

Martin Luther, Augustinian

By Richard D. Balge

It was Professor J.P. Koehler's verdict on Augustine of Hippo that "had he lived at the time of the Reformation, he would have taken his stand with Luther."¹ Perhaps the great theologian of the West would have preferred to wait for Calvin. Also, when one recalls Augustine's struggles with the Donatists, it is difficult to imagine him taking a stand with a man whom the Catholic Church regarded as a rebel and a schismatic. In view of the fact that Luther transcended him in understanding Scripture, especially Paul, we might conclude that Augustine could have learned a great deal from his avid pupil. Whether or not he would have been receptive is a question we cannot really answer. Thus, Professor Koehler's thesis remains thought-provoking but unprovable.

But even if we cannot know how the bishop of Hippo would have received Luther's teaching, we can come to some conclusions as to the degree in which Luther stood with Augustine. The Reformer's writings show that he had a thorough knowledge of Augustine's writings, learned from him and appreciated him until the end of his life. There was no father of the church whom Luther knew better or quoted oftener, no teacher of the Catholic Church with whom he identified more closely. There are times when the Reformer seems to speak of Augustine as of a peer, and some non-Lutheran historians have judged that he was.

Martin Luther was an Augustinian in the sense that he was a member of the Augustinian Eremites. He entered their Black Monastery at Erfurt on July 17, 1505, at the age of 21. Several other orders maintained houses in that city and its environs. It is not too daring to say that the story of the gospel's course in history would not be the same if the earnest young man had entered one of the others. This was the only order which combined the study of Scripture and of Augustine's writings with dual emphasis on the care of souls and higher education. It was only in this order that Martin Luther could come to know John Staupitz, who embodied the ideals and aims of the order, who was not only Augustinian in name but also strongly Augustinian in his theology.

The order's Constitution of 1287 had exhorted the friars "to read the Scriptures eagerly, to hear them devotedly, and to learn them zealously."² Staupitz had incorporated this exhortation, verbatim, in the new constitution of the reformed order. When he drew up the curriculum for the University of Wittenberg he made St. Paul the patron saint and established Augustine's dictum as the first statute: "The highest authority in matters of faith is the Bible."³ Most of the monasteries which he supervised as vicar general conducted a *studium generale* which included instruction in the theology of Augustine.

For Staupitz, the order's connection with the African doctor was not merely formal or incidental or nominal. Thus, when he became Brother Martin's father confessor, there were three helpful observations he could offer the troubled sinner. Not from the scholastic theologians, but from Augustine, he had learned that penance begins with the love of God, that you cannot depend on your works to make you right with God, and that true theology gives glory to God rather than to men.⁴ These observations did not end Luther's spiritual torment. There was still much to learn about the righteousness of God, but here was a beginning—a significant beginning of his development as a theologian.

At the time of his appointment to lecture on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard at the University of Erfurt in 1509, Luther's acquaintance with the writings of his order's patron seems to have been secondhand and minimal. He had been schooled in the writings of William of Occam and was thoroughly familiar with the work of Gabriel Biel. From his remark in a letter to George Spalatin on October 19, 1516, we learn that when he began to teach he had no special esteem for the saint or familiarity with his work: "Devotion to my order does

¹ Joh. Ph. Koehler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1917), p 133.

² Barend Klaas Kuiper, *Martin Luther, The Formative Years* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1933), p 121.

³ Reudolf Thiel, *Luther*, transl. Gustav K. Wiencke (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955) p 111.

⁴ David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz, an essay in the intellectual origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1980), p 180.

not compel me to approve of the blessed Augustine; before I had stumbled upon his books I had no regard for him in the least.”⁵

It was in preparation for the lectures on the *Sentences* that he began to read in Augustine. Peter Lombard had included references to *On the Spirit and the Letter* in his glosses, and these led the young professor to the original. The earliest notes from Luther’s own hand are marginal glosses of 1508 in Augustine’s works.⁶ Luther’s lectures of 1509 also contain marginal references to *On the Spirit and the Letter*.⁷

