

MARTIN LUTHER: HIS JOURNEY TO TRUTH AND THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

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***Abstract* — Luther’s story is one of fierce internal struggles within his heart stemming from his deep desire to receive forgiveness from sin. This passion drove him to seek the Church. However, in the Church, Luther did everything more excellent than all others searching far and wide to find rest for his soul. But, when the Church failed to provide the assurance he so longed for, Luther’s life entered a crossroads. It was at that point that Luther found his answer in Scripture and the authority of the Bible. Luther’s conscience could no longer bear with the abusive reign of the papal system and its disregard for the truth and authority of the words written in the Holy Text. And thus was born – *Sola Scriptura*.**

***General Research Topic(s)* — Christian History, Martin Luther, Reformation, Authority of Scripture, Historiography.**

I. INTRODUCTION

No figure of the 16th century Protestant Reformation stands out and is more significant than the notorious German monk, Martin Luther. Luther’s Reformation cries of “faith alone” and “Scripture alone” are the pinnacles of his reformation theology, but he was not originally striving to be on this dramatic, life-altering journey. Many events happened in his life that brought him to his knees in seeking to be accepted before God and understand his will. This paper aims to investigate some of the elements of his life and writings that reveal his integrity, struggles, conviction, and passion to find God and to find peace for his soul in salvation. What

Luther’s search eventually leads him to conclude is the final and absolute authority of Scripture for governing Christian faith and doctrine. I will attempt to trace a foot trail that will help paint (in broad strokes) the path Luther experienced along the way to finding truth and establishing the preeminent role of the Holy Scriptures.

II. WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Luther’s devout pursuit for truth and salvation can be said to have begun on that fateful stormy evening on July 2 of 1505 in Stotternheim, Germany when the thunder and lightning of a ferocious storm terrified him into deciding to dedicate his life to monasticism and the Church.¹ It was during his time as a student studying law at the University of Erfurt that this sudden crash of lightning from a thunder cloud caused Luther to forever change the course of his life. That storm awoke within him a deep feeling, an insatiable urge, to do something definitive to save his soul from damnation.²

¹ WAT 4 no. 4707; 330, 440, 9ff; 1539. WAT 5 no. 5373; 99, 10ff; 1540. Quoted in Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 92 & 125.

² Luther believed the thunderstorm to be a sign from God that he was not pursuing the proper path for his life and God was angry with him. As was popular in Luther’s time, “The natural explanations of earthquakes and thunderstorms did not preclude occasional direct divine causation.” Roland H.

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Luther was well aware in his day of the fire and brimstone style of preaching on hell and the judgment and condemnation of God upon sinners like himself, though he was not theologically inclined to take particular interest in it at the time. The imaginative descriptions of devilish fiends that were lurking about, just waiting to capture a soul and drag it to hell, struck fear into the hearts of the general population in the Medieval Ages, especially in young lads like Luther who knew nothing of the Scriptures. While Luther had never envisioned living a monastic life, he was now beyond doubt that becoming a monk was what he needed to do to achieve solace in his soul. Less than two weeks after the thunderstorm and the pledge he made to St. Anne on that fateful night following the lightning bolt, Luther joined the monastic congregation of the Augustinian anchorites in Erfurt (July 15, 1505).³

Luther had never really thought much of the Bible during his years at the university, and when he held a Bible for the first time at Erfurt, he barely took a cursory glance at it, passing it off as nothing more than a collection of ancient writings held sacred by the Church.⁴ However, the tendencies of medieval sermons to play upon alternating themes of hope and fear did much to deter Luther from feeling at peace with God after simply joining the monastic order in Erfurt. The ambivalent attitudes and actions of the Divine portrayed by preachers (typical of medieval Christianity) affected Luther greatly and his recurrent mood swings between states of exultation and depression can be viewed as the outcome of the tensions produced by these ensnarling and treacherous teachings of the Church.⁵ The uncertainty of the position of God toward humanity

conjured up a sense of bewilderment in Luther. Luther was often caught in the middle of a perplexing paradox between God being merciful and forgiving people for their sins and God being vengeful and punishing people and exacting his wrath upon them whenever he so chose to do so.

