to his Augustinian brothers at their provincial meeting in Heidelberg in April 1518 marked an important milestone in the journey from the worldview of his childhood and youth, as it had been developed and deepened in different ways by his university education in the scholastic way of thinking and by his formation in the monastic-mystical piety that included the meditative devotional piety of Johann Tauler and his followers, for example, the anonymous of the *Deutsche Theologie*, which Luther edited for publication in 1516.[3]

Students of Luther spent over half of the past century searching for the critical moment, an "evangelical breakthrough" or a "tower experience" which marked Luther's decisive turn from his past to his new theology.[4] While most scholars are conscious of the gradual development of their own ideas, the Romantic perception of such "magic moments" in history and personal biographies, coupled with the fact that leading figures of the Confessional Revival of the nineteenth century (among them Wilhelm Löhe and Louis Harms), had recorded their own conversion experiences, led these researchers of the Wittenberg Reformation to see that point at which Luther's new worldview emerged. Closer scrutiny of his writings reveals a typical evolution of his way of thinking that reflects fresh discoveries in his reading of the biblical text, a good deal of meditation and reconsideration of ideas he had previously taken for granted, and no little experimentation in the best way to fit the pieces of the thought he encountered in the writings of the prophets and apostles together.

This process of redefinition of the nature and practice of theology as a university discipline accompanied Luther's redefinition of what it means to be a Christian. From parents, priests, and preceptors in Mansfeld and later from his instructors in the schools of Magdeburg, Eisenach, and Erfurt, he had understood being Christian as a matter of the human's seeking God through his or her own efforts, perhaps aided by grace in some more or less decisive way, but with responsibility for the relationship that formed the connection to the divine resting ultimately on human performance.

The preferred, essential activities that gained access to God's aid and favor were, for the young Martin, of a sacred nature, religious acts prescribed by the church, though ethical good works were also presumed to be important. This structure for the understanding of how religion should function had seeped into the exercise of the faith from the traditional religions of the Germanic tribes. In the early Middle Ages, princes converted their populations by edict, without the support of adequate personnel to preach and teach the biblical message thoroughly to the common people. Traditional perceptions of how the divine powers were to be channeled into daily life formed the skeleton upon which Bible stories and Christian vocabulary were placed.[5]

Luther came to the biblical text in the cloister and then in the university with this general perception of his faith. As his Ockhamist-inclined instructors and his monastic formation shaped his maturing mind, they supplied reinforcement for much of his childhood faith. Nonetheless, both the university and the cloister provided other elements of the late medieval approach to the faith that combined with his study of Scripture, aided by new methods developed by the biblical humanists,[6] to alter his perception of what it means to be a Christian (it is not coincidental that at Luther's time, his own order, the Augustinian Hermits, had an intensified interest in Augustine and Paul as well as in the methods and perspectives of the biblical humanists' attention to the ancient sources and the original languages of the biblical text[7]). Luther found that God initiates the relationship and that it depends on his favor alone. He found that trust in the promise of new life through Christ's death and resurrection laid the groundwork for his own good deeds. The maturing Luther learned as well that this life that proceeds from trusting Christ's work and that his promise produces not only praise and prayer directed toward God but also love and service directed toward other creatures, particularly fellow human beings.[8]

Parallel to this development in his definition of what it means to be a Christian, the seriousness with which Luther took his calling to serve God as a "Doctor in Biblia" guided him to rethink what it means to be a theologian, a teacher of the Holy Scripture, for the sake of the church and the spiritual well-being of Christ's people. The theses which his Romans lectures (1515-1516) inspired his student, Bartholomäus Bernhardi, to compose on the freedom of the will, offered the Wittenberg theological faculty an experiment in reexamining the content of his instructors' thinking, focused as

Bernhardi's theses were upon what role the human being plays in establishing the relationship between self and God.[9] These theses set Luther's colleagues and students to thinking in September 1516. Almost exactly one year later, Luther composed theses on the method of scholastic theology for his student Franz Günther to defend.[10] Less than two months after that disputation took place, the young professor took a detour from the program he had proposed in these two sets of theses. He composed ninety-five theses on the practice of indulgences to elicit debate on practical issues of pastoral care rather than to explore the nature of the theological enterprise at the university. With the theses presented in Heidelberg to his brothers in the Order of Augustinian Hermits, he returned to his examination of the nature and practice of theology. These theses built on what he had been proposing in 1516 and 1517 with the propositions on the freedom of the will and scholastic theology.

These "Heidelberg theses" made much less of a direct impact in the sixteenth century than had the Ninety-five Theses on Indulgences and much less than would Luther's further development of the ideas he advanced in Heidelberg in April 1518 in his six programmatic treatises of 1520-1522. All six—*On Good Works*,[11] *Open Letter to the German Nobility*,[12] *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*,[13] *On the Freedom of the Christian*,[14] *Against Latomus*,[15] and *On Monastic Vows*[16]—proceeded with the deconstruction of fundamental elements of medieval piety and of scholastic method for the practice of theology even while retaining other elements of both, altering them to a greater or lesser degree.

