The Heart of the Matter: Luther's Concept of Reformation

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Abstract

Luther is often presented as a reformer of the church, but this paper demonstrates that the reformation of the church was a consequence of the real issue: a reformation of the relationship between God and man. Luther's spiritual biography and especially his debate with Erasmus make clear that to him the heart of the matter was how to define the relationship between the righteous God and sinful man and how to repair that relationship. Only from this perspective can the history and theology of the Reformation and its lasting relevance be understood.

Introduction[1]

> Ever since my childhood, I was used to blanching and becoming frightened whenever I simply heard the name of Christ mentioned. For I had not been taught anything else other than that I had to see him as a strict and wrathful judge.[2]

[1] This article is a revision of the lecture given by Dr. Herman Selderhuis on March 15, 2017, at Westminster Theological Seminary as the tenth annual Richard B. Gaffin Lecture on Theology, Culture, and Missions.

[2] Martin Luther, *Galatervorlesung* (1531), WA 40/1:298 (WA = Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luther Werke*, 120 vols. [Weimar, 1883–2009]). I refer only to Luther's writings and purposely leave all reference to secondary literature out. For more details on Luther's life and some secondary sources, see Herman Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

To understand Martin Luther's Reformation, we must follow him on his spiritual journey, which began with a fear of God that many had at the time. The big question that kept innumerable people, young and old, preoccupied was, Would you be able to do enough good for God, and were your sins, nonetheless, still higher in number than your good deeds? They struggled: Did you belong to those who were predestined or not? Would you ever go to heaven and not spend an interminable time in hell? Looking back, Luther said that to him Christ was often presented more as judge than as savior, and that kept people away from him.

> Therefore it is scandalous that men under the papacy taught people to flee from Christ. I preferred that his name would not be mentioned within my hearing because they had instructed me in such a manner that I had to provide satisfaction for my sins and that on the last day Christ would say: "How well did you keep the Ten Commandments? What's your condition?" Whenever someone described him to me, I was terrified of him, just like I was of the devil, because I could not bear his judgment.[3]

This experience would become fundamental for Luther's reformational turn. The Reformation was first of all the reformation of the relationship between God and man. His initial goal was not a reformation of the church, nor was his program a fight against corrupt practices in the church. His only issue was what he defined as *theology*: God who justifies, and man who needs to be justified.[4] In this respect, his theology cannot be understood without his biography. What follows will describe some crucial moments of Luther's life that make his fierce fight with Erasmus understandable.

I. *Stotternheim*

When he was in his early twenties, two important moments took place in Luther's life: his near death in a thunderstorm and his entrance into the monastery.

Luther was a student of law, but that did not satisfy him, and it had not provided him with what he was looking for. After a visit to his parents in Mansfeld on July 2, 1505, Martin returned to Erfurt. Near Stotternheim, about five miles from Erfurt, he was caught in a terrific thunderstorm. It thundered, and lightning flashed so violently that he feared for his life, and

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[3] Martin Luther, "Sermon on Psalm 110 (06.05.2535)," WA 41:197–98.

[4] "… ut proprie si subiectum Theologiae homo reus et perditus et deus iustificans vel salvator." Luther, *Galatervorlesung* (1531), WA 40/2:328.

he was struck by a "fear of sudden death"[5] and his unexpected and insufficiently prepared appearance before the Judge of heaven and earth. After lightning struck again close by, he invoked the aid of Saint Anna—who was seen as the mother of Mary—and promised her that he would become a monk if she rescued him from this horrible weather.

At least this is the way the story is usually presented. Does it fit with the facts?

