

Martin Luther's "Tower Experience" (1545)

Abstract

In 1545, Martin Luther penned the following autobiographical introduction for a collection of his Latin writings. It describes his revelation that Christian salvation rests on faith alone [*sola fide*], that it comes not from human works, but rather from God's grace [*sola gratia*], as promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New [*sola scriptura*]. Although the accuracy of Luther's account has long been debated, his introduction, which includes a description of his famous "tower experience" (for which this document is the only direct evidence), is interesting as a deliberately composed autobiographical statement. This text was the key source for many twentieth-century accounts of Luther's "breakthrough" to the core of his theology.

Source

Dear Reader,

I have steadfastly resisted those who wanted my books published, or perhaps I had better call them the confused products of my nighttime study. First, I did not want the labors of the ancient authors to be buried under my new works and the reader to be hindered from reading them. Second, there now exists, thanks to the grace of God, a good number of systematically arranged books, especially the "Loci communes" of Philip, [Philip Melancthon, scholar of Greek and associate of Luther at Wittenberg.] from which a theologian or bishop can get a thorough foundation [cf Titus 1:9], so that he might be strong in preaching the doctrine of virtue. Third, and most importantly, the Bible itself is now available in almost every language. The disordered train of events, however, has seen to it that my works resemble a wild, disorganized chaos, which now even I cannot easily put into order.

For these reasons I wanted all my books to be buried in perpetual oblivion, that thus there might be room for better books. But other people, by their bold and unrelenting arguments, badgered me into publishing mine. They maintained that, if I did not permit them to be published while I was alive, people would publish them after I was dead anyway, people ignorant of the sequence of events and of the causes behind them. Thus instead of one confusion, there would be many. I also had to take into account the wish and command of our most illustrious Prince Elector Johann Frederick, who ordered or rather forced the printers not only to print this edition but also to get it done quickly.

Above all I beg the reader, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, to read these works with discernment, or perhaps I should say with compassion. The reader should know that I was once a monk, the most rabid of papists, when I took up this whole affair. I was so drunk, so submerged in the pope's doctrines, that I was ready, if I could, to kill or help kill those who would have advocated by so much as a single syllable withdrawing obedience to the pope. That's how much of a Saul I was [i.e., St. Paul, who, before his conversion, was called Saul and who was zealous in his persecution of Christians], as many still are. I wasn't so icy cold in defending the papacy as was Eck and those like him, who seemed to me to defend the pope more for the sake of their bellies than through serious commitment. To this day they seem to me to be laughing at the pope like Epicureans. I took the matter seriously because I had a horrible fear of the Last Day, yet still wished from the depths of my heart to be saved.

Consequently you will find that, in my earlier writings, I most humbly conceded many important things to the pope, things which I later detested and now detest as being the greatest blasphemy and abomination. Therefore, dear reader, kindly ascribe this error or, as my calumniators call it, this

contradiction to the time and to my inexperience. At first I was alone and surely much too inept and unlearned to be dealing with such matters. For, as God is my witness, it was by accident and not by my own will or desire that I got involved in all this turmoil.

When in 1517 indulgences were sold (I wanted to say promulgated) in these regions for disgraceful profit, I was a preacher, a young Doctor of Theology, as they say. I began to dissuade the people from lending an ear to the shouts of the indulgence-sellers. I told them that they had better things to do and that I was sure that in these matters I had the pope on my side. I was relying greatly on his trustworthiness, since in his decrees he had very clearly condemned the excesses of the quaestors [name of a treasury official in ancient Rome] as he called the indulgence preachers.

Shortly thereafter I wrote two letters, one to Albert, the archbishop of Mainz, who was getting half the money from the indulgences (the other half was going to the pope, a fact of which I was at the time ignorant), the other to the ordinary of the place, Jerome, bishop of Brandenburg. I begged them to put a stop to the shameless blasphemy of the quaestors, but they despised this poor little brother. Therefore, finding myself despised, I published a list of theses and, at the same time, a sermon in German on indulgences. A little later I published the "Explanations," in which, in deference to the pope, I maintained that indulgences should not be condemned but that the works of charity should be preferred to them.