Indeed, the Heidelberg theses were occasionally made available to the reading public. In 1520 the Parisian printer Pierre Vidoué issued a collection of "conclusions" offered for debate by Luther, his colleagues Andreas Karlstadt and Philip Melanchthon, "and others" in which the Heidelberg Theses were contained. In 1530 the Wittenberg printer Joseph Klug issued a collection of Luther's theses offered for debate over the years, and he likewise included the Heidelberg Theses. They also appeared in the first volume of the Wittenberg edition of Luther's Latin works in 1545.[17] This document gained little or no mention in subsequent writings on Luther[18] until the topic of its "*theologia crucis*" surfaced in the larger consciousness of Luther researchers with the appearance Walther von Löwenich's work on that theme in 1929.[19]

Nonetheless, the continued critique of scholastic method and the anthropology of his Ockhamist instructors, with the vital role that the free will

played in it, did persist in Luther's thinking. The key concepts formulated in these theses from Heidelberg took on great significance as the framework for the execution of other hermeneutical principles that took shape between 1518 and 1522. These axioms for biblical interpretation included his distinction of law and gospel; his distinction of the twofold righteousness or the two aspects of humanity, passive and active; and his distinction of the two spheres or realms of human relationship, the relationship to God and the relationship to his creation, particularly other human creatures. Therefore, the Heidelberg Theses mark a critical stage in the development of Luther's mature thinking and reveal an essential element in the construction of his worldview and his hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture.

## The Occasion of the Heidelberg Theses

Luther's mentor, Johann von Staupitz, the General-Vicar of the Saxon congregation of the Reform branch of the Augustinian Hermits in the German lands, had been conducting his own plan for reform within the Order and through the Order within the wider German-speaking church. Luther was but one of several Augustinian brothers whom von Staupitz had promoted through doctoral studies and other means, preparing a corps of leaders to implement the General-Vicar's vision of improvements in church life through the spread of his own grace-oriented theology.[20] But in contrast to Staupitz's reform, Luther suddenly represented a genuine jeopardizing of the chief pillar of order and truth in the opinion of the church's leadership.

When ecclesiastical officials reacted strongly to the threat which they perceived in the challenge of the Ninety-five Theses to papal authority, pressure mounted not only on Luther himself but also on the responsible officials of his Order. That pressure took concrete form within the context of the rivalry of universities and of the monastic orders. A direct challenge came from the University of Frankfurt an der Oder, the bastion of learning for the neighboring electorate of Brandenburg and its ruling house, the Hohenzollerns. In the person of Elector Joachim I, Brandenburg was striving to outmaneuver electoral Saxony. Frankfurt professor, Konrad Wimpina, prepared theses for his friend, the indulgence preacher Johannes Tetzel, to present to the assembly of the Saxon province of the Dominicans, rival mendicants to the Augustinian Hermits, defending the indulgence practice

that Tetzel had been following. It was clear to all that Tetzel's particular approach to selling indulgences had provoked Luther's critical theses. The Saxon Dominicans reacted to Tetzel's presentation of Wimpina's theses by resolving to press heresy charges against Luther in Rome, thereby promoting both Wimpina's university and their own organization.[21]

Von Staupitz arranged for Luther to defend himself and thus aid the Augustinians in deciding how to react to this threat by informing his brothers of his own vision of reform. In Heidelberg in April 1518 Luther neither addressed Wimpina's attack on him nor the issue of indulgences and the crisis of pastoral care besetting the church, of which the indulgence issue was a symptom. Instead, Luther resumed the formulation of his proposal for decisive change in the practice of the discipline of theology. He explored some implications of his critique of scholastic method that had begun in Wittenberg with Bernhardi's theses on the freedom of the will nineteen months earlier and those on scholastic theology seven months earlier. The forty theses which his student and Augustinian brother Leonhard Beyer, who had accompanied him from Wittenberg to Heidelberg, presented and which Luther himself defended, laid out central ideas and implications proceeding from them that Luther had proposed in the theses on scholastic theology in September 1517. Luther had indeed caught the frustration of many of the guild of theologians, particularly among the younger who were still studying. Among those who heard him in Heidelberg and who became his followers as a result were the future reformers Johannes Brenz, Martin Bucer, Theobald Billikan, and perhaps Erhard Schnepf. [22]

## The Theology of the Cross

Jos Vercruysee observes that "one judges [the Heidelberg Theses] falsely if one views them only as an outstanding example of academic argument. They are rather a piece of engaged, confessing theology, a sermon on law, sin, cross, and grace, God and the human creature. This paraenetic aspect occurs more often as [Luther] changes his style to admonition and encouragement. The theses are not only a description of the process of justification but also an admonition to seek grace in the crucified Christ."[23] Gerhard Forde has called the Heidelberg theses "a kind of outline for Luther's subsequent theological program."[24] The theses treated twenty-eight theological assertions and twelve

which Luther labeled "philosophical." They spoke both of the "theology of the cross" and of being a "theologian of the cross."

The first of the theological theses asserts the goodness of the law, which Luther viewed as God's plan for human living, and the impossibility of keeping it. Forde compares Luther's assessment of the sinner's ability to fulfill God's commands to addiction (although he admits the analogy is not perfect): "The law 'Thou shalt not quit!' is for the alcoholic quite right and true. It is [to use Luther's words in his first theses, describing God's law] a 'most salutary doctrine of life.' However, it does not realize its aim but only makes matters worse. It deceives the alcoholic by arousing pride and so becomes a defense mechanism against the truth, the actuality of addiction."[25] The final theological thesis expresses Luther's understanding of the only solution to the sinner's condition, the re-creative word of forgiveness, which is described as God's creation of the object of his love. Thus, the goal of these theses was not only to offer the church a new core for the appropriation and application of the biblical message. The theses also aimed at cultivating the attitude and orientation of those who were teaching and preaching God's Word for the people.