By entering the monastic order, Luther sought to remedy this conflict in his soul and he believed the Church was the only power that could help him. In the eyes of the general population, the Church offered the only secure course of mediation to placate God and to offer the appropriate merits and prescribe the necessary penance for receiving God's grace (favor). Luther knew this well and diligently sought to take hold of every help the Church promoted and was thought to provide. He began to invest his energy and conviction in the sanctifying power of the sacraments, pilgrimages, indulgences, saints, prayers, devotions, and especially the "divinely bestowed" authority of the Pope, who held the "keys" to heaven (a doctrine of the Church built off the passage of Mt 16:19).⁶ "The opinion was popular that if the [any] monk should sin thereafter [taking the cowl], he was peculiarly privileged because in his case repentance would bring restoration to the state of innocence. Monasticism was the way par excellence to heaven."⁷ Becoming a monk was the one and only path to salvation in Luther's eyes. There was no better way (actually no other way) that Luther saw for attaining the peace in himself that he so desperately desired to have.

At the monastery Luther was as devote a brother as anyone could be expected to be. Luther followed the life of monasticism with even more conviction than most others in order to find peace with God.⁸ However, peace would not be what Luther would soon find by way of his newly dedicated life to the Church. Luther's physical needs were sufficiently provided for in the order and he

Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin, 1950), 20.

³ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought* (trans. Martin H. Bertram; St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 2.

⁴ Richard Friedenthal, *Luther: His Life and Times* (trans. John Nowell; New York: Harcourt, 1970), 15.

⁵ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

had a rigorous schedule that kept him busy, but his heart and conscience were continually burdened despite everything he did to assuage it. The suffering of Luther's soul was the greatest torment of all. As Luther recounted concerning his early time in the brotherhood, "I often took fright at the name Jesus, and when I looked at Him on the cross it was like seeing a flash of lightning...In the monastery I did not think about women, money or possessions, but my heart trembled and pounded at the thought of God's mercy to me."⁹ Luther was searching for answers—he was searching for forgiveness. He wanted to know how to set his heart free. While this internal affliction did not prevent Luther from participating in the daily activities, prayer times, and services of the order, it was constantly a brick on his shoulder causing a heaviness in his step. Everything Luther sought in the Church seemed to be constantly out of his grasp.

After his first year in the monastery, though, Luther appeared to be adapting quite well to monastic life overall. He felt at ease with his place among the brethren and became accustomed to the life of the order. Following the strict routine exercises of the brotherhood each day, Luther was confident that he was "walking in the path the saints had trod" and that he was pursuing "the life which the Church regarded as the surest way to salvation."¹⁰ But Luther's sin always weighed heavily on his mind. He would meditate upon his sinfulness more than anything else and even became consumed with his guilt in the most trivial and seemingly inconsequential matters.¹¹ This acute mindfulness of his sin and the inescapable need to confess every transgression became the primary concern of his life in solitude.¹² As Friedenthal describes quite aptly, "What

Luther really wanted was something quite simple: to find a merciful God."¹³ The idea of the Day of Judgment and facing the wrath of God, who could sentence him to eternal damnation of which he had heard so much about growing up and more so now in the monastery, frightened him to no end.¹⁴ Luther yearned to know where was the grace of God? Where could his soul find refuge? How could he receive complete forgiveness for his sins?

Luther fared all right in the monastery battling these unanswered questions in his heart until one day (May 2, 1507) when he encountered an idea of God unlike he had ever had before. As Luther was preparing to initiate his first mass, he stood before the altar and began reciting the introductory prayer of the mass. When he came across the words, "We offer unto thee, the living, the true, the eternal God", Luther was struck cold at the thought of standing before the infinite, divine Creator of the world. He felt a sudden, compelling urge to run away from the altar and hide himself upon even conceiving the thought. He would have surely done thus if not for the intervention of his preceptor.¹⁵ As Luther describes the startling realization he had that day:

*"At these words I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, 'With what tongue shall I address such Majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I a miserable little pygmy, say 'I want this, I ask for that?' For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God.'"*¹⁶

⁹ Quoted in Friedenthal, *Luther*, 30.

