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Imitatio Christi in Luther's Theology of Faith

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I

We say that we believe in God. But have we examined the depth which is in this simple statement? What does it mean to believe in God at all? The purpose of the present study is to ask what Luther meant when he said, 'I believe in God'.

Whenever Luther spoke of the Christian faith he saw it bound up with the specific name of Jesus Christ. He was not interested in philosophical definitions of faith or metaphysical speculations on the nature of belief in general. 'What does it mean to believe in God?', he asked, and looked straight up to Christ, who is the greatest believer of God, to find the final answer. With the Apostle Paul who said, 'For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2), Luther looked straight at Christ in tremendous intensity, and his theology became unreservedly Christocentric. From his watchful gaze on the crucified Lord came the spiritual energy that accomplished the titanic work of the Reformation.

Luther's theology of faith began with his existential question, 'what must I do to be saved?' (Acts 16:30). He asked this question with dead seriousness. In the year 1505, believing that the monastic life is the surest and quickest way to salvation, Luther, then 22 years old, entered the Augustinian Black Cloister in Erfurt. The severest trial which Luther encountered in the monastery was the terrible feeling that God himself might not be propitious to him. God may be *forsaking* him. Under the pressure of despair and darkness he groaned:

'Is it not against all natural reason that God out of his mere whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them, as if he delighted in sins and in such torments of the wretched for eternity, he who is said to be of such mercy and goodness? This appears iniquitous, cruel, and intolerable in God, by which very many have been offended in all ages. And who would not be? I was myself more than once driven to the

very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hate him!¹

Whenever Luther spoke of the dreadful experience of being forsaken by God he used the word 'Anfechtung'. This powerful German word, which is untranslatable to English, comes from the verb 'anfechten' meaning 'attack'. Professor Bainton explains the meaning of 'Anfechtung' as follows:

'It may be trial sent by God to test man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy men. It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation and desperation which invade the spirit of man.'²

In his Latin writings, Luther used words like *tribulatio* (distress, trouble), *tentatio* (attack, trial), *tristitia* (sorrowfulness, dejectedness) and *desperatio* (hopelessness). All these words combined make up what 'Anfechtung' is.

According to Luther scholars, Luther most likely came to the new interpretation of the Righteousness of God, which is very often spoken of as the discovery of the Gospel, in the years 1511, 1512 or 1513. Through the dark cloud of Anfechtung, Luther saw the light of the Gospel, that is, that the Righteousness of God is not retributive but rather it is the Righteousness that makes the unrighteous righteous through his sovereign grace. God was already infinitely gracious to him. All he needed to do was to accept it in believing and trusting God. So Luther declared that man is saved only by faith (*sola fide*) in the grace of God and not by the works he does.

II

What, then, did Luther mean when he said, 'I believe in God'? According to Luther to believe in God means, *in its depth*, to believe in God *in spite of* and *in the midst of* Anfechtung. This is the critical dimension of faith one must discern in the pregnant phrase of Luther, *sola fide*. Faith is genuine if it displays its power in the time of Anfechtung. Remember Job! When calamities fell upon him one after another he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (1: 21). Luther writes as if there is no such thing as faith in God apart from the Anfechtung experience. The proper *locus* of Christian faith is adversity and Anfechtung.

To believe in God in spite of Anfechtung does not mean to have *blind* faith in God. It does not mean that one should believe 'a head of a sardine is a god' to quote from a Japanese proverb. Again, it is not a fanatical faith nor is it an automatic supplement to reason (what we do not understand, we must simply accept in faith).

¹ R. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 59.

² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

The faith in the *Anfechtung* theology operates itself on the dynamic level of life's reality. It has a solid foundation in the example of Christ (*Christus exemplum*). In the hour of trial of faith, one must trust in God just as Christ trusted in God in the midst of the maximum *Anfechtung*, the death on the cross. In the entire life of Christ, was not the death on the cross the most critical moment of crisis for him? Yet, Christ believed in God! In the midst of the darkest and bitterest *Anfechtung*, the greatest faith and the true nature of faith are displayed in the person of the Mediator. This faith of Christ in the ultimate trial of faith is the ever vividly concrete example of the faith given to the followers of Christ.