Luther's use of Christ's cross and the Word that conveys it took on at least five aspects in Luther's maturing thought. Luther used the epistemology and resulting structure for Christian thinking that Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 to unfold his foundation for thinking of God, the human creature, Christ's work of salvation, the believer's and the church's continuing experience of Satanic attack, and the nature of the obligations to others imposed by God's calling to responsibilities of service in the world. In each of these areas, in different ways, the divine *modus operandi*, which, in Paul's words, appears foolish and impotent according to sinful human standards, is in fact the wisdom and power of God. Luther referred to this characteristic of God's actions as his operating under the appearance of opposities [*sub contrario*].

In the Heidelberg Theses, Luther presented three of these basic themes—God, the human creature, and Christian suffering—and labeled them his "theology of the cross." His treatment of Christ's cross as instrument of salvation from sin and of the burden-bearing of Christians in the service to neighbor to which God calls them were developed elsewhere. First, Luther described a foundational truth about God that he had discovered in his study of Scripture. The Creator is so much larger than the human imagination that the creature can never dare to presume to be able to describe God

in his fullness. The Creator is in part God Hidden (*absconditus*). Alister McGrath correctly notes that "Luther uses term less frequently than might be imagined, and frequently employs variants (for example, *Deus nudus*) to express substantially the same ideas."[26] God is hidden by virtue of his being the infinite Creator and our finitude as his creatures; Luther later refers to the god which human imaginations create as some approximation of the true God as truly hidden (*absconditus*) by human misconceptions. Human creatures should never expect to understand God fully, and they avoid speculation about what is exercise of lordship over his creation means apart from his revelation if they know what is good for them.

But Luther also posits that in his saving actions, operating "under the appearance of opposites" [*sub contrario*], God hides himself by exhibiting his power in what human reason has come to regard as weakness and his wisdom in what human philosophy labels foolishness. Aristotle had never thought to look for the Ultimate in a crib, on a cross, in a crypt. The God Hidden, therefore, Luther noticed, has revealed what he wants his people to know of him and his actions in their behalf by becoming a human being himself, Jesus of Nazareth, and by speaking to his human creatures through the prophets and apostles in Holy Scripture. God Revealed commands the focus, full attention, devotion, and trust of his human creatures. Luther had no doctrine of God that could be discussed by his human creatures apart from God in relationship to them. This distinction between God Hidden and God Revealed comes to its full flowering seven years later in *De servo arbitrio*, there also as part of an argument in behalf of the almighty power and also the limitless goodness of God.[27]

In thesis 21 Luther noted that the theologian of glory, who seeks personal glory through mastery of the world in rational explanation and who seeks to defend God's glory by explaining why he is not responsible for evil, must call what is evil good and the goodness of Christ's cross evil. The reformer's distinction of God Hidden and God Revealed takes the burden of mastery through explanation from the theologian of the cross, who bears suffering with the sufferers and points to Christ's cross as the ultimate answer to all evil, but does not try to assess credit or blame when bad things happen to anyone. Thus, Luther concludes, the theologian of the cross can "call the thing what it actually is" and not try to get God off the hook nor assuage suffering through explanation; the theologian of the cross does not attempt

rational mastery of questions raised by the attacks of evil.

Second, the Heidelberg Theses affirm that the human creature exists fully embraced by the relationship with the Creator. Luther had no definition of being human apart from his centering human life on "fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all else,"[28] a trust from which God wants all human actions to proceed. Dependence and reliance on God, grounded on trust in the promise of forgiveness and new life in Christ, replaced the exercise of human control over one's own life and the surrounding world through reason in Aristotle's system, in which there was no personal god in whom to trust. Trust as the center and constituting power of human personhood and personality compelled a rethinking of the Christian's view of God's law and of the human will and its ability to turn itself to God. Although Luther regarded reason as a good gift of God,[29] he limited it to a servant's role in theology and sharply criticized its use when it presumed to place God's revelation in Scripture under its judgment. This placed the human creature in a situation of total dependence on God. In discussing the theses in Heidelberg, Luther commented, "it is impossible to hope in God unless one has despaired of all creatures and knows that nothing can profit without God."[30]

Third, this *theologia crucis* set forth how God has rescued humankind from its sinfulness through the atoning death of Christ on the cross. His death spelled the death of the sinful identities of those who trust in Christ, as preface to the resurrection (cf. Paul's conclusion to this epistle in 1 Cor 15), which sets believers on the path of new life in Christ's footsteps. Christ assumed the burden of human sin and buried believers' sins in his tomb (Rom 6: 3-4, Col 2: 11-13), as Paul had affirmed in Romans 4:25.[31] Luther took sin very seriously, and he took God's wrath against sin just as seriously. Forde observes that for Luther the cross is "the attack of God on the old sinner and *the sinner's* theology."[32] God is acting in the cross to put an end to the sinner's identity as sinner, through burial with Christ, and to raise up a person restored to righteousness through Christ's resurrection. Forde uses again the analogy of addiction to assert that sinners cannot help themselves but are totally dependent on God's saving action in Christ, according to the Wittenberg reformer.