¹⁰ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 28-29.

¹¹ James M. Kittleson, *Luther, The Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 84.

¹² Friedenthal, *Luther*, 39, 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁶ Quoted in Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 30.

A new toxin had taken hold of Luther's heart. How could he, a man of "dust and ashes," be worthy to address the Holy and Eternal God of the universe? But this is exactly what Luther wanted to be able to do! He wanted to know how he could draw near to such Majesty as an insignificant and sinful human. His soul was plagued by the thought of God's vengeance and yet he still yearned to have forgiveness. As Bainton remarks regarding Luther's disposition, "Toward God he [Luther] was at once attracted and repelled. Only in harmony with the Ultimate could he find peace."¹⁷ Luther wanted to be rid of the helpless, hopeless, and unworthiness he persistently felt when thinking of standing before God. The specific word Luther used to describe this feeling of desperation, panic, and inner turmoil was *Anfechtung*. Luther lived with this *Anfechtung* but in a slightly lesser state for several more years after the encounter at his first mass. But Luther had begun a new quest. He was now wholly engrossed in seeking to understand the right way to stand before God without the heavy burden of his sinful, unworthy human condition disgracing the Holy and Almighty Creator. His thoughts revolved around "How could man [a person] abide in God's presence unless he were himself holy?"¹⁸ Joining the monastic order at Erfurt was intended to be the answer to the problem Luther was struggling with, but the rigorous exercises and minimal distractions did not seem to settle the anxiety in Luther's restless soul. Luther slaved away day and night to follow the prescribed rituals and devotions of the order. He attended every prayer session and was fervent in his vigils and mindful of all his duties and responsibilities, and he fasted much, often sometimes for days. As Luther recorded about his life during the time he spent in the monastery, he writes:

"I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to

*heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work."*¹⁹

Despite all the busyness and good works Luther involved himself in at the monastery, what stirred within Luther was a hunger that would not be met by the institutionalized religion of the brotherhood or the Church. He received no enduring inner tranquility in his soul from what he did day in and day out and what the order proclaimed would bring liberty to his soul. Within Luther was a debt of sin which he felt was never completely wiped away. No action he performed seemed adequate enough or meaningful enough a compensation to clear his conscience of the guilt he had before God.

III. THE CURTAIN BEGINS TO FALL

Luther's life as a monk and his perception of the Church was affected drastically only a couple years later. In the fall of 1510, Luther and another fellow brother of the Augustinian order in Erfurt were commissioned with the task of traveling to Rome to resolve an unsettled issue in their monastery. Since a significant indulgence was guaranteed to any person who made the pilgrimage to Rome, and on account of the large number of holy objects and locations that also carried the implicit bestowal of indulgences upon the visitor, Luther desired to use the trip to the fullest capacity he could and collect all the merits he was able to in order to receive pardon for sin. While at Rome, Luther specifically desired to absolve his grandfather of his sins and release him from purgatory by climbing the stairs of the *Scala Sancta*²⁰ in front of the Lateran

¹⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 34.

²⁰ The *Scala Sancta* ("Holy Stairs") are a specific set of 28 marble steps that are housed in a building leading up to the *Sancta Sanctorum* ("Holy of Holies") near the Lateran Basilica, which was the personal chapel of many early Popes. The chapel was formerly known as the Chapel of St.

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

Basilica by crawling on his hands and knees and repeating the *Pater Noster*²¹ on each step.²² As he climbed the stairs and spoke the *Pater Noster*, Luther even bowed and kissed each step for good measure.²³ No little deed was overlooked by Luther for the sake of earning every bit of merit he knew he could.