What I did toppled heaven and consumed earth by fire. I am denounced to the pope, commanded to go to Rome, and the entire papacy rises up against me alone. These things happened in 1518 when Maximilian was holding the Diet at Augsburg, at which Cardinal Cajetan was the legate of the pope. The most illustrious Duke Frederick of Saxony, Prince Elector, took up my cause with the Cardinal and asked that I not be forced to go to Rome but that he, Cajetan, should summon me to a hearing and take care of the matter. Shortly thereafter the Diet was adjourned.

Meanwhile the Germans were getting tired of putting up with the plunderings, the buying and selling, and the endless frauds of the Roman rascals. They were waiting with bated breath for the outcome of so important a matter, which neither bishop nor theologian had ever before dared to touch. This mood of the populace encouraged me, because those crafty "Romanations" with which they had filled and fatigued the whole world were now hateful to everyone.

Poor and on foot I came to Augsburg, my expenses paid by Prince Frederick. I had from him letters commending me to the senate and to certain good men. I was there for three days before I approached the Cardinal, because those good men strongly advised me not to go to the Cardinal until I had a safe conduct pass from the Emperor. The Cardinal had been summoning me every day through a certain spokesman. This latter pestered me greatly, saying that if I'd only recant, then everything would be all right. But long the injury, long the detour back.

Finally, on the third day, the spokesman came and demanded to know why I hadn't yet approached the Cardinal, who was waiting to receive me most kindly. I answered that I was complying with the advice of good men to whom I had been commended by Prince Frederick and that they had advised me not to go to see the Cardinal unless I had a safe conduct pass from the Emperor. I said that they were requesting one from the imperial senate and that I would come as soon as it had been obtained. He got very angry and said: "Do you think Prince Frederick is going to take up arms for your sake?" I said, "I don't want him to." He asked, "Where will you stay?" I replied, "Under heaven." He then asked, "If you had the pope and the cardinals in your power, what would you do?" I said, "I'd show them every reverence and honor." Then He moved his finger in an Italian gesture and said, "Hem." Then he went away and never came back.

The same day the imperial senate informed the Cardinal that I had been given a safe conduct; they warned him that he should not plan to have anything too severe in store for me. It is said that he

answered, "Fine, but I shall act according to my duty." These events were the beginning of this whole commotion; the rest can be learned from what follows.

That same year, 1518, Prince Frederick had called Philip Melanchthon here to Wittenberg to teach Greek, doubtless so that I might have a colleague in my labors of teaching theology. His works testify to what the Lord has accomplished through Melanchthon, his instrument, not only in literature but also in theology, despite the fact that Satan and all his brood are infuriated.

The following year, in February of 1519, Emperor Maximilian died, and by the law of the Empire Duke Frederick became vicar. Then the fury of the tempest abated a little, and gradually excommunication, the papal thunderbolt, came to be held in contempt. Eck and Caraccioli brought from Rome a bull [a papal decree] condemning me. The former conveyed it to Wittenberg, the latter to Duke Frederick, who was at the time in Cologne, where he and the other princes were to receive Charles, the newly elected Emperor. Duke Frederick got very indignant at that papal rascal and courageously told him off in no uncertain terms because in his absence he and Eck had disturbed his dominions and those of his brother. He gave them such a magnificent tongue lashing that they went away from him shamed and disgraced. The prince, endowed as he was with unbelievable natural ability, knew all about the crafty ways of the Roman curia [the administrative apparatus of the Roman Church]; he knew exactly how to treat them. He was a man with a good clear nose, and he could smell more and farther than the Romanists could either hope or fear.