Fourth, God's *modus operandi* as exhibited in the cross determines and helps believers to understand much of their experience as Christians. Like their Lord, they suffer the attacks of Satan and his minions in a variety of forms, and that explains why those whom God has chosen do encounter the hostility

and persecution of the world around them. This was not an attempt to make suffering in itself something good even though it recognizes that God works under the appearance of opposites to accomplish his will in a sinful world through suffering. Nor is it a sentimental glorifying of suffering itself or the sufferer. Forde comments, "in a theology of the cross it is soon apparent that we cannot ignore the fact that suffering comes about because we are at odds with God and are trying to rush headlong into some sort of cozy identification with him. God and his Christ, Luther will be concerned to point out, are the *operators* in this matter, not the ones operated upon," as Luther asserted in thesis 27 in Heidelberg. Some suffering, Luther believed, comes from Satan, and sometimes God employs our suffering to call us to repentance or to aid others. But suffering is not in God's Edenic plan for his human creatures.

Luther occasionally also spoke, fifth, of the Christian's calling to serve others as the cause of the weight of a cross that comes with bearing the suffering and needs of others. In a world invaded by evils of various kinds, others suffer, and believers join them in their suffering to give comfort and aid as they are able because God has called them to love the neighbor in concrete ways.[33] Though the least-used application of the cross in Luther's writings, it fits into his understanding of God's overcoming evil through that which reason regards as evil itself. Luther sees such suffering as God's putting the negative to work for his people.

## Luther's Critique of Scholastic Method

Luther had begun his public deconstruction of scholastic theology in the disputation composed for Franz Günther nearly eight months earlier, at the beginning of September 1517. His ever-deepening command of biblical perceptions and concepts had gained a concept of God as Creator, whose almighty power his Ockhamist-inclined instructors had posited as a fundamental axiom. If it was true that God is almighty and has created law and the design for human life, then Luther was compelled to recognize that Aristotle's view of what it means to be human was faulty. A personal God who converses with his human creatures through his Word in Scripture, in preaching, and in the promise delivered in the sacraments, played no role in Aristotle's understanding of reality. Luther had used Aristotle day in and day out in his studies and in his earliest lectures in Erfurt and Wittenberg.

He never abandoned his use of much of the ancient philosopher's logic and other elements of his analysis of what exists. But already in 1509-1510 his doubts about essential elements of Aristotle's worldview were growing.

By 1518 Luther had long since gone beyond Aristotle's way of describing the foundations of reality in terms of substance and accidents, that is, the core of a thing that determines its genus, and the specific incidentals that constitute a particular specimen of that genus. Before he had completed his doctoral studies, he had perceived that the personhood of God, his nature as a conversation partner with his creatures, laid the bedrock of reality in relationships between Creator and creature and among the creatures he had fashioned, particularly those created in his own image.[34] Therefore, Luther came to the realization that Aristotle was worse than useless in describing the basic reality of a world created by this personal God who had revealed himself as Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, Edgar Carlson's observation, based on the consensus of early twentieth-century Scandinavian Luther scholars, that Luther's critique of reason and of Aristotle arises from his soteriological concerns[35] is correct, but those soteriological concerns took form in the context of his elaboration of his even more fundamental understanding of the person of God as a speaker and a Creator, who established and sustained his relationship with his human creatures even at the price of the death of his second person, enfleshed as Jesus of Nazareth.

As Brian Gerrish before him,[36] Alister McGrath has traced the development of Luther's selective antipathy toward Aristotle. As he moved to a relational understanding of the foundations of reality, the implicit assigning of primacy to God that lay therein led Luther to distinguish sharply between theology and philosophy in a general way: they treat quite different subjects. Luther's focusing specifically on the person of God may well have arisen from his reading of the Augustinian theologian Hugolino of Orvieto (ca. 1300-1373), a disciple of the general of his Order, Gregory of Rimini (ca. 1300-1358). Both particularly accented the predestination of the faithful and the necessity of grace for the performance of a God-pleasing work. By 1515 Luther acknowledged the inevitability of the inability of the creature's powers of mind to grasp the fullness of God and his *modus operandi*; likewise, he recognized the dependence of the human will on its Creator as Scripture presents him. He continued to praise reason as God's gift for managing secular affairs, but because the larger framework of life stems from the Creator's acts

of fashioning and sustaining human existence, reason's ability to address the whole of life fell short. Aristotle's way of thinking broke down at the point it went beyond the presupposition that God had created the order of his world and its human creatures.[37]

Luther never abandoned his use of Aristotle's concepts of substance and accidents, but Aristotle could only distract from the search for truth about God and about the humanity he had formed in his own image. Just as he continued to use Aristotle, so Luther's negative comments about "*philosophia*," particularly metaphysics, did not extend to every part of the legacy of the ancient philosophers. Often "*ratio*"—reason—also designated this Aristotelian philosophy that could not account for human origins in the creative Word of God and so was rejected. Nevertheless, Luther also counted reason as one of God's good gifts, to be used even in theology as a servant to God's revelation of himself.[38]