Then, upon reaching the top, one might think that Luther would have been extolled with joy for the devoted effort he just offered in delivering his grandfather's soul from the chains of purgatory and helping him enjoy the blissful ecstasy of entering the gates of heaven. But, instead of being pleased and confident in the effectual power of his generous actions, at the top of the stairs at the Lateran, Luther uttered to himself in disbelief, "Who knows if it is really true?"²⁴ Luther was questioning whether his efforts really had any actual effect at all upon a person's soul in purgatory. After performing all the grueling prayers and crawling up the stairs, Luther's heart was no less content than when he started. All the sacred shrines, the catacombs, the basilicas, the veneration of the bones of martyrs, the observation of holy relics, and the most austere sessions of confession did not seem to offer Luther the peace he so longed for. He was not convinced that these physical acts affected the guilt of his sin or of any others. He began to doubt whether what he was doing according to the Church was true or not.

Lawrence, and according to the Catholic tradition, the *Scala Sancta* are the steps of the praetorium of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem where Jesus was led to stand trial at the beginning of the Passion. It is believed that the stairs were brought to Rome by St. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, in the 4th century.

²¹ The *Pater Noster* ("Our Father") was a prayer taught to the disciples by Jesus in Mt 6:9-13 and is commonly called the "Lord's Prayer." It has been a central part of the Catholic Mass since the 4th century and is recited numerous times each day by Catholics all over the world.

²² Oberman, *Luther*, 147.

²³ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 38.

²⁴ WA 51.89, 20-23; 1545. Quoted in Oberman, *Luther*, 147.

Luther had long put his faith in these "good works" and "acts of merit" as the only right and proper course prescribed by the Church for atonement and forgiveness of sins. This was the form of penance the Church dictated. Yet, these acts of penance and accrual of indulgences were powerless to alleviate the *Anfechtung* burning in Luther's soul. However disconcerting the trip to Rome might have been for Luther, one thing became clear to him, "if crawling up the very stairs on which Christ stood and repeating all the prescribed prayers would be of no avail, then another of the great grounds of hope had proved to be illusory."²⁵ In his mind, Luther remained unconvinced that his efforts had achieved anything against the overbearing weight of sin in his conscience. It seems that his experience in Rome sprouted a thought which began to grow inside him...a thought that would ultimately lead Luther in the near future to find the source of his peace elsewhere.

Upon leaving Rome, Luther felt dejected and defeated.²⁶ It appeared to him that yet another avenue to find a means of grace through the Church was a farce. Luther's disappointment in the Church had begun to grow more steadily and it would soon find firmer ground to truly take root. Also influential in the degradation of Luther's confidence in the Church was the vile and despicable hearsay and gossip that reached Luther's ears regarding Church officials in Rome. It was likely most appalling for Luther to learn that in the "All Holy City" of Rome, the center and sacred city of the Church, there were the most depraved and immoral atrocities being practiced by priests and the Pope alike.²⁷ However, as Friedenthal comments, "Like many other pilgrims, he [Luther] saw on his journey only 'certain

²⁵ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 38.

²⁶ Luther's famous quote "I, too, was so foolish as to carry onions to Rome and bring back garlic" describes his deep dissatisfaction with his visit to Rome. Luther had anticipated something great to come from his visit but he left severely discouraged. WA 47.392, 10ff. Quoted in Oberman, *Luther*, 146.

²⁷ Friedenthal, *Luther*, 86.

grievances' and small blemishes on the shining escutcheon of the Church."²⁸ Even exposed, as he was, to such religious villainy and hypocrisy of the Church in Rome and his dissatisfied conscience with the pseudo-effective merit of his indulgences, Luther still believed in the Church and in the Augustinian order as the way of attaining peace with God. Thus, it is quite difficult to determine how deeply this experience affected Luther at this point in his life and when the turning point away from the church really took place in his heart.