Now began the period which Luther recalled at table in 1532: “At first I devoured, not merely read, Augustine.”⁸ He read through and annotated *On the Trinity* and *The City of God* in 1511 and 1512.⁹ In his earliest *Introductory Lectures on the Psalms*, 1513 and 1514, there are many citations from the writings of Augustine, particularly his *Confessions*. Luther’s earliest extant sermons cite Augustine, and “the nearest analogy to Luther’s [sermonic] method is that employed in Augustine’s homilies.”¹⁰ At least 24 of the great doctor’s works are cited in the *Lectures on Romans*, delivered in 1515 and 1516. By 1516 he knew Augustine well enough to reject, on the basis of internal evidence, the work on true and false repentance ascribed to the latter.¹¹

The scholastics, in whose writings Luther had begun his theological studies, paid lip service to Augustine. However, they had reacted against his teaching on election, original sin and the bondage of the will. They wanted to avoid the errors of Pelagius, but they also wanted to allow free will a role in man’s salvation. In his lectures on the *Sentences*, Luther still followed Biel (and thus Occam): Man is impaired but not impotent. Before he acquires the disposition to love God he is capable of desiring to love God. God accepts this desire as meritorious (the merit of congruity) and rewards the sinner by forgiving his sins in baptism. In baptism he infuses man with his grace and enables him to perform the works because of which he will finally, by the merit of condignity, be worthy of eternal life. Thus one could speak of salvation by grace alone and at the same time vitiate that doctrine by a thoroughgoing synergism.

These teachings of the scholastics did not quiet the concern of the young monk-priest-professor about the righteousness of God, which he could only understand as the righteousness which God demands and according to which he damns the sinner. If earlier scholastics had understood the *iustitia dei* in any other way, Gabriel Biel who was Luther’s principal authority on Lombard had not.¹²

It was from Augustine, indirectly, that Luther began to learn about the righteousness of God in the evangelical sense of Romans 1:17. Not at first hand, but from the gloss in which Lombard paraphrases Augustine, he learned that “this is called the justice of God, not with which he is just, but because with it he makes us just.”¹³ Augustine—and ultimately the apostle Paul—would teach him much more about the righteousness of God; this was a beginning. It was at this time, 1508—1509, that Luther began “to devour, not merely read” Augustine.

Now, to say that God “makes us just” suggests that justification is something which God effects in us and that it is a process. It was not understood by Augustine, nor is it understood by Roman Catholics today, as the non-imputation of sins and imputation of righteousness for Christ’s sake. Thus, when Luther began his *Introductory Lectures on the Psalms* in 1513 his understanding of the *iustitia dei* was still defective. While the concept did not terrify him as it once had, he did not yet understand it as God’s favorable verdict which is apprehended by faith.

⁵ LW XLVIII, 24.

⁶ Heinrich Boehmer, *Luther in Light of Recent Research*, transl. Carl F. Huth, Jr. (New York: The Christian Herald, 1916) p 49.

⁷ Uuras Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), pp 109ff.

⁸ LW, LI, xviii.

⁹ Heinrich Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, transl. John W. Dobberstein and Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946) p 84.

¹⁰ LW, LI, xviii.

¹¹ Boehmer, *Road*, p 126.

¹² Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God, Luther Studies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), p 125.

¹³ Rupp, op. cit., p 124.

But with Augustine's help he was beginning to learn about sin and grace, law and gospel, faith and works. At Psalm 1:6 he commended the bishop because "he did not set up his own righteousness nor justify himself or attribute anything to himself" in the *Confessions*.¹⁴ At Psalm 71:15 he paraphrased Augustine's comment on Romans 10:3; "One's own righteousness ... is trouble and not peace because it does not conciliate God but rather irritates him."¹⁵ Then at Psalm 73:1, he "paraphrased" *On the Trinity* with regard to the *iustitia dei*. Actually, he said something that Augustine was not saying but that his mentor was helping him realize: "He is righteous, however, when he forgives or imputes sin and the evil of guilt and bestows the good of grace and righteousness."¹⁶ At Psalm 81:1 he neither cited nor paraphrased the great teacher but simply said: "The blessing of Christ is received through faith in his deeds."¹⁷