It is perhaps more likely that Luther had gone home to tell his parents that he wanted to become a monk. In the thunderstorm, he made his commitment vow. According to Luther's own words thirty years later, he had begged, "Help me holy Anna; I want to become a monk."[6] As it was, Luther wanted to become a monk anyway. Therefore, it is not convincing to assume that soaking wet and deadly afraid in Stotternheim, he had come then and there to his decision. At an earlier date, he had also invoked the aid of Saint Anna to help him because he was considering holy orders so he could clear his guilt before God and because his death would have come at a very inopportune time. Apparently, Anna must have agreed with him because Luther's life was spared, which became for him a confirmation that he should enter the monastery. Why did he appeal to Anna and not to Mary? Anna was the patron saint of miners, and therefore we may presume that Luther had learned at home to call on her in emergencies. A year earlier, though, he had appealed to Mary when he accidentally stabbed himself with his dagger. At that time, he was on his way home, but now he had just left home. Had his trip home once again brought Anna closer to him? It is also entirely possible that Luther had not called out to Anna at all. The first time he mentioned her in the above circumstances was thirty years after the fact. Before that, he had never mentioned Anna.

Whatever the case may be, Luther survived and entered the monastery as he had pledged, committed because of the deep fear of dying without being properly prepared. Friends at that time compared this change to Paul's Damascus road conversion.[7] For Luther, it was very clear that this was a heavenly call that resounded deep in his soul.[8] In fact, this change in his life was not so radical; he had been preoccupied in seeking God for some time already. That is to say, he was seeking the God who could provide him with peace of heart and rest in conscience. In this context, he recounted that at a very young age he had already learned to search his heart and seriously confess his daily sins. This was such a burden for his conscience that he

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[5] Martin Luther, "Devotis monasticis Martini Lutheri iudicium (1521)," WA 8:573–74.
[6] Martin Luther, WA TR 1, no. 461 [TR = Tischreden].
[7] Crotus Rubianus, "Letter to Luther (10.16.1519)," WA BR, 1:543 [BR = Briefe].
[8] Luther, "Devotis monasticis (1521)," WA 8:573–74.

almost collapsed.[9] Luther sought God; he sought him everywhere. Thinking he could find him in the monastery was simply the next step in his quest, a life-changing step. He decided to exchange the rowdy table in the student pub for the silence and solitude of the monastic cell, a significant difference.

II. *Erfurt*

On July 16, when it was supposed to happen, Luther was received into the monastery. He had his choice of monasteries because Erfurt, like most towns, had a number of different monasteries. Luther chose the Augustinian monastery, where the monks lived in accordance with the rules set out by Augustine. The Augustinian monastery in Erfurt at this time had fifty residents and was known as an organization where a lot of time was devoted to Bible study. But they also spent considerable time begging, because the monastery survived on gifts. So Luther had to go on the streets regularly to collect money. He was now confronted with the question whether this would really allow him to accomplish the purpose of his quest.

The evening before he left his life as a student, he celebrated with a little party. He wanted to eat, drink, and make music with his friends one final time. He wrote that during that evening he played his lute for the last time. Before the party, he had also been able to sell some of his books. The heavy tomes of law studies, which according to him did not contain much of any value, claimed a good price.[10] Getting rid of his books did not cause him any grief. He claimed that he only experienced joy in the study of the Holy Scriptures. The next day, however, he had to hand in all the money from the sale of his books and property to the monastery. That did not appear to be a problem for Luther because he was not attached to material things. Would he be able, however, to give himself completely? At dawn, his friends accompanied him to the entrance of the monastery, where they said goodbye. According to Luther, this was forever: "You see me now, but afterward never again."[11] It would not turn out that way.

The day that he entered the monastery remained with Luther for the rest of his life. From the words that he spoke in 1539, it is clear that he continued to remember the anniversary of that date.

> On July 16, the day of [Saint] Alexius, he said: "Today it is the anniversary of my entry into the monastery in Erfurt." And he began to recount the story how he had made a

[9] Luther, WA TR 1, no. 461.
[10] Luther, WA TR 1, no. 11.
[11] Luther, WA TR 4, no. 4707.