Faith is rightly a risk, but it is not a blind risk. Because the imitation of Christ in the hour when the faith is tested is not a blind imitation. We have Christ, the Example who walked through the darkness of *Anfechtung*, and we follow Him. The example of Christ strengthens the hearts of believers in the time of *Anfechtung*. Faith in God can live even in the midst of *Anfechtung* through the practice of the imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*). Thus the noblest of all the mediaeval spiritual heritages resounds in the heart of Luther's 'Theology of the Cross' (*theologia crucis*).

III

Luther's imitation of Christ is not a blind or fanatic imitation. It is rather upheld by faith's insight into the nature of Christ's faith in *Anfechtung*. What did Luther discern as he looked at the forsaken Lord?

He saw the Lord under the left hand of God. This is the first discernment.

Looking at the Lord in *Anfechtung*, Luther remembered Isaiah 28:21 which says, '... strange is his deed! and to work his work—alien in his work!' He interprets this passage as follows:

'Though God is the God of life and salvation, and these are his proper works, yet in order to accomplish these, he kills and destroys, that he may thereby come to his proper work.'³

Following the Augustinian tradition, Luther symbolizes the proper and strange work (*opus proprium, opus alienum*) by the image of the right and left hands of God. The right hand of God signifies the favour of God while the left hand throws man into *Anfechtung*. But this does not suggest a dualistic struggle between the two hands of God himself. Here Luther is using anthropomorphic, not metaphysical, imagery.

Why is it that God has a left hand? If he must have two hands, why not two right hands? To this Luther answers by quoting Psalm 18:9, 'And darkness was under his feet', which

³ Hereafter quotations in this study are all taken from Luther's *Operationes in Psalmos*, 1519-1521. W.A.V. This quotation—63-35.

means that God's works and his ways cannot be known by man (*opera et viae eius cognosci non possunt*).⁴ Man cannot control the acts of God which are symbolized by his right and left hands. Man is not allowed to 'domesticate' the sovereign God.

Luther saw that in the forsaken Lord, God's strange work reached its highest point. Here God forsook his Son of whom he announced, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11). Is it not true that the reality of complete forsakenness (Anfechtung) from God can come only to one who has known the most intimate closeness with God? Luther says, therefore, that no man was ever so 'attacked' as Christ. The Lord in the Anfechtung stood under the pressure of the left hand of God, yet he believed in the salvation of God symbolized by the right hand. This kind of faith, according to Luther, brings genuine salvation to man. Luther writes:

'It is one thing to know the Lord as a judge, another to know him as having mercy (*Aliud enim est cognoscere dominum iudicem, aliud dominum miserentem*). He who knows the Lord as a judge and feels his judgment, immediately falls, is terrified, and reduced to nothing in the face of his unsupportable wrath. But he, who knows the Lord as a God of mercy, rises up in joy, and is lifted up above all things in the face of his incomprehensible goodness.'⁵

The one who follows the example of Christ in the time of Anfechtung will cling himself existentially to the insight that God does not have two left hands even in the severest moment of Anfechtung. This is what faith learns from Christ the Example.

Looking at the crucified Lord, Luther saw the terrifying meaning of the truth that there is only one saving God. This is the second discernment.

The God who threw Christ into Anfechtung was, according to Luther, the God of the First Commandment. 'I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have none other gods but me' is, according to Luther, not a law but a comforting and propitious promise of God (*promissio dei*).⁶ Because none other than this God is the God who conducted the great drama of the national redemption of Israel from the land of Egypt. Therefore, the First Commandment means, 'I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have none other gods but I who have actually saved you.' Luther writes of this saving God of the First Commandment:

'It is the Lord alone that saves and blesses (*dominus solus est, qui salvat et benedicat*); even though the whole mass of all evils should be gathered together in one against a man, still, it is the Lord who saves; salvation and blessing are in his hand (*In manu eius salus et benedictio*).'⁷

⁴ 503-24.

⁵ 317-28.

⁶ 376-3.

⁷ 94-3.

God alone and no one else brings man out of the straits (*angustia*) of affliction into the broad place of consolation (*in latitudinem consolationis*).⁸

Luther puts his emphasis repeatedly on the critical (relationship between the experiences of 'being forsaken of God' (*Anfechtung*) and 'believing in one saving God'. Were there more than one God, there would be no *Anfechtung* situation in God's action of forsaking man. When one God rejects and forsakes man, he could yet flee to the other. Plurality of God and the unique depth of the experience of *Anfechtung* are thus mutually exclusive. But now the forsaken Lord faces the agonizing reality of *Anfechtung*. That is, there is no salvation at all for him except in the God who forsakes him. The saving God is forsaking him!