These are evidences of movement and signs of growth. They do not, however, signify that Luther had now fully and consistently developed the theology of the *Book of Concord*. In the very paragraph (at Psalm 119:76) which includes what seems to be his first mention of Augustine's *massa perdit*a he also repeated the Catholic view that we must still be punished in some way for our sins: "For we are all a 'lost mass' and deserve eternal death. Now, therefore, lest sin pass unpunished, for Christ's sake, out of His supreme mercy, he changes the eternal punishment into temporal punishment for us."¹⁸ In the introduction to Psalm 121 he relapses and speaks of the righteousness of God as a demanding and condemning justice, requiring man's holy obedience: "*Nullus est justus nisi obediens.*"¹⁹

Luther was thoroughly conversant with Augustine's writings before he began his Lectures on Romans in the summer of 1515. This is evident from the fact that he cited at least 24 of Augustine's works in the course of these lectures. His thorough acquaintance with the Augustinian corpus, including the father's own commentary on Romans, actually could have prevented Luther from really penetrating Paul's teaching on justification. He could not have learned from Augustine that the forgiveness of sins *is* justification and that this is apprehended by faith alone.

In 1545, during the last full year of his life, Luther acknowledged Augustine's help in the *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings*. But he also remarked on Augustine's imperfect understanding of Paul. Concerning Romans 1:17 he wrote.

That place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us.²⁰

Although this was heretofore said imperfectly and he did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly, it nevertheless was pleasing that God's righteousness with which we are justified was taught.²¹

James Mackinnon has noted that Luther read *Cur Deus Homo?* as part of his theological preparation. He says, "From Anselm he learned to conceive of justification as the remission of sin, imperfectly grasped by Augustine, who confused justification with sanctification."²² We have not found evidence that Luther acknowledged this debt to Anselm. If he was in fact helped by *Cur Deus Homo?*, then he did what he regularly did with Augustine's writings. That is, he gleaned what was Pauline or placed a Pauline construction on

¹⁴ LW, X, 27.

¹⁵ LW, X, 399.

¹⁶ LW, X, 416.

¹⁷ LW, XI, 103.

¹⁸ LW, XI, 468.

¹⁹ WA, IV, 405.24.

²⁰ Luther must mean "re-read" and "read with new insight."

²¹ LW, XXXIV, 337.

²² James Mackinnon, *Luther and the Reformation*, Vol. I, *Early Life and Religious Development to 1517* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), p 160.

something in Anselm. This is not to begrudge Anselm or to challenge Mackinnon. It is to emphasize that Luther learned from Paul as the highest authority and thus transcended all the fathers from whom he had learned.

As Luther was growing in his understanding of the righteousness of God, so also was he gaining an understanding of the law and sin. In a scholia which he prepared for the prefatory remarks with which he began to lecture on Romans he wrote,

The chief purpose of this letter is to break down, to pluck up, and to destroy all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh. This includes all the works which in the eyes of people or even in our own eyes may be great works. No matter whether these works are done with a sincere heart and mind, this letter is to affirm and state and magnify sin, no matter how much someone insists that it does not exist, or that it was believed not to exist.

He goes on to cite *On the Spirit and the Letter* for patristic support, but he is already saying it more clearly and truly than his teacher.²³ In his comments at Romans 7:6 he cites the same work to speak of the law in the narrow sense:

Paul refers not only to the symbolical portions of Scripture or the doctrines of the law but to every teaching which prescribes those things which belong to a good life.²⁴

Luther began to deliver his *Lectures on Romans* in the summer of 1515. While strong arguments for a later “tower experience” have been made, it was very likely during the preparation for those lectures that, as he said in 1545, Romans 1:17 became “the gate of Paradise” for him. At table, in 1538, he recalled,

I hated Paul with all my heart when I read that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. Only afterward, when I saw the words that follow—namely, that it is written that the righteous shall live through faith—and in addition consulted Augustine, was I cheered. When I learned that the righteousness of God is his mercy, and that he makes us righteous through it, a remedy was offered to me in my affliction.²⁵

The “afterward” would again seem to refer to the period of preparation for the Romans lectures. It is certain that this crucial understanding was granted him before he wrote the lectures, for this is what he wrote at Romans 1:17:

Only in the gospel is the righteousness of God revealed [that is, who is and becomes righteous before God and how this takes place] by faith alone, by which the Word of God is believed.... By the righteousness of God we must not understand the righteousness by which he is righteous in himself but the righteousness by which we are made righteous by God. This happens through faith in the gospel. Therefore blessed Augustine writes in chapter 11 of *On the Spirit and the Letter*: “It is called the righteousness of God because by imparting it he makes righteous people.”²⁶

A marginal gloss at 3:20f says essentially the same thing and goes on to speak of the separate functions of law and faith:

²³ LW, XXV, 135.

²⁴ LW, XXV, 324.

²⁵ LW, LIV, 308f..

²⁶ LW, XXV, 151f..

It is a righteousness without the law, which God through the Spirit of grace bestows on the believer without the aid of the law, that is unaided by the law. For through the law he has shown man his weakness, so that through faith he may flee to his mercy for cleansing.²⁷

He still appealed to Augustine's authority and still accepted his "makes righteous." But he had said something that his teacher never did say, namely, "by faith alone." In *On the Spirit and the Letter* the bishop of Hippo came as close to Paul as he ever would, but he never did say "by faith alone."

At Romans 4:7 Luther quoted Augustine on the non-imputation of sins: Blessed Augustine says very clearly that "sin, or concupiscence, is forgiven in baptism, not in the sense that it no longer exists, but in the sense that it is not imputed."²⁸

In connection with the same verse he quoted Scripture and Augustine to demonstrate man's inability to love perfectly and thus be righteous by the law. Then he said,

We sin even when we do good, unless God through Christ covers this imperfection and does not impute it to us. Thus it becomes a venial sin through the mercy of God, who does not impute it for the sake of faith and the plea in behalf of this imperfection for the sake of Christ. Therefore, he who thinks that he ought to be regarded as righteous because of his works is very foolish, since if they were offered as a sacrifice to the judgment of God, they still would be found to be sins.²⁹

Although he had devoured Augustine's writings during the six years which preceded his *Lectures on Romans*, it becomes apparent in those lectures that he was selective in his use of them. He was also interpreting them from an increasingly Pauline perspective. He was at that point in his development to which he referred at table in 1532,

When the door was opened for me in Paul, so that I understood what justification by faith is, it was all over with Augustine. There are only two notable assertions in all of Augustine. The first is that when sin is forgiven it does not cease to exist but ceases to damn and control us. The second is that the law is kept when that is forgiven which does not happen.³⁰

But he was still "Martin Luther, Augustinian" to the extent that respect for the teacher could lead the pupil astray. At Romans 5:18 one wonders how Luther could say that the "justification that brings life for all men" does not mean "all" but "many." And then his marginal gloss reveals that he is citing Augustine, who here confused justification with regeneration and thus rejected the universal application which Paul's "all" requires.³¹ At 8:28, commenting on "God desires all men to be saved (1 Tm 2:4)," he drew the Augustinian inference that "these verses must always be understood as pertaining to the elect only."³² Luther had not yet arrived at a consistent reliance on what the Word actually says. He was, however, saying with increasing clarity and frequency, "Grace alone through faith gives life."³³

Luther began to lecture on Galatians in 1517. He might still refer to Augustine to bolster a teaching which he was presenting more clearly and faithfully than Augustine had done:

²⁷ LW XXV, 30f..

²⁸ LW, XXV, 261.

²⁹ LW, XXV, 275f..

³⁰ LW, LIV, 49.

³¹ LW, XXV, 48.

³² LW, XXV, 375.

³³ LW, XXV, 307.

The righteous are not wholly perfect in themselves, but God accounts them righteous and forgives them because of their faith in his Son Jesus Christ, who is our Propitiation. These points St. Augustine discusses at length in his *On Nature and Grace*.³⁴

In this Anti-Pelagian writing the bishop of Hippo did come as close as he ever would to teaching *sola fide*, but he still did not say it. The Pelagian controversy, as Luther noted on a number of occasions, compelled Augustine to study and expound Paul, but the great father never quite grasped all that the apostle was saying.³⁵ In spite of the fact that he relied on Augustine in a few points of interpretation, it can be said that Luther was quite independent in expounding the great theme of the Christian's freedom from the law in Paul's epistle to the Romans.