Thereafter they stopped testing Frederick. Furthermore, he paid no honor to the rose that they call "golden" [a special mark of papal esteem] which Leo X sent him that same year; on the contrary, he ridiculed it. Thus the Romanists were forced to give up any hope of duping such a prince. The Gospel advanced successfully under the protection of this prince and was propagated far and wide. His authority influenced many; since he was a most wise and keen-sighted prince, he could incur no suspicion, except among the hateful, that he was out to encourage and support heresy. This did the papacy great harm.

In the same year, 1519, there was held at Leipzig the debate to which Eck had challenged Karlstadt and me. But by no letter of mine could I secure a safe conduct from Duke George, and so I entered Leipzig not as a debater but as a spectator under the safe conduct which had been given to Karlstadt. I don't know who was blocking my way, since I was sure that, up to that time, Duke George had not been hostile to me.

In Leipzig Eck came to me in my lodgings. He said he had learned that I had refused to debate. I answered, "How can I debate if I can't secure a safe conduct from Duke George?" He answered, "I came here to debate with you, and if I can't, then I don't want to debate with Karlstadt either. What if I get a safe conduct for you? Will you debate with me then?" I said, "Get it and I will." He left, and shortly thereafter I too got a safe conduct and so had the opportunity of debating.

Eck did this because he thought he would cover himself with glory in debating my proposition in which I denied that the pope was the head of the church by divine right. In this proposition Eck had a golden opportunity of flattering the pope and of meriting his thanks and of overwhelming me with hatred and ill-will. That is exactly what he did throughout the whole debate, but he neither proved his position nor refuted mine. Even Duke George said to Eck and me at breakfast, "Whether it's by divine right or by human right, still he's the pope." If he hadn't been influenced by the arguments, he would never have said such a thing but would have approved of Eck alone.

From my case you can see how hard it is to struggle free from errors which become fixed by universal standard and changed by time-honored custom into nature. How true the proverb is: "It's hard to abandon customs" and "Custom is a second nature." How right Augustine was when he said, "Custom, if

it is not resisted, becomes necessity.” I had been reading and teaching the Sacred Scriptures diligently in private and in public for seven years, so that I knew almost all of them by heart. Then too, I had imbibed the beginnings of the knowledge of Christ and of faith in him, i.e., that it is faith in Christ and not works that justifies and saves us. Finally, I was now defending publicly that proposition of which I’m speaking, namely, that the pope was not the head of the church by divine right. But I still didn’t see the necessary conclusion, i.e., that the pope must be from the devil, for what is not from God must be from the devil.

I was so absorbed, as I have said, by the example and title of the Holy Church as well as by my own customary way of thinking, that I conceded that the pope was head of the church by human right. However, if that right is not supported by divine authority, then it is a lie and comes from the devil. After all, we obey our parents and the civil authorities, not because they themselves command it, but because God wants us to (cf. 1 Peter). That is why I can, with a little less hatred, put up with those who cling so tenaciously to the papacy, especially those who haven’t read the sacred Scriptures or even the secular writings, since I myself had read the sacred Scriptures diligently for so many years and still clung tenaciously to the papacy.

In 1519, as I’ve already said, Leo X sent the Golden Rose through Karl von Miltitz; with many arguments he urged me to be reconciled to the pope. Miltitz had seventy apostolic briefs, and if Prince Frederick would hand me over, as the pope was asking by sending the Rose, he would post one of the briefs in each town and so conduct me safely to Rome. But Miltitz betrayed to me what was really in his heart when he said, “Martin, I thought you were some aged theologian who used to sit next to the stove and debate with himself, but now I see that you’re still a strong young man. If I had twenty-five thousand armed men, I don’t think I could convey you to Rome. I’ve been sounding out the opinions of people along the way to see what they thought of you. For every one for the pope there are three for you against the pope.” That’s ridiculous!