> vow almost fourteen days earlier when underway he was upset by a lightning bolt near Stotternheim, not far from Erfurt. In his fear, he had called out: "Help me holy Anna, I want to become a monk." At the time, however, God regarded my vow in Hebrew: Anna, that is to say, in grace, and not under the law.[12]

> I regretted my vow, and many told me that I should not keep it. I persisted, however, and on the day before [Saint] Alexius, I invited my best friends to say goodbye so that they could accompany me to the monastery the next day. When they tried to hold me back, I said: "Today you will see me for the last time." With tears, they took me away. Also, my father was furious about the vow, but I stuck to my decision. I never considered leaving the monastery. I was completely dead to the world.[13]

Looking back, he said that he knew that God had wanted to use his entry into the monastery so he could learn about the many sins that were committed there[14] and to discover the gospel of grace again. The latter would certainly have been more relevant for him, but learning about sins was not an issue in that monastery. The Augustinian monastery was recognized as being strict and pious. More than likely, his negative judgment was influenced by his attitude toward the time before his reformed period, a phenomenon prevalent among converts. Luther was plagued more by his own sins than by those of others. Nor did he enter the monastery in a quest of self-discovery—something monasteries were not meant for—but to seek and to find God's grace. In the normal induction procedure, the first question asked by the prior was: "What do you seek here?" and then the candidate monk had to answer: "God's grace and your grace." Luther's search was exclusively the former. "In the monastery, I never thought about women, money or possessions, but my heart trembled and pondered about the question how I could gain God's grace."[15]

Luther's search was to find the grace of God, and so the monastery was not so much a flight from the world as a dedication to God. In retrospect, it was a decision that he forced himself to make against the coercive pressures of everything and everyone: "I became a monk under pressure, and did so against the will of my father, my mother, God and the devil."[16] He especially made this choice against the devil, because Luther made a discovery in the monastery that would cause the devil to lower his banner, as he wrote himself in "A Mighty Fortress."

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[12] Luther refers to the meaning of the Hebrew word *ḥanna*, namely, grace.
[13] Luther, WA TR 4, no. 4707.
[14] Luther, "Devotis monasticis (1521)," WA 8:573.
[15] Martin Luther, *Matthäus 18–24 in Predigten ausgelegt, 1537–1540*, WA 47:590.
[16] Luther, WA TR 4, no. 4414.

III. *Bible*

Luther writes that when he became a member of the monastic community, the monks gave him a red leather-bound Bible. He familiarized himself so thoroughly with the contents that he knew exactly what was on each page, and if someone named a particular text, he knew exactly where it was.[17] Luther "began to read the Bible and read it again and again."[18] He read his Bible from front to back and then would start anew. He would make summaries of each chapter so as to remember the content better. He made such tremendous growth in his Bible knowledge while in the monastery that later Carlstadt would praise him for this.[19] While there, Luther learned that Bible reading is actually "listening to the Bible": a text had to be read but also heard, again and again, as frequently as necessary until the reader had some understanding what the text said. This manner of Bible reading was called *lectio divina*, literally, godly reading. Reading and listening until one had heard God's voice in the Word.

> If you want to become a Christian, you must take the word of Christ, realizing that you will never be finished learning, and then with me, you will recognize that you still do not even know the ABC. If one was to boast, then I could certainly do that about myself because day and night I was busy studying the Bible, and yet I have remained a student. Every day I begin like someone in the primary school.[20]

Luther needed the Bible in his search for God. He was searching for the heart, for the real essence of theology, searching out God as he really is, in addition to searching out who man really is and how God and man are related to each other. Luther searched in the Bible; he "knocked" on the texts; he shook them like a fruit tree and then listened to find words of comfort and reassurance to drive away his fears. But initially, Bible reading shocked him, especially the Psalms that he had to pray many times a day. He prayed the Psalms, but he did not understand them because the required prayers were not meant to help him understand the Psalms but to merit good works. In Psalm 71:2, the prayer is expressed: "In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me" (ESV). Luther could only see righteousness as judgment, condemnation, and a punishing justice. He even says that he hated Psalm 2:11 because we are told to serve the Lord with fear and trembling,[21] as if not

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[17] Luther, WA TR 1, no. 116.
[18] Luther, WA TR 3, no. 3767.
[19] Luther, WA TR 2, no. 2512; WA TR 4, no. 5030.
[20] Martin Luther, "Sermon in Erfurt on John 5 (10.11.1529)," WA 29:583.
[21] Martin Luther, "Enarratio Psalmi 2 (1532; published 1546)," WA 40/2:295.