Because Aristotle had no personal God to hold his world in order, he stressed human reliance on eternal law as the key to ultimate truths about how the world functions and how human life is to take shape. Thus, Aristotle necessarily directed human thinking about the good life to dependence on human performance that conformed to the eternal law.[39] As Luther grew in his appreciation not only of God's ultimate power but also of his ultimate goodness and came to define his essence as love and mercy that bestows his favor on his human creatures, Aristotle no longer could serve as a vehicle for the interpretation of the message of the prophets and the apostles. Luther resolved to attempt to let them speak directly. Naturally, he could not do so without bringing some presuppositions to his reading, and those were largely shaped (both positively and negatively) by Ockhamist-inclined instructors. Luther resolved, however, in the midst of his evangelical maturation to discipline his reading of Scripture by letting other parts of Scripture judge his own presuppositions and guide his reading of the text.[40]

Luther began his propositions concerning theology by defining his theology as paradoxical. The term "paradox" does not appear in the theological dictionary of Johannes Altenstaig, published in 1517, which provides a view of late medieval theological usage.[41] Luther may well have gleaned the term from the mystical strands of monastic devotion. This term reinforced Luther's depriving reason of its monopoly on the human being's perception of the truth and placed that perception at the mercy of God. Luther's paradoxical arguments also irritated Erasmus, who sought a more orderly approach to human

knowledge.[42] Luther anchored his thinking, he claimed, in the "most specially chosen vessel and instrument of Christ," Saint Paul, and Saint Augustine, "Saint Paul's most faithful interpreter."[43] This shrewdly framed introduction not only appealed to the Augustinian brothers with its reliance on the namesake of their Order, in whom the members of the Order had taken increasing interest in the course of the fifteenth century, but also with its appeal to the Apostle Paul, in whom Augustinian Eremites had at the same time become ever more interested, dedicating no little formal study to his epistles.

Although it was not apparent at the beginning of the theses, Luther was explicitly placing Paul and Augustine in opposition to Aristotle and the domination of his discipline by Aristotelian presuppositions. Content and method merge in these theses, but Luther placed methodical considerations concerning the use of Aristotle at the end of his propositions. The final twelve are labeled "*ex philosophia*" in contrast to the first twenty-eight "*ex theologia*." His theological theses address the anthropological issues that lay at the heart of his rejection of the ancient philosopher, and in the philosophical theses he addressed other issues. He began with the assertion that whoever wishes to "philosophize" with Aristotle must previously have been made foolish with Christ, a direct reference to 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. In the discussion of this thesis Luther set rational knowledge against "trust, life, glory, power, and wisdom" in Christ. God comes to reveal himself out of his hiddenness in Christ. Trust in him follows God's command in Jeremiah 9:22-23; Luther presumed that his hearers would associate his brief citation—that the wise person does not glory in his own wisdom but in knowing God—with the words of adjacent passages, which ascribed true power and riches to the power and riches, alongside the wisdom, of God.[44] Luther repeated this sentiment in the second philosophical thesis, assuring that hearers would get the point. In the "Theses on Scholastic Theology" he had made the same argument. "The whole of Aristotle, in brief, has the same relationship to theology as darkness has to light," he had stated in thesis 52 (50). The following three theses elaborated, with a side remark that Latin theologians probably did not understand Aristotle anyway (theses 53/51). Luther found Porphryry's comments in his commentary on Aristotle regarding universals faulty and asserted that the more useful definitions of Aristotle seem" to presume what they are supposed to be proving" (thesis 55/53). At his best, Aristotle was doing little more than asserting his own opinion, Luther claimed.

Thesis 31 of the Heidelberg propositions placed the conclusions of Aristotle that the world is eternal and that the human soul is mortal before Luther's hearers, asserting thereby that Aristotle did not understand basic presuppositions of the biblical revelation of God's creation of the universe and his fashioning human creatures for an everlasting relationship with himself. The following three theses rejected Aristotle's focus on the material universe, that is, they led hearers to the conclusion that "if Aristotle had recognized the absolute power of God, it would have been impossible for the material to exist in and of itself" (thesis 34). Luther had learned from his Ockhamist instructors that God is omnipotent. The remaining "philosophical" theses spelled out details of this proposition with reference to Plato, Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Anaxagoras.

Within this framework, Luther offered his alternative to a theology beholden to and crippled by trying to fit the biblical worldview into an essentially foreign and hostile interpretation of reality, as, in his view, the scholastic theologians had attempted to do. Luther's theological theses presented an analysis of the human experience of reality that took the presence of the Creator into account and perceived that he is almighty. Therefore, these theses begin by assessing the impotence of the human will in relationship to the eternal law, so vital for order in Aristotle's system, which the Augustinian brother from Wittenberg labeled "God's law," setting forth God's possession and mastery of control in the world. The "theology of glory" that Luther's alternative method for practicing the interpretation of reality on the basis of the proper interpretation of Scripture sought its "glory" through its own ability to conform to God's law and its ability to master reality through its own rational analysis. It failed to recognize God's true glory in the foolishness and impotence of the cross. That "glorious" approach to theology presumed that the human mind could plumb the depths of the law through rational exercise of its capabilities and that the human will is able to act on the perceptions of this reasoning to carry out the law. Aristotle's rationality had no place for an Ultimate that worked under the appearance of opposites, for such a God cannot be corralled by human reason but can only be trusted. Luther found the approach to God and his law through reason not only flawed and faulty but also a false path to relating to God. That was true because the exercise of rationality not only failed to perceive God's *modus operandi* and his very person correctly; it also depended on a will that, Luther contended, was

actually unable to grasp hold of the Creator as he had revealed himself in Christ and therefore was bound to make false choices in regard to God.