He had asked the women and serving girls in the inns what they thought of the Roman See [the Latin “sedes” = “seat”]. They didn’t know what the word meant and, thinking of a household chair, they answered, “How are we supposed to know what kind of chairs you have at Rome? We don’t know whether they’re made out of wood or stone.”

Miltitz begged me, therefore, to do everything I could to make peace, and he would do his best to see that the pope did the same. I promised that I would most promptly do anything that I could in good conscience do. I said that I too wanted peace and that I had been drawn by force into these squabbles and had been forced by circumstances to do everything I did; I was not to blame. Miltitz had summoned the Dominican friar, Johann Tetzel, the originator of this tragedy. With threatening words from the pope he so broke the man, who up to that time had been the terror of all and a fearless crier of indulgences, that he wasted away and was finally consumed by a mental illness. When I found this out, I wrote him, before he died, a kindly letter in which I comforted him and told him to take heart and not to fear my memory. But perhaps his conscience and the wrath of the pope sent him to the grave.

People thought Miltitz and his line of action were useless, but it seems to me that if the man at Mainz [i.e., Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz] had followed Miltitz’s course from the beginning when I had reprimanded him, and if the pope had followed it before he condemned me without a hearing and raged with his bulls, and if they had suppressed Tetzel’s fury, the affair wouldn’t have resulted in such an uproar. It’s all the fault of the man at Mainz, who was tricked by his own cleverness with which he wanted to suppress my doctrine and to save his money which he’d sought through indulgences. Now they seek counsel in vain; now they make efforts in vain. The Lord has awakened and stands to judge the peoples [cf. Psalm 76:9 and Daniel 9:14]. Even if they were able to kill us, they still wouldn’t have what they want; in fact, they’d have even less than they have now while we are alive and well. Some among them, whose nose is not completely inactive, can smell this well enough.

Meanwhile in that same year, 1519, I had begun interpreting the Psalms once again. I felt confident that I was now more experienced, since I had dealt in university courses with St. Paul's Letters to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the Letter to the Hebrews. I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter one: "The justice of God is revealed in it." I hated that word, "justice of God," which, by the use and custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as referring to formal or active justice, as they call it, i.e., that justice by which God is just and by which he punishes sinners and the unjust.

But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, "Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?" This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience. I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans 1 and anxiously wanted to know what he meant.

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: "The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The just person lives by faith.'" I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The just person lives by faith." All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

I exalted this sweetest word of mine, "the justice of God," with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise. Afterward I read Augustine's "On the Spirit and the Letter," in which I found what I had not dared hope for. I discovered that he too interpreted "the justice of God" in a similar way, namely, as that with which God clothes us when he justifies us. Although Augustine had said it imperfectly and did not explain in detail how God imputes justice to us, still it pleased me that he taught the justice of God by which we are justified.

Better armed now with these thoughts, I began for the second time to interpret the Psalms. The work would have grown into a large commentary, but I was summoned the following year to Worms for the Diet convened by Emperor Charles V and so had once again to leave the work I had begun.

I am telling you all this, dear reader, so that, if you are going to read my little works, you should remember that I am one of those, as I said above, who, as Augustine writes of himself, makes progress by writing and teaching. I am not one of those who out of nothing suddenly become perfect (although in fact they are nothing), who don't work, who aren't tempted, who have no experience, but who, with one look into the Scriptures, exhaust their whole spirit.

Up to that point, 1520–21, the indulgence affair was still going on. There followed the affairs dealing with the sacraments and with the Anabaptists, about which I will write prefaces in other volumes, if I live to do so.

Good-bye in the Lord, dear reader, and pray that the word may increase against Satan, because he is powerful and evil. And now he has become extremely vicious and savage because he knows that he has

only a short time and that the kingdom of his pope is endangered. May God strengthen in us what he has accomplished. May he prosper his work which he has begun in us for his glory [cf. Phillipians 1:6 and Psalm 68:29]. Amen.

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