It is interesting that after he had won through to the *sola fide*, he was willing to ascribe that doctrine to Augustine and even to others who had never clearly or consistently taught it. At Psalm 143, in 1517, he commented, "Saint Augustine says that faith obtains what the law demands."³⁶ The editors of the American Edition note that this is probably Luther's interpretation of the famous line from the *Confessions*, "Grant what you command and command what you will." In *On Translating: An Open Letter*, 1530, in defense of his rendering of Romans 3:28, Luther wrote, "I am not the only one, or even the first, to say that faith alone justifies. Ambrose said it before me, and Augustine and many others."³⁷ He must have realized that none of them had actually been that explicit. He could read *sola fide* into their words because of what he had learned from Paul, and then read it out again:

After I know that we are justified by faith alone.... it pleases me very much that Augustine, Hilary, Cyril, and Ambrose say the same thing, even though they do not stress the foundations so much and at times express themselves less properly. I do not charge that this is an error on their part. It is enough for me that they say the same thing, even though they say it less properly, and I am strengthened by their testimony.³⁸

We cannot really know what Augustine or the others would have made of these words. It is possible that since they did not receive them from Paul they would not have received them from Luther, either.

It has been said that the *Ninety-Five Theses* were not very "Lutheran." In spite of Luther's increasing clarity in the doctrine of justification, that was not the central theme of the document which he affixed to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg. In his attack on the corruption that attached to the penitential system generally and the traffic in indulgences particularly, he did not directly attack the doctrine of purgatory. In fact, in his 1518 *Explanation of the Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther cited Augustine's teaching and example:

I am positive that there is a purgatory ... for St. Augustine, more than eleven hundred years ago ... prayed for his mother and father and requested that intercession be made for them.³⁹

Later in the same writing, however, he appealed to Augustine and others to support his conclusion "that the saints have no superabundant merits which would help those who are lazy."⁴⁰ He used the same arguments with the papal legate Cajetan during the proceedings at Augsburg in the same year.⁴¹

By 1521 he was ready to reject the authority of Augustine and all the teachers of the church in the matter of purgatory:

³⁴ LW, XXVII, 228.

³⁵ LW, XXX, 69; Walch XXII, 1392.

³⁶ LW, XIV, 196.

³⁷ LW, XXXV, 197.

³⁸ LW, III, 194f.

³⁹ LW, XXXI, 126.

⁴⁰ LW, XXXI, 215.

⁴¹ LW, XXXI, 266.

Who can convince us that they were not deceived in this matter or did not err as in many other matters? Our faith must have a foundation which is God's Word, and not sand or moss, which are the delusions and works of men.⁴²

Staupitz released Luther from his monastic vows after the encounter with Cajetan at Augsburg, in effect dismissing him from the order. He was no longer "Martin Luther, Augustinian." As we have seen, in the things that mattered most he had left Augustine before he left the Augustinians.

It was not on the basis of Augustine that he was teaching justification by faith alone. He was doing that on the basis of Scripture alone, and giving the concept of grace alone a content that it never quite had in Augustine and never quite attains in Catholic theology. He was able now to cite Augustine to demonstrate that Luther was not the first to say that Scripture is higher than man's reason. He wrote to Emperor Charles V on April 28, 1521, "The authority of the Scripture is greater than the comprehension of the whole of man's reason, as St. Augustine says."⁴³

In his debating and defending and treatise writing during the years 1518–1521 Luther continued to appeal to his mentor's writings. It cannot be said, however, that he was taking his stand on Augustine. He was trying to demonstrate that his doctrine was not new, that the greatest father of the western church had said the same things about law, sin, works, free will and the non-imputation of sins that he was saying. He was not so much cloaking himself in Augustine's authority as trying to meet the opponents on their ground.⁴⁴

In *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 1521, he pointed out that Augustine himself had placed the Bible above all authority. He wrote,