Therefore, Luther praised God's law as a "most salutary teaching for life," but it was not in the first place, and certainly has not been since the human fall into sin, an instrument for aiding human beings to attain righteousness. Instead, it offers a diversion for sinners because it creates the illusion that external compliance with what God has commanded could demonstrate true righteousness in God's sight (theses 1-2), thus placing the responsibility for reconciliation with God in human hands. Within months of his visit to Heidelberg Luther would publish the first of his elaborations of the ideas proposed before his brothers there, his *On Three Kinds of Righteousness*, which matured into his *On Two Kinds of Righteousness*, which appeared in 1519. These brief treatises decisively altered the traditional paradigm for defining humanity and describing the relationship between God and his human creatures. The vast majority of Christian teachers had defined righteousness ultimately in terms of human performance. Even Augustine believed that God's unconditional grace saves by granting the human sinners the equivalent of perfect obedience to the law, through the aid that the Holy Spirit gives to conform to it in faith or through the non-imputation of sin and the imputation of righteousness: God regards the sinner as one who has the equivalence of that perfect obedience to the law.[45]

Luther's introduction of a simple but paradigm-altering definition of human righteousness as twofold, was foreshadowed in the first several of the Heidelberg Theses. In late 1518 Luther's *On Three Kinds of Righteousness* counted three forms of sinfulness that are parallel to the three kinds of human righteousness. Criminal acts are the opposite of external conformity to divine law apart from faith in Christ. The righteousness that God bestows through his regard for human beings who trust in Christ renders them in God's mind, where reality rests, as truly righteous, is the opposite of original sin, which Luther defined as doubt of God's Word and denial of his Lordship passed on to all descendants by Adam and Eve. The failure of believers to produce the fruits of faith is then the opposite of the exercise of obedience to God's design for human living in the law, empowered by the Holy Spirit, on the basis of trust in Christ.[46]

In 1519, *On the Two Kinds of Righteousness* did not discuss outward conformity to the Ten Commandments but did elaborate on the *iustitia aliena* [righteousness given from outside the person] and the *iustitia propria*

[righteousness exercised by the person].[47] Luther later labeled the righteousness or identity of human beings as God's children in his sight, an unconditional gift of new life for sinners, "passive righteousness" and the righteousness or identity in relationships with other creatures, especially human, as "active righteousness." In 1531 he called this distinction of the two aspects of the righteousness of believers "our theology."[48] In April 1518 he was laying the groundwork for this essential element of his anthropology and his entire theology when he informed his fellow Augustinians, in theses 1 and 2, that the law does not aid human beings in attaining the foundation of their righteousness through the works that conform to God's commands. Only despair over one's own ability can lead to receiving the grace God gives because of the work of Christ (thesis 18). Thus, righteousness before God on the human side consists of faith in Christ (thesis 25). Luther was beginning at that time to define faith as "*fiducia*," trust, as he would spell it out in developing his concept of "promise"[49] and as he would lay it before the public in his *On the Freedom of the Christian* in 1520.[50]

Thesis 15 recognizes that not only is sin responsible for the inability of the human being, on the strength of reason and will, to win God's favor; even in Eden, Adam and Eve did good "not in an active but in a subjective manner." That meant that the first human creatures were not doing good on their own power and resolve, but because that was the nature that God had given them as he poured out his favor and love upon them simply because he wanted to—this is the nature of God's identity or righteousness. Luther's expression of this idea was still to ripen, but the seeds had been planted. He further was exploring this distinction of the twofold righteousness when he wrote in thesis 27 that properly speaking, "what Christ does is his actively performing something whereas what we do that is pleasing to God is performed only by the grace of Christ, the one is actively doing what he is doing. The growing sense of this distinction of two aspects to human righteousness also led to a redefinition of other terms, including merit. Human merit had no place in a theology which professed a gracious God whose almighty power is in complete control of his world.

## The Practice of the Theology of the Cross

The practice of the theology of the cross—teaching as a theologian of the cross—centered on delivering the message that "The law brings God's wrath;

it kills, renders one guilty, condemns whatever is not in Christ" (thesis 23). That should not lead to despair but rather "to humility and to seeking Christ's grace" (thesis 17). Alister McGrath emphasizes that God addresses the sinfulness of human beings by humiliating them,[51] and in fact, Luther asserts that he uses the law not only to humiliate them but also to kill sinners, abolishing their sinful identity. He does not only desire to change their attitude from confidence in their own works to abandoning confidence in those works. He also eliminates their very existence as sinners in his sight, where all reality exists. Only by fleeing to the cross and relying on Christ in faith can believers come properly to terms with the law. If they do not, they will abuse the best of God's gifts (theses 23-26). This view of Christ and of the law altered the understanding of sin: no longer can sins be quantified as "mortal" or "venial" since all proceed from the fatal failure to fear, love, and trust in God above all else.