IV. WHEN THINGS DON'T ADD UP

Shortly after returning from his trip to Rome in 1511, Luther was transferred to a new appointment in the town of Wittenberg, Germany where he was to be an assistant professor and lecturer in moral philosophy (Luther was 25 years old).²⁹ At Wittenberg, Luther came to be acquainted with the vicar of the Augustinian order, Johann von Staupitz. During his early time at Wittenberg, Luther continued to try and discover a cure for his ailment of feeling estranged from God and completely contemptible to his Creator. As Bainton describes, "He [Luther] tried good works and discovered that he could never do enough to save himself. He endeavored to avail himself of the merits of the saints and ended with a doubt, not a very serious or persistent doubt for the moment, but sufficient to destroy his assurance."³⁰ It is not that Luther doubted the teaching of the Church on indulgences and the saints but that the concept of forgiveness of sin through these channels came to be seen as an arbitrary mode of atonement. Luther began to waver on whether it was even real or not. But the problem was, he could never know. And his doubt began to grow into distrust in the Church.

Therefore, Luther became fanatical about confession of sin since it was the way that the Church condoned direct forgiveness. The Church claimed that a priest could absolve a person of their guilt upon confession. Nevertheless, even after hours of attempting to be the most thorough and scrupulous he could achieve to be in confessing his sins, Luther would walk away from confession and then soon after recall un-confessed sins and all the guilt would come flooding back into his mind and rushing over him like a frigid wave of fear and shame. When he would remember his un-confessed sins, he would immediately feel condemned again and unacceptable in God's eyes and could not stand the thought of God's judgment upon him. The problem that Luther came to understand was that the penitential system of the Church was inherently flawed because it was only able to transfer grace and forgiveness on particular instances of sin, which the confessor had to recall and vocalize to the priest and then the priest had to pronounce absolution of the sin upon the confessor.

Luther soon saw the issue being the incomplete absolvment of sin according to the teaching and practices of the Church. At this point, "Luther had come to perceive that the entire man [person] is in need of forgiveness."³¹ He knew that he could not bring to remembrance every single nuance of sin he had committed. Therefore, he concluded, it must be impossible for a person to actually receive full forgiveness for their sin in this way. As Bainton puts it, "For those who are troubled by particular sins the Church offers forgiveness through the penitential system, but pardon is made contingent upon conditions which Luther found unattainable."³² Luther's deduction on the limited absolution of sin by the Church would eventually culminate in his understanding that the Church must not be the true way to receive complete forgiveness for sin because, according to Luther's

²⁸ Ibid., 92.

²⁹ Ibid., 67.

³⁰ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 40.

³¹ Ibid., 41.

³² Ibid., 43.

reasoning, no one is capable of being absolved from all their sin by way of confession.

V. DISCOVERING THE WORDS OF LIFE

Luther became engulfed in the search for an answer to this unsettling turmoil in his soul. His obsession to receive forgiveness for his sin badgered him day and night. Luther was excessively sensitive to this issue and was in dire straits to discover the cure. There had to be a cure, because otherwise Luther saw there being no hope, and if there was no hope, then God was cruel, unjust, and altogether intolerable. As Luther describes:

“I felt, with the most disturbed conscience imaginable, that I was a sinner before God. I did not love, indeed I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly (if not blasphemously and certainly with great grumbling) I was angry with God, and said, ‘As if indeed it is not enough that miserable sinners, eternally lost through eternal sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Ten Commandments, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel’s threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!’”³³

Not long after his new appointment at Wittenberg, a turning point in Luther’s life came when his friend Staupitz, after expending all possible remedies for his friend’s unnerving emotional/spiritual malady, decided to suggest Luther enroll for his doctorate at the university and then become a Professor of Bible on the Faculty of Theology.³⁴ Staupitz likely thought that enabling Luther to wrestle with the actual writings of the Church would be therapeutic and would lead him to discover answers for himself. It is not as though Luther had abstained from all study of the Scriptures until this time. This is hardly the case, for he studied the