This is my answer to those also who accuse me of rejecting all the holy teachers of the church. I do not reject them. But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they have erred, as men will; therefore I am ready to trust them only when they give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred.... St. Augustine writes to St. Jerome to the same effect, "I have learned to do only those books that are called the Holy Scriptures the honor of believing firmly that none of their writers have ever erred. All others I so read as not to hold what they say to be the truth unless they prove it to me by Holy Scripture or clear reason."⁴⁵

At the Diet of Worms that same year he quoted the same *Letter 82, To Jerome*, to make the same point.⁴⁶

On a number of occasions Luther's opponents, no doubt noting his frequent appeals to Augustine, tried to quote the great father against him. In the *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* of England's king, Henry VIII, Augustine was misquoted to prove that the authority of the church is above the Scripture: "I should not believe the gospel if I did not believe the church." In *A Reply to the Texts Cited in the Defense of the Doctrines of Men*, 1522, Luther took note of the use which Henry's treatise had made of Augustine. He answered,

Even if Augustine had said so, who gave him the authority that we must believe what he says?
What Scripture does he quote to prove the statement?

Then he corrected the quotation:

St. Augustine's words are actually these, "I should not believe that gospel if the authority of all Christendom did not move me."

⁴² LW, LII, 181.

⁴³ LW, XLVIII, 207.

⁴⁴ LW, XXXI and XXXII.

⁴⁵ LW, XXXII, 11.

⁴⁶ LW, XXXII, 118.

He went on to interpret Augustine's words in a way that would not contradict the ancient father's own statements on the authority of Scripture. The interpretation is not entirely convincing and Luther must have realized it, for he concluded:

And if this meaning cannot be found in St. Augustine's statement, then it is better to reject the statement; for it is contrary to Scripture, the Spirit, and all experience, if it has that other meaning.⁴⁷

The opponents also quoted the bishop of Hippo on the subject of purgatory. Although Luther had once quoted Augustine in his own affirmation of "orthodoxy" in purgatorial doctrine, he later noted that Augustine was not really committed to the concept, that his tentative views were not at all like the elaborate teaching of the medieval church, and that Scripture must finally settle the issue. In 1537 Luther not only rejected the teaching but also asserted that Scripture alone is the *norma normans* for all teaching in the church. His judgment has become part of the confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church:

Our Papists ... will never prove these things from Augustine. Now, when they have abolished the traffic in masses for purgatory, of which Augustine never dreamt, we will then discuss with them whether the expressions of Augustine without Scripture are to be admitted.... The rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel.⁴⁸

When the papists cited Augustine's endorsement of the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople to buttress the authority of all later councils, Luther reviewed what those councils did and what it was that Augustine commended. In *On the Councils and the Church*, 1539, he again cited *Letter 82, To Jerome*. Then he quoted *On the Trinity*. "My dear man, do not follow my writing as you do Holy Scripture." He quoted still another letter to Jerome, expressing the same principle, and concluded,

If we should take the church back to the teaching and ways of the fathers and the councils, there stands St. Augustine to confuse and thwart our plan because under no circumstances does he want reliance placed on the fathers, bishops, councils, as learned and holy as they may be, or on himself. Instead he directs us to Holy Scripture.⁴⁹

Luther did not hesitate to apply the principle of *sola Scriptura* against his hero. In *The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, 1521, he noted Augustine's comment "that condemnation was incurred by nuns not only for marrying but even for wanting to marry. But first let us take a look at Paul. If Paul does not hold such a view, neither may Augustine."⁵⁰

His independence from Augustine and his rejection of some of the latter's interpretations was not a light matter. In his homiletical treatment of John 1:4, in 1521, he began a paragraph with this sentence: "Let nobody accuse me that my interpretation differs from that of St. Augustine." But then he concluded the paragraph with this sentence: "St. Augustine was only a human being; we are not compelled to follow his interpretation."⁵¹

Much later in his career, in 1537, Luther recalled how difficult it had been to disassociate himself in many points of doctrine from the teacher to whom he owed so much:

⁴⁷ LW, XXXV, 150ff.

⁴⁸ Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article II, 13, 14.

⁴⁹ LW, XLI, 21–27.