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enough fear gripped Luther already! Praying the Psalms, and therefore the Bible itself, made life even more burdensome for Luther: "What I wouldn't have given if someone had delivered me from the mass and the fear in my conscience, and had shown me the true meaning of a Psalm or one of the chapters in the Gospels. I would have crawled on my knees to Saint James [Santiago de Compostella]."[22]

It is evident that Luther gradually and more frequently questioned the prevailing theology and some ecclesiastical practices. Through the reading of Augustine, among others, he progressively developed the insight that the human will is totally incapable of achieving anything in the context of eternal salvation; it completely depends on God's righteousness. Almost hopelessly he searched in Paul for the meaning of God's righteousness: "I hated that word, namely, 'God's righteousness,' … indeed, I did not love God, but I hated this righteous God who punishes sinners."[23] He could not understand why God first condemned the sinner through the law and then also threatened him again in the gospel with righteousness. "I raged with an angry and thoroughly confused conscience, and unrestrained I went to Paul concerning this text, because I had a burning desire to know what the holy Paul would say about this."[24] Not until he had thought day and night about the relationship between the two words "God" and "righteousness" did he come to a conviction that this relationship was radically different from what he had always been told: "The gospel reveals the righteousness of God, namely, the passive, through which God the merciful justifies us through faith, as is written: 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" He discovered that the concept "God's righteousness" in Romans 1:17 did not mean that God *demands* righteousness, but that He *imparts* righteousness.[25] Hatred toward God immediately changed into love: "I felt like a completely newborn, and it was as if I had gone through the open gates into paradise itself."[26]

IV. *Erasmus and Indulgences*

Erasmus played a role in this development in that he brought the Greek New Testament to the market. This publication was revolutionary because the church had hitherto only used the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the

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[22] Martin Luther, "Sermon (05.14.1536)," WA 41:582.

[23] Martin Luther, "Vorrede zum ersten Bande der Gesamtausgaben seiner Lateinischen Schriften (Wittenberg, 1545)," WA 54:185.

[24] Ibid., WA 54:185.

[25] Ibid., WA 54:185–86.

[26] Ibid., WA 54:186.

Bible. It was this translation that was authoritative. As a humanist, Erasmus wanted to go back to the original source, and this original source of the New Testament was Greek. He also had the intention of bringing a new purer Latin translation to the market, but to show his new Latin text he published it beside the original Greek text. Indeed, when his publication appeared, it was clear that the translation that the church used did not properly correlate to the original text. Luther noticed this especially in John the Baptist's appeal. The church's translation spoke about penance as if it concerned following the rules for confession. But Erasmus's text spoke about repentance (*metanoia*) not as an act, but as an internal change. We must not simply do things differently; instead, something must happen that will change us within. Only then will we start doing things differently. Luther became convinced that the sequence of sanctification and righteousness had to be different. We are not righteous because we sanctify ourselves, but we sanctify ourselves because we have been justified.

> Therefore, it is not the way Aristotle maintained, that we become righteous by doing righteous deeds. That remains only an appearance of righteousness, a sham. Only those who become righteous and who are righteous, do righteous acts. First, the person has to change; only then the works will follow.[27]

The church taught that Christ's righteousness meant that Christ enabled us to become righteous. Luther's growing conviction was that the righteousness of Christ means that he has made us righteous. In essence, those statements are two very different things. People who try to live so that they are acceptable to God, "do not understand the righteousness of God, because that was given to us completely and freely in Christ." Whoever tries to do it himself shortchanges Christ. "If we, with our own efforts and torments, had to bring peace to our conscience—indeed, why did he actually die?"[28]

His discovery brought him into conflict with the existing practice of indulgences. Luther had had problems with indulgences for a while already. In his first lectures on the Psalms in 1514, he had complained that the practice of indulgences made the road to heaven easy and made grace cheap.[29] At other times he expressed his concern about the whole trade in indulgences. How could money and guilt be connected with each other in such a destructive way? Luther maintained that people bought indulgences because they were afraid of punishment, while in fact, they should be afraid