Luther concentrates on the boundness of human choice in theses 13-18, concluding in thesis 14, with the help of Ockhamist terminology, that the freely-exercised choice of sinners is only passively able—that is, in dependence on the Holy Spirit—to do good, whereas it actively turns to evil.[52] Thus, the presumption of thinking that one can please God by—in the phrase of Ockham and Biel—doing one's best, or what by purely natural powers lies within human capability is simply sin, of the highest order, since it takes away glory from God. These theses offer not a rational argument but an existential address of human experience that can be honestly taken seriously only in the shadow of Christ's cross. It is less a matter for disputation than for preaching and forgiving of sin.

This dependence on what God reveals, Luther argues, does not try to scrutinize "the hidden things of God" and to look behind or beyond his Word. This reliance on what God says in his biblical conversation and as Jesus Christ permits honesty about the worst of human problems because it has abandoned its need for rational control and explanation of the mystery of evil in human life.

Luther concluded his "theological" theses with the proposition that God does not seek out or come upon the loveable as the objects of his love but rather, in a creative act, he makes those who were unlovable lovable. That is, for Martin Luther, the nature of the person he was encountering in Jesus Christ. He is a creator who makes sinners into children of God because his

nature is to love and show mercy to his beloved human creatures. Forde comments, "God's love in Christ is a creative act that brings believers into being." When all our human possibilities have been exhausted and we have been reduced to nothing, one who creates out of nothing does his 'proper work'" [Luther's expression for his demonstration of his love and mercy, in contrast to his "foreign or alien" work, the work of bringing sinners to repentance through the killing power of the law's judgment on their sinfulness].[53]

The several elements that came together under the heading of "cross" in 1518 to form what Luther regarded as the heart of the content of Scripture and as the key to proper theological method continued to develop as he spelled them out in works of the following years. McGrath views the lectures on the Psalms which Luther delivered in 1519 and 1520 as the arena for developing further his understanding of righteousness but above all "their leading feature is their exposition of the *theologia crucis* . . .". McGrath notes as well that his concept of passive righteousness was embedded in a larger "programmatic reinterpretation" of several concepts, within the framework of the theology of the cross.[54] These ideas flowed into the programmatic writings of 1520-1522, into the *De servo arbitrio*, and into his preaching and teaching to the end of his life. In lecturing on Psalm 126:5 in 1533, he referred to his theology as the "theology of the cross," and his editor, Veit Dietrich, rendered Luther's expression: "For theology is properly called the profession of the holy cross."[55] "*Professio*" may refer to the Christian's walk of life or to the confession of the faith. If the former definition was Dietrich's intent, this formulation of the theology of the cross referred to the believer's "*sub contrario*" experience of suffering in the eschatological battle; if the phrase here refers to the latter, it lifts up faith's dependence on God's Word.[56]

Scholars have employed other concepts to label Luther's theology: his is a theology of God's Word, of the justification of the sinner, of the presence of God, among many others. The basic concerns that were emerging in his constructing of his core interpretation of Scripture in 1518 may be viewed and used from several points of view and concern. His own conviction that his is a "theology of the cross" and his desire to practice being a theologian of the cross nonetheless serves as a helpful guide for appropriating his way of thought. The Heidelberg Theses formed a key stage in the development of this theology and a springboard to its use.

1 Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 176.

2 Reinhard Schwarz, *Martin Luther: Lehrer der christlichen Religion* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2015), 1-3.

3 *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883- 1993 [henceforth WA]), 1: 152-153, 375-379. On the various strands of Luther's formation, see Theodor Dieter, "Luther as Late Medieval Theologian: His Positive and Negative Use of Nominalism and Realism," in: *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomir Batka; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31-48, Volker Leppin, "Luther's Roots in Monastic-Mystical Piety," ibid., 49-61, and Erik Herrmann, "Luther's Absorption of Medieval Biblical Interpretation and His Use of the Church Fathers," ibid., 71-90.

4 *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther* (ed. Bernhard Lohse; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968); *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther. Neue Erkenntnisse* (ed. Bernhard Lohse; Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1988). On the question in the "Luther Renaissance" launched by Karl Holl in the 1920s, see James M. Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Saviour. German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917-1933* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

5 Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard, The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2004),1-30.

6 Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 237-266; Leif Grane, *Noster Martinus. Luther in the German Reform Movement 1518-1521* (Mainz: Zabern, 1994); Helmar Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985).

7 Cf. Eric Leeland Saak, *High Way to Heaven. The Augustinian Platform between Reform and Reformation 1292-1524* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), David Gutiérrez, *Die Augustiner im Spätmittelalter 1357-1517* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1981), Adalbero Kunzelmann, *Geschichte der Deutschen Augustiner-Eremiten, Fünfter Teil. Die sächsisch-thüringische Provinz und die sächsische Reformkongregation bis zum Untergang der beiden* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1974), esp. 397-523, Hedwig Vonschott, *Geistiges Leben im Augustinerorden am Ende des Mittelalters und zu Beginn der Neuzeit* (Berlin 1915, rpt. Vaduz: Kraus, 1965), esp. 97-174, and Rudolph Arbesmann, *Der Augustiner-Eremitenorder und der Beginn der humanistischen Bewegung* (Würzburg: Augustinus Verlag, 1965).

8 Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1-6.