⁵⁰ LW, XLIV, 396.

⁵¹ LW, LII, 57f..

No one will believe how great an ordeal it is and how severe a shock when a person first realizes that he must believe and teach contrary to the fathers.... When I read the books of St. Augustine and discover that he, too, did this and that, it thoroughly appalls me.”⁵²

In his earliest published work he could still repeat Augustine’s allegorical interpretations in an approving or noncommittal way, but as time went on he became increasingly critical of his teacher’s hermeneutical aberrations. In the Preface to Psalms 1 and 2, he characterized the expositions of Augustine and others as “quite orthodox, but very far removed from the literal sense.”⁵³ In the *Kirchen Postille*, 1521, he criticized Augustine’s Platonic interpretation of John 1:4, 5.⁵⁴ The Genesis Commentaries of 1535 to 1545 are frequently critical of Augustine’s allegorical interpretations as speculative, absurd and artificial.

Even after he had gone beyond Augustine in the penetration of the gospel and in the principles of interpretation, Luther could still call on him to “say it well.” He brought the insights of his favorite teacher into discussions of ethics, history, government, marriage, the two kingdoms and the care of souls. In *The Smalcald Articles* and *The Large Catechism* he quoted Augustine’s dictum that it is the Word which makes the sacraments what they are.

He had praise, admiration and charitable words for Ambrose, Bernard and others. But it was Augustine he cited, to whom he appealed, from whom he learned. Sometimes he drew on him for examples and illustrations unconsciously or without conscientious ascription.⁵⁵ On the other hand, he sometimes ascribed words to his teacher for which editors cannot find a source.⁵⁶ “For Luther *antiqui patres* often meant Augustine.”⁵⁷ He drew on him to the end of his labors, as the *Lectures on Genesis*, 1535 to 1545, make obvious. It is all the more remarkable then that in writing *On the Bondage of the Will* Luther appealed to Augustine only once for corroboration.⁵⁸

Long after he ceased to take his stand on or with Augustine, Luther could still speak appreciatively of the man whom he regarded as Paul’s “most trustworthy interpreter.”⁵⁹ He believed that faith in the gospel had preserved Augustine’s soul from the logical consequence of his errors.⁶⁰ “Holy Christendom has, in my judgment, no better teacher after the apostles than St. Augustine.”⁶¹ He opined that “Augustine is certainly a princely elector in heaven.”⁶² He regarded him as “a teacher who shines in the church up to this day and teaches and instructs it.”⁶³ “No teacher of the church taught better than Augustine.... He has been teaching the entire Christian Church for approximately 1100 years.”⁶⁴ He “freed countless souls from many errors and was second only to the apostles in conquering so many monstrous heretics.”⁶⁵

Marcus Aurelius Augustinus, **Lutheranus**? Probably not. Martin Luther, Augustinian? In some ways he may be regarded as Augustine’s most faithful son. Although the pupil surpassed the teacher in the understanding of man’s sin and, especially, God’s grace, he never forgot who had helped him win through to an assurance of his own salvation and to clear teaching. He acknowledged the relationship and put it in perspective in a sermon on John 4:1, in 1540: *Aber ich wil bej S. Augustino bleiben, sonderlich aber bej dem herrn Christo, der do hatt das wortt der warheit.*⁶⁶

⁵² LW, XXII, 256.

⁵³ LW, XIV, 285.

⁵⁴ LW, LII, 52 and 53.

⁵⁵ LW, XXXVI, 298&ff.

⁵⁶ LW, XLI, 50, 79, 151.

⁵⁷ LW, XXV, 300fn..

⁵⁸ LW, XXXIII, 108.

⁵⁹ LW, XXXI, 39.

⁶⁰ LW, XXXVI, 188 and IX, 130.

⁶¹ LW, XXXVII, 107.

⁶² LW, XII, 298.

⁶³ LW, III, 160.

⁶⁴ LW, XXII, 512 and 514.

⁶⁵ LW, VII, 135.

⁶⁶ WA, XLVII, 218.

The Twelve Essays in *Luther Lives*

“Martin Luther, Augustinian” by Richard D. Balge

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