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[27] Luther, "Letter to Spalatin (10.19.1516)," WA BR 1:70.
[28] Luther, "Letter to Georg Spenlein (04.08.1516)," WA BR 1:35.
[29] Martin Luther, *Psalmenvorlesung, 1513–1515*, WA 3:416.

of sins.[30] Indulgences provided people with a false sense of security and strengthened self-interest so that they were not concerned with living to God's honor but only with escaping God's punishment. The indulgence issue gave people the wrong impression that punishment is the problem, whereas it is merely a consequence. The actual problem was not punishment from God, but guilt before God. One acquainted with the original intention of indulgences would know that they are only useful if one is truly remorseful. But—and this was Luther's new insight—if one is truly remorseful, one does not need an indulgence. Luther's problem was not that German money went to Rome, nor that it was used for building Saint Peter's, nor that people spent so much on indulgences even though they had so little to begin with. Rather, it involved something far more fundamental: people were being offered a kind of false insurance policy. Indulgences do not provide forgiveness of sins and do not help restore a relationship with God one iota. Indulgences do not produce the remorse and repentance required by God. Grace becomes a financial transaction; it is external and cheap, and it invites people to sin. Moreover, in light of Christ's work on the cross, it is questionable whether an indulgence is even necessary. With these questions, Luther undermined the foundations of a system that held enormous economic consequences for the church and made an emotional claim on people's consciences. He was not at all concerned about economics, but the burdening of the people's consciences was a significant concern for him, especially because his own conscience struggled so intensely with the questions of guilt and forgiveness.

Luther at first appeared completely unaware that this new insight would close the gates of Rome, and that his perspective would conflict with the church. In the first place, it concerned a personal discovery, but what this would mean for other believers, and the church as a whole, was beyond his awareness. Luther did not have an agenda for reformation, and "reformer" was not his career choice either. Nor did he set out to cause a breach with Rome. True, he wanted reforms in the church, but many with him and before him wanted the same, and that was not unique. Only when he received messages from Rome that they considered his ideas heretical did he become aware of the impending conflict. Luther wanted nothing other than a return to the Bible as the only norm. If this meant breaking with traditions, so be it. But Luther was not out to break with traditions either. His objective was not reformation, but renewed attention to the message that grace is sufficient. Now that he had found the proper relationship between the law and

[30] Martin Luther, "Sermons on Matthew (1517)," WA 1:141.

the gospel, that relationship was fundamental not only for him but for all of theology. "He who knows how properly to distinguish between the gospel and the law can thank God and realize that he is a theologian."[31]

V. *Conflict*

Like ominous thunder clouds, the confrontation between Luther and Erasmus hung in the air. Initially, it appeared as if these two giants would stand shoulder to shoulder for the same cause. Both wanted a return to the original sources, recognized the authority of the Scriptures, expressed their unvarnished criticism concerning the wrongs in the church, and were fed up with theologians who busied themselves with issues that were inconsequential for ordinary people. Early on, however, Luther noticed that there was a difference between Erasmus and himself. According to Luther, the Dutchman had insufficient appreciation for the sinfulness of people. "Every day I lose more joy in Erasmus …. Humanity appears to weigh more with him than the divine. Whenever you expect more from our human capacity, you judge differently than when you only want to know about grace."[32] Nevertheless, Luther defended Erasmus when he was targeted for censure because of criticism he expressed against the church.

> I always support him and give him highest praise as long as I can. And I try my utmost not to express myself on points on which I differ in opinion with him to avoid strengthening the negative attitude with my comments. But if I have to judge him, regardless of all the appreciation I have as theologian, and not as philologist; then we will find with Erasmus much that, according to me, is inappropriate for the knowledge of Christ.[33]

On March 28, 1519, he wrote Erasmus a letter in the flattering language unique to the style of the humanists, congratulating him on the many gifts he had and commiserating with him for the fact that he had received so much criticism. Erasmus and he were being tarred with the same brush, according to Luther. Because his name was becoming more renowned and was connected with that of Erasmus, it appeared good to send him such a letter.[34] From his side, Erasmus was less and less happy with Luther because he himself was being blamed for instigating the Reformation. He distanced himself from the Wittenberger and did not want to be involved in the