Scriptures intensely ever since he received his first Bible, which was the Latin Vulgate of St. Jerome, from Staupitz earlier when he first came to Wittenberg.³⁵ The fact was not that Luther did not have the Scriptures available to him but that the Scriptures did not serve a primary function in his faith, in the Church, or in theological education at the university.³⁶ Instead, Luther was obligated to know and teach the standard theological textbook of the day (Lombard’s *Sentences*) and the classical writings of the Church Fathers (Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, etc.). Traditionally, it was these sources which contained the necessary knowledge for theological education, not Scripture.³⁷

Upon receiving his appointment at Wittenberg to teach the Bible, Luther began to study the Scriptures more intently and he began almost immediately lecturing on certain books of the Bible. On August 1, 1513, Luther began a lecture series on the book of *Psalms*, and then later in 1515 he commenced a series on Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*. After that, Luther began lecturing on *Galatians* and *Hebrews* throughout the years of 1516-17. Above all else, Luther considered Paul his teacher and Luther reveled in the words of the Apostle (especially in the *Epistle to the Romans*).

When he began lecturing, though, Luther still taught and interpreted the Scriptures according to the conventional “four-fold” method he learned in accordance with the traditional commentaries and prominent Church figures he had studied. However, in the course of poring over and studying meticulously the text of Scripture (especially the writings of the Apostle Paul), Luther’s interpretive methods began to change and he began to see Scriptures in a new light and the words of life began to come alive to him.

³³ WA 54, 185 (AE 34, 336-337). Quoted in Kittleson, *Luther*, 87-8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁵ Friedenthal, *Luther*, 51.

³⁶ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 45.

³⁷ Friedenthal, *Luther*, 52.

During his intense study of Scripture, Luther stumbled upon a pivotal answer that would reframe his entire thinking about God, sin, and forgiveness. This one answer would be the birth of his reformed theological framework and would send him on a quest for redefining the Christian faith and the authority of the Bible. The answer he found was that through the death of Christ on the cross, God was able to redeem humankind from the guilt of their sin and reconcile them to himself by counting them to be righteous, not according to anything that humans have done, but by their faith in what Christ alone did.³⁸ This truth of Scripture provided a new meaning to the phrase “the righteousness of God” for Luther.

No longer was it that Luther felt unable to relate to God on account of God being the Righteous Creator and he being sinful creation, but in Scripture Luther learned that God’s righteousness is shared with his creation through faith in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. This new understanding formed the outline of Luther’s theology, which he would later call “a theology of the Cross.” The work of Christ and the grace of God that Luther discovered in Scripture began to deliver his soul from the pangs of the guilt of sin he had felt his whole life. The truth he found in Scripture freed him from “the church’s demand to find in her power, in her laws, in the hierarchy, and in her spiritual goods a pledge and guarantee of God’s reality on earth.”³⁹

Luther would later look back on this time in his life when his soul was torn in the struggle to find the answer for receiving grace and forgiveness for sin saying, “Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon those Pauline passages, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul

wanted.”⁴⁰ Luther’s battle to find peace consisted of desperation—a desperation for understanding the truth of the Scriptures.

Even in his commentary on *Psalms*, Luther began to talk against the ecclesial authority of the Church in a more doubting and disapproving tone. As Scripture is what was thought to sustain and feed the Church, in his commentary on *Psalms* Luther attacks the Church by asking, “What is the reason that at this day the Church has not only withered away into luxury and pomp, but is almost wholly destroyed? What, but because the Word of God is disregarded and the laws of men and the artful inventions of Rome are taught?”⁴¹ More and more, Luther began to find confidence in the message of Scripture that the Church could never give. And from that confidence grew a great distaste for Rome and the papacy. Howbeit, Luther’s shift in perspective did not occur all of the sudden. It was a gradual ascent into new heights of understanding that began to bring this long-desired peace to his weary soul. Luther began to see that only the authority of Scripture can bring true freedom.