9 WA 1: 142-151.

10 WA 1: 221-228; cf. Leif Grane, *Contra Gabrielem: Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Gabriel Biel in der Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam* (Gyldendal, 1962).

11 WA 6:202-76; *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia/Fortress, 1958-1986 [henceforth LW]), 44:21-114.

12 WA 6:404-69; LW 44:123-217.

13 WA 6:497-573; LW 36:11-126.

14 WA 7:3-38, 42-73; LW 31:333-77.

15 WA 8: 43-128, LW 32: 137-260.

16 WA 8:573-669; LW 44:251-400.

17 Helmar Junghans, Introduction to "Disputatio Heidelberge habita," in *Martin Luther. Studien Ausgabe*, Bd. 1 (ed. Hans-Ulrich Delius; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1979), 187.

18 In the research for my *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) no significant mention or use of the Heidelberg Theses as a document surfaced. That the topic of the theology of the cross did play a role in various forms in the writings of some of Luther's students, however, is clear, see Robert Kolb, "Did Luther's Students Hide the Hidden God? Deus Absconditus among Luther's First Followers," in *churrasco. A Theological Feast in Honor of Vitor Westhelle* (ed. Mary Philip, John Arthur Nunes, and Charles M. Collier; Eugene: Pickwick, 2013), 1-16.

19 Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976); German original 1929.

20 I owe this insight to Robert Christman, On Staupitz, cf. David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1980).

21 David V. N. Bagchi, *Luther's Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists, 1518-1525* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 22-27.

22 Junghans, Introduction, 186-187.

23 Jos E. Vercruysse, "Gesetz und Liebe. Die Struktur der ‚Heidelberger Disputation' Luthers (1518)," *Lutherjahrbuch* 48 (1981): 42 (8-43). Vercruysse offers an extensive bibliography of literature to 1981. For further

bibliography, see Vitor Westhelle, "Luther's Theologia crucis," in *Oxford Handbook*, 155-167; and Robert Kolb, "Deus revelatus—Homo revelatus. Luthers theologia crucis für das 21. Jahrhundert," in: Robert Kolb and Christian Neddens, *Gottes Wort vom Kreuz, Lutherische Theologie als kritische Theologie* (Oberursel: Lutherische Theologische Hochschule, 2001), 13-34.

24 Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 21.

25 Ibid., 25.

26 McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 164.

27 Klaus Schwarzwäller, *Theologia crucis, Luthers Lehre von Prädestination nach De servo arbitrio, 1525* (Munich: Kaiser, 1970), 201-212, Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 32-38, Steven Paulson," Luther's Doctrine of God," in *Oxford Handbook,* 187-200.

28 Luther's explanation of the first commandment in his Small Catechism, *Die Bekenntnisschrfiten der Evangelische-Lutherischen Kirche* (ed. Irene Dingel; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 862/863, *The Book of Concord* (ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 351.

29 Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason, a Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

30 WA 1: 359, lines 20-22, LW 31: 48.

31 Robert Kolb, "Resurrection and Justification: Luther's Use of Romans 4:25" *Lutherjahrbuch* 78 (2011): 39-60.

32 Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 4.

33 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (trans. Carl C. Rasmussen; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 50-63.

34 Stefano Leoni, "Der Augustinkomplex. Luthers zwei reformatorische Bekehrungen," in *Reformatorische Theologie und Autoritäten: Studien zur Genese des Schriftprinzips beim jungen Luther* (ed. Volker Leppin, Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2015), 193 (184-192).

35 Edgar M. Carlson, *The Reinterpretation of Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1948), 127.

36 See note 28 above.

37 McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 138-141.

38 Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, Dieter, "Luther as Late Medieval Theologian."

39 Notger Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," in *Oxford Handbook*, 212-232.

40 Kolb, *Luther and the Enduring Word*, 75-131.

41 Johannes Altenstaig, *Vocabularius Theologie complectens vocabulorum descriptiones/ diffinitiones et significatus ad theologiam vtilium …* (Hagenau: Joannes Rynman, 1517), fol. CLXXVIb: following "Paradisus celestis" comes "Paraferna." Altenstaig may not have included every theological term in use in his 554-page folio-sized work, but certainly those used prominently are to be found.

42 In a letter to Ulrich Zwingli, August 31, 1523, in Desiderius Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami denuo recognitum et acutum*, 12 vols. (ed. P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen; Oxford: Clarendon, 1903-1955), 5:327. I am grateful to Robert Christman for this reference.

43 WA 1: 353, lines 8-14, LW 31: 39.

44 *Martin Luther. Studien Ausgabe* 1: 212-213.

45 WA 2: 43-47.

46 WA 2: 43-47.

47 WA 2:145-152, LW 31: 297-306.

48 WA 40,1: 45, lines 24-26, LW 26: 7.

49 Oswald Bayer, *Promissio. Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), esp. 161-351.

50 WA 7: 21, lines 1-4, LW 31: 344.

51 McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 151-155.

52 Cf. *Martin Luther. Studien Ausgabe*, 1:215, n. 634.

53 Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 22.

54 McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 145.

55 WA 40,3,193, lines 19-20.

56 Robert Kolb, "Luther's Theology of the Cross Fifteen Years after Heidelberg: Luther's Lectures on the Psalms of Ascent, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61 (2010): 69-85.