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[31] Martin Luther, *Galatervorlesung* (1531), WA 40/1:207.
[32] Luther, "Letter to Lang (03.01.1517)," WA BR, 1:90.
[33] Luther, "Letter to Spalatin (01.18.1518)," WA BR 1:133.
[34] Luther, "Letter to Erasmus (03.28.1519)," WA BR 1:361.

ecclesiastical conflict. It was said that Luther was the chicken that hatched from the egg that Erasmus had brooded. Erasmus wanted peace, but especially rest, and for his income he depended on people favorably predisposed to Rome. Gradually, and quite deliberately, he publicly distanced himself from all of it. Of course, Luther noticed that too.

> What Erasmus's opinion is, or what he says his opinion is, you can read very clearly in his books, in both his first as well as his most recent ones. Though I notice his ruses everywhere, I act as if I don't get his stratagems. He puts on an act publicly as if he were not my enemy, though I have figured him out better than he thinks himself. He has done what he was meant to do: He introduced knowledge of the source languages to call people back from blasphemous studies. Perhaps he will die with Moses in the fields of Moab (Deut 34:5) because concerning godliness he has not come to a better understanding. I would love to see him ceasing to engage himself in commentaries on Scripture and stopping his paraphrases because he lacks all knowledge to do this. Thus he engages his readers in vain and prevents them from developing an understanding of Scripture. He has done enough to show what was bad, but he cannot let us see the good and bring us into the promised land.[35]

For Erasmus, the time had come to make a definitive break with Luther, as King Henry VIII had advised. He did this by initiating a discussion to clarify that fundamentally he had nothing to do with Luther. He published a treatise in Latin concerning free will, an issue to be discussed at a scholarly level. The nature of this treatise involved thoughts for consideration rather than theses, as Erasmus had never dared to propose theses or points of view. Instead, for safety's sake, he approached the issues with questions. For several years already, Luther had opposed the opinion that after the fall people have free will. Erasmus stated that free will enables people to take hold of salvation, which God has prepared. In the monastery, Luther had become completely confused by the issue of free will. Erasmus, however, expected free will to enable people to live more Christianly. He thought Luther's view was dangerous because it would cause people to become easygoing. Luther, on the other hand, thought that Erasmus's view was dangerous because it could cause uncertainty for people. These views had to clash head on, but initially nothing happened. Luther's first reaction was in a sermon that he delivered on October 9, 1524, in which he described the powerlessness of a person's will,[36] using these well-known words: "You are a stallion, and the devil is your rider," a word that counted not only for Erasmus, but for every person. Only Christ can deliver us from that rider.

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[35] Luther, "Letter to Oecolampadius (06.20.1524)," WA BR 3:96–97.

[36] Martin Luther, "Predigt am 20. Sonntag nach Trinitatis (10.09.1524)," WA 15:713–16.

By November 1, he had read only part of Erasmus's booklet,[37] but that had been enough to convince him that he needed to react to it. Generally, he was not in the habit of reading his opponents' works completely; he read until he knew enough to react, and the rest of the book he would use as toilet paper.[38] But Erasmus's booklet did not end up hanging beside Luther's toilet; he read it all. He did not like it and realized at the same time that this reaction would require a special effort: "It is indescribable how much I detest this little book [of Erasmus'] concerning free will, even after reading a few pages. It will be a difficult task to respond to such a learned book from such a learned man."[39] Furthermore, he had no desire to get into a discussion with Erasmus, and moreover, he had other pressing matters to deal with. In 1525 Luther had to deal with the Peasants' War, the conflict concerning the Lord's Supper, and his marriage. Nevertheless, after some time, he did react because he realized that this was an important issue. More importantly, he realized that it concerned the heart of the matter, as he stated at the conclusion of his book when he thanked Erasmus:

> I want to praise you highly in this, and I am telling you openly, that in contrast to everyone else, you are the only one who has focused on the matter itself, on the main issue, and that you have not bothered me with other issues such as the papacy, purgatory, indulgences and more of those silly things concerning which almost everyone has dogged me. You are the only one who has seen the heart of the issue and truly tried to zero in on that vital spot—for that I want to thank you with all my heart.[40]