While Luther was quite aware of the extreme vice and avarice that infected the Church on every level, he was not solely preoccupied with these matters as much as he was with the question of his own personal salvation and spiritual well-being in addition to the apparent unscriptural teachings of the Church. Even after discovering the sediments of what would be the bedrock of his theology, Luther still grappled with the ideas of salvation, justification, and the righteousness of God.⁴² As Luther explains about his time in studying the *Epistle to the Romans*:

⁴⁰ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521* (trans. James L. Schaaf; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 225.

⁴¹ *Luther’s Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms* (trans. John Nicholas Lenker; vol. 1; Minneapolis: Lutheran In All Lands, 1903), 209.

⁴² Friedenthal, *Luther*, 102.

³⁸ Influential passages that served to reform Luther’s thinking and be the basis for his stand on the authority of Scripture were *Romans* chapters 3-5 and *Galatians* chapters 3-4.

³⁹ Bornkamm, *Luther’s World*, 4.

“I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is the righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face.”⁴³

Through his committed study of the Scriptures, particularly of Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*, Luther had found the missing link that supplied the answer for how

God’s forgiveness can encompass all the sins of an entire person. The missing component was how God imparts his righteousness to those who have faith in Christ. He also discovered what it meant for God to be merciful and just at the same time. How could God be the righteous Judge and the righteous Forgiver?—a concept that was previously irresolvable in his mind. One might say that Luther’s peace had started to dawn when he learned about the God declared in Scripture in place of the God that was declared by the Church. In looking back on his efforts to uncover the meaning of Scripture, Luther describes how he had to ‘choke’ over the Scriptures when all prior interpretations had failed to speak to him. In his thirst to comprehend God as revealed in Scripture, he declares, “It is much better to see with one’s own eyes than with someone else’s.”⁴⁴ And so it was not until Luther began to see for himself that he began to see grace for the first time.

VI. “THIS HAS TO STOP”: TAKING A STAND

After growing stronger and deeper in his knowledge of the Scriptures, Luther seemed to feel more comfortable and audacious in questioning and challenging with increasing acerbity the teachings of others at the university and of the Church itself. Luther was not directly launching a frontal attack against the Church’s traditional teachings at this time but was critical about the disparity between what the Church practiced and taught and what he read in Scripture. Luther’s boldness grew to the point where he began to “take Scripture at its word and to subject even the most revered scholastic theologians to close scrutiny.”⁴⁵

Luther gained a true foul scent of the Church’s practices and teachings from the constant murmurings

⁴⁴ Friedenthal, *Luther*, 117.

⁴⁵ *WABr* 1.171, 71-76; May 1518. Quoted in Oberman, *Luther*, 121.

⁴³ Quoted in Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 49-50.

over the sale of indulgences that ran through the halls of the university and among his community at Wittenberg. Upon inquiring about the nature and propriety of indulgences with Father Johann Paltz, a teacher at the monastery who widely preached on indulgences, Luther found himself perplexed at the feeble and inadequate answer he received. Paltz simply proclaimed that “The Church approves indulgences and dispenses them, therefore they exist – *ergo sunt*.”⁴⁶ A simple answer that Paltz thought should suffice for a simple question. As one might expect, such an answer did not sit well with Luther for it answered nothing of his question.

Luther continued to study Scripture as fervently as ever, and at some point, his allegiance turned and he came to embrace the authority of Scripture above all else. Maybe in his conscience Luther could no longer tolerate the abuse and misuse by the Church’s teachings, or perhaps the life-giving message of Scripture finally broke the power that the Church had exercised over Luther’s conscience, and in breaking free, he saw things clearly for the first time. Whatever changed in Luther’s heart, from that point forward he began to head down a road where the only voice he hearkened to was the voice that sang from the words he read: Scripture alone became his guide.