'In this state, hope despairs and despair hopes' (*Hic enim spes desperat et desperatio simul sperat*).⁹

This is, so to speak, a 'No Exit' situation which is framed by God himself.

Yet Christ believed in God. Trusted in the forsaking God! Christ believed in God hoping against hope (*contra spem in spem credere*).¹⁰ Christ's faith was a faith against faith (*fide contra fidem*) that justified God even in the darkest hour of *Anfechtung*.¹¹ Christ did not flee to death nor did he retreat from the *Anfechtung*.¹² He firmly believed that God is propitious to him in spite of God's unbearable wrath which he experienced in *Anfechtung*.

Christ fled to the forsaking God. Faith is 'to flee to God against God' (*ad deum contra deum confugere*).¹³ Two quotations will clarify the meaning of this paradox:

'Even though seeing God, in the darkness of the storm of death and hell, a deserting God, (faith) acknowledges him a sustaining God; when seeing him as a persecuting God, acknowledges him a helping God; when seeing him as a condemner, acknowledges him a Saviour' (*. . . videns deum etiam derelictorem agnoscit susceptorem, deum persecutorem agnoscit auxiliatorem et deum damnatorem agnoscit salvatorem*).¹⁴

'A strong faith! which can speak to an angry God, call unto him when persecuting you, flee unto him when driving you back, praise him as your helper, your glory, and the lifter up of your head, when you feel him deserting, confounding

⁸ 516-11.

⁹ 385-19.

¹⁰ 84-39.

¹¹ 623-17.

¹² 457-21.

¹³ 203-26.

¹⁴ 84-14.

and oppressing you' (. . . *clamare ad persecutientem se, confugere ad expellentem se, laudare susceptorem, gloriam, exaltatorem, quem derelictorem confundentem et opprimentem senseris*).¹⁵

There would be no 'fleeing to God against God' apart from the faith in the God of the First Commandment. The one who imitates Christ the Example in the time of *Anfechtung* will know that his imitation is not a blind imitation but an experience of becoming one with Christ in the pathway of faith characterized by the 'flight to God against God'. This 'flight' is what faith learns from Christ the Example.

Luther looked at the crucified Lord, and saw that 'God is a slow rewarder' (*deus enim tardus est redditor*).¹⁶ This is the third discernment.

God hides himself when man is 'suffering upon earth, in waters, and under the weight of all creation'.¹⁷

'How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me for ever?
How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?'¹⁸

According to Luther, if God answers man's cry immediately then he is a God outside of *Anfechtung* and need for trust and faith would be eliminated. On the contrary, faith endures the 'slowness' of God's answer and learns to see all things according to God's way (*coram dei*). In the cry 'how long?', man is uttering his trust and hope in God. If he does not believe in God, why does he bother to say 'how long?' Also in this agonizing cry, he is confessing that God will not fail him. His right hand will sustain him 'soon'.

Christ's cry, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?', is a great mystery of paradox:

'If the salvation had not been near, he would not have said "My God", and if it had not been far off, he would not have said "hast forsaken me".'¹⁹

In this cry of Christ one sees the faith which clings to God's un-failing 'nearness' (soonness) in spite of his agonizing 'far-ness' (slowness):

'For a brief moment, I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you.'²⁰

¹⁵ 96-13.

¹⁶ 307-29.

¹⁷ 54-9.

¹⁸ Psalm 13:1-2.

¹⁹ 607-2.

²⁰ Isaiah 54:7.

Time is in obedience to God. The one who imitates Christ the Example in the time of *Anfechtung* will acknowledge the paradox of 'soonness' in 'slowness' and 'nearness' in 'far-ness'. And this quality of 'soonness' is what faith learns from Christ the Example.

What does it mean to believe in God?

Looking at the crucified forsaken Lord who stands in the bitterest moment of *Anfechtung*, Luther answers that it means to trust in God even in the midst of the utter darkness. If we do this, are we sure that we will not be disappointed? Answer: *Christ did it!* To see the right hand of God in spite of his left hand, to flee to God against God, and to believe in the 'soonness' of God in spite of his 'slowness'—this is what, *in its depth*, faith is. No such faith is possible apart from the Example that Christ gave. Faith watches *Christus exemplum* and walks the way of *imitatio Christi*.

'It is not from works that we are set free by the faith of Christ, but from the belief in works, that is from foolishly presuming to seek justification through works.'

—MARTIN LUTHER