Not until December 31, 1525, a year after Erasmus's booklet had been published, did Luther begin his reaction. The size of his reply shows that he took his time to consider his response. In this work, Luther worked out the distinction between a hidden God and the revealed God, of which he had spoken already in Heidelberg in 1518. At the outset, he stated that we do not have a free will, and concerning grace and eternal life we have absolutely nothing to say. God elects, God determines, God gives. And why he chooses to give faith to one person and not to another remains hidden to us. It is none of our business. We must only concern ourselves with the revealed God, the God who comes to us and says, "Believe the gospel, and you shall live in eternity." Predestination is a given in the Bible, but how it works only God knows. Whatever is beyond our understanding is none of our concern. We may hold fast to God's promises, and that is sufficient for anyone.

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[37] Martin Luther, "Letter to Spalatin (11.01.1524)," WA BR 3:368.
[38] Luther, WA TR 2, no. 2086.
[39] Luther, "Letter to Spalatin (11.01.1524)," WA BR 3:368.
[40] Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525), in WA 18:786–87.

How important this book was for him is seen by the fact that he said that everything he had published could be thrown into the fire as long as the *Larger Catechism* and *De servo arbitrio* were spared.[41]

The breach was definitive. Luther was disgusted with Erasmus's attitude and his opinions. "I hate Erasmus. I hate him with all my strength." To engage this man in a discussion was impossible. "Erasmus is an eel."[42] That, according to Luther, you could see in him. "Erasmus is, such as his facial expressions show, a person full of scheming and evil who mocks God and religion."[43] Erasmus reacted dismissively and accused Luther of being impulsive and of being guilty of slanderous lies and ridiculous accusations. After that, the discussion remained quiet for a long time. Luther did not return to this topic either. As far as he was concerned, everything had been said, and moreover, this was hardly a topic for the pulpit. Luther considered Erasmus a man of smooth talk, a moralist who presented Christ as an example but did not see him as savior. In 1533, discussion between the two flared up once again.[44] But after Erasmus had defended himself one more time, no more was said. Two years after Erasmus's death, Luther gave his final judgment about him:

> Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote many exceptional works. He had the intelligence for it and the time. There was nothing to prevent him; he had no official duties, did not preach, did not give lectures and did not have to be involved in business. He had a lifestyle without God, lived in complete self-assurance and thus he died, without asking in his final agony for a servant of God's Word or the service of the sacraments. God spare me that I, in my hour of death do not ask for a believing servant, indeed, that I would especially call the first available one, and praise God. Erasmus learned those things in Rome, but because of his distinction and his books, we must now be silent about it.[45]

Conclusion

Luther's primary goal was neither a reformation of society, nor a revolution in natural sciences, a restructuring of political and social life in Europe, or a re-evaluation of marriage, family, and education. His goal was not even a reformation of the church, although he was much concerned about the state of the clergy and the abuse of power by the church and in the church. His primary—and existential—concern was the relationship between God and

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[41] Luther, "Letter to Wolfgang Capito (07.09.1537)," in WA BR 8:99.
[42] Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525), WA 18:716.
[43] Luther, WA TR 2, no. 2420.
[44] Cf. Luther, "Letter to Nikolaus von Amsdorf (03.11.1534)," WA BR 7:27–40.
[45] Luther, WA TR 4, no. 4028.

man, and more specifically, the relationship between a holy God and a sinful man. In the 1545 foreword to the first edition of his collected works, he wrote that when he discovered what justification really means, it was as if the gate of paradise had been opened to him.[46] He describes this discovery as the key element in the Reformation. By 1545 he had seen what the Reformation had brought about. By the opening of the gates to heaven, he does not mean that Europe needed a new political system, or that monks and nuns should get married, or that human beings need freedom for self-development. He was convinced that all of a sudden he had understood a central Bible text and that man can be saved from God's judgment and eternal death by free and undeserved grace. That, for Luther, was the heart of the matter.

[46] "Hic me prorsus renatum esse sensi, et apertis portis in ipsam paradisum intrasse," Martin Luther, "Vorrede (1545)," WA 54:186.