In the wake of such discrepancies that he had come to realize in the teachings of the Church, Luther began actively preaching against indulgences and the sacramental system of the Church in 1516. His antagonistic view of penance and papal authority to forgive sin and grant release of souls from purgatory was detailed at some length in a sermon he delivered on October 31, 1516 on All-Saints Day (Halloween). “No one, he [Luther] declared, can know whether the remission of sins is complete, because complete remission is granted only to those who exhibit worthy contrition and confession, and no one can know whether

contrition and confession are perfectly worthy. To assert that the pope can deliver souls from purgatory is audacious. If he can do so, then he is cruel not to release them all. But if he possesses this ability, he is in a position to do more for the dead than for the living.”⁴⁷

Then, on that benchmark day one year later (October 31, 1517), Luther decided to post his *95 Theses* on the door of the Wittenberg Church to engage the university professors in an open dispute over several premiere teachings of the Church, mainly surrounding the sale of indulgences and corrupt practices of Church officials. However, whether Luther recognized it or not, it was ultimately a dispute against the authority of the Church, and thus, the Pope. One could view this action as his determinate desire to make a stand for Scripture, for it was the authority of Scripture that provided the one true answer that set Luther’s heart free, an answer which had now become the predominant teaching governing his entire theology. He had become convinced that the answer Scripture provided was right and people needed to know about it. What Luther had intended to be an awakening for the Church was actually the greatest disruption and threat to her long-standing tyranny.

At this point Luther’s sail had already been set and he was being carried along by his enthusiasm and passion for proclaiming the voice of Scripture and the truth that changed his life, even though he may not have recognized at that time into what deep waters he would eventually find himself contending. Many other major events would soon unfold as he began to enter the most calamitous season of his life. What had brought Luther to the point of questioning the Church’s doctrine and denouncing the Pope’s authority was an unquenchable fire in his soul. A fire that burned so hot for the truth of Scripture that he thought others would listen and follow that voice as he had done and embrace the life-giving

⁴⁶ Friedenthal, *Luther*, 59.

⁴⁷ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 54.

answers it contained. But even if they did not, Luther had found truth to be more valuable than his very life. Luther's loyalty had now sided with the authority of Scripture over the Church, and he would soon learn that the Church and the Pope would fight him and the testimony of Scripture for the power over people's souls. Therefore, Luther's stand for the authority of Scripture was, from the beginning, a stand against the most powerful religious organization in the world – the Church.

VII. CONCLUSION

In bringing the story to a close, out of much anguish and distress over his soul and the problem of sin, Luther had climbed a mountain and stood atop seeing farther and more clearly than any other person of his time. In the beginning, he sought the help of the Church and the great teachers of his time to give him the answers he needed in his life, but he found them wanting. Their answers did not soothe the inflammation and agony in his guilt-ridden conscience from sin which he continually suffered from. It was only the words of truth he eventually found in Scripture, specifically the message of the gospel expressed by the Apostle Paul, which ultimately brought the healing he so desperately searched for. For Luther, Scripture then became the staple of his faith and the sole basis for his theology. He mined it like he would for hidden treasure, and therein, he discovered the answer of God's righteousness that settled the question of his guilt once and for all. The authority of Scripture pronounced God's righteousness in Christ to all those who have faith in him. And so, Luther armed himself with the truth of his righteousness that is in Christ and made it the flagship of his arsenal against the traditions of the Church and the authority of the Pope. This is the journey that the great reformer took in arriving at the most meaningful conclusion and affirmation of his life—that Scripture taught what was true, not the Church, and that Scripture alone was the final word to be trusted, not the Pope. Luther's legacy

still lives on today and his stand for the truth and the authority of Scripture has changed more lives than his alone. May we never forget – *Sola Scriptura*.

VIII. ABBREVIATIONS

- WA *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Abteilung Werke.* 61 vols. Weimar, 1883–
- WABr *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel.* 18 vols. Weimar, 1930–1985.
- WAT *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden.* 6 vols. Weimar, 1912–1921.
- AE *Luther's Works.* 55 vols. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, general editors. St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–1986.

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