

Martin Luther

Faith and the Devil: Anfechtung

1) *Simul Justus et Peccator*: at the same time justified and sinner.

Simul gemitus et raptus: at the same time “sighing” or “groaning,” and “in rapture.” Sighing or groaning because of sin and evil; “in rapture” in the love of God in Christ.

2) In *Bondage of the Will* Luther writes that God is often concealed under what is contrary to God. The devil (Satan) is real, but subservient to God. In our fallen, sinful condition, the devil is always with us, both in external things and internally within us. Internally the devil is experienced as the power of a negative we cannot overcome on our own. The experience is one of conflict: prominently as guilt feelings, but also as anxiety, for example, about our own death or the death of a loved one.

3) Luther calls this conflict “Anfechtung.” – One can hear English in the two words “an” (on or against), and the verb “fechten” (fight): the experience of internal conflict. The plural is “Anfechtungen.” According to Luther Anfechtung is common Christian experience.

4) “Anfechtung” was a word frequently used to express the experience of monks. Luther’s own first experiences of it were as a monk, above all in doubting his salvation to the point of utter despair: he could not “do enough” to satisfy God’s justice.

“More than once have I been internally attacked [angefochten, past tense] until thrown into the abyss and the hell of despair, so that I wished never to have been born – until I saw how salutary, how beneficial this despair actually is and how near grace.”

It is near grace, because in despairing of our ability to “do enough” or to solve whatever insoluble problems plague us, we become open to God’s freely offered solution, the gift of Christ himself. Luther’s Reformation discovery is that “justification” is God’s gracious work in Christ: God unconditionally loves and accepts us. Here we are not the “doers;” God is the “doer.”

5) Christ is “The Good Samaritan”

“When Christ makes the Samaritan the neighbor of the man who fell among murderers, He especially wants to show that he himself is and wants to be the neighbor who both rightly fulfills the commandment and demonstrates his love to poor, miserable consciences and to the hearts of all people who were wounded and perishing before God. In this way he also gives the example that His Christians should do the same as he does.” [from a sermon, 1531]

“You should grasp Christ, his words, works and sufferings, in a twofold manner. First, as an example [of behavior] that is presented to you... But this is the smallest part of the gospel, on the basis of which it cannot even be called gospel. For on this level Christ is of no more help to you than some other saint... Knowing Christ as the Good Samaritan is what it means to have a proper grasp of the gospel, that is, of the overwhelming goodness of God.”
[Luther, Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels]

We identify ourselves in Jesus' healing miracles the same way: first with those healed, second with Jesus as the worker. According to Luther, ignoring this order is idolatry: obeisance to a god of works.

6) The following quotations are from Luther's "Table Talk."

"God's grace is so great that it cannot be understood without Anfechtung, anxiety and struggle. This is why St. Paul was given an angel of Satan (2 Cor. 12:7)... And so it happens also with all right Christians."

"Doctor Luther once said: I did not learn my theology all at once, but had to search deeper and deeper, something to which my Anfechtungen brought me. One does not understand Holy Scripture without Anfechtungen. Many do not understand this because they lack the right "contradictor," namely the devil, who teaches it. St. Paul was given a devil, one who drove him to study the Scriptures with great diligence. ... Without such a devil, we are only speculative theologians who just go about with their reason and say it should be so and so."

When Satan disputes that God is gracious to me, how can I come against him with the saying that those who love God with their whole heart, their whole soul and with all their power, will possess God's Kingdom? For the devil will right away say, "you have not loved God," as my conscience then convinces me. What I must do is grasp the words, and use them against the devil, that Jesus Christ died for me and through him I have a God of grace. And as St. Paul in 1 Cor. 1:30f says, from God Christ became to me wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and salvation."

7) Anfechtung is related to, but not identical with temptation. Temptation involves a certain distance from what is tempting and a decision of will, whereas there is no such distance in Anfechtung. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther writes that temptation is of three kinds: 1) "those of the body (sexual offenses, laziness, gluttony, in short, all sorts of evil desires);" 2) "those of the world (words and deeds that drive us to anger, hate, envy, pride...)" In both "the devil agitates and blows in everywhere." 3) In the third kind of temptation, the devil "works to our despising and casting aside God's Word and work." "So we pray that God not let us grow tired, fall [into the devil's trap] and not resist evil."

8) Depression, a "work of the devil," is also related to Anfechtung, which Luther occasionally experienced. He openly writes about in "Table Talk" and in pastoral letters. In one such episode he wrote in chalk on the table before him, "I am baptized" – within the love of God. He advises that must pray and wait for deliverance, but also fight depression with healthy diversions. He mentions being in company with other people, playing cards and games, and music. He could also write humorously about depression: "You can't keep birds from flying over your head, but you don't have to let them nest in your hair."

Faith and Reason

9) In Luther's time there were two schools of thought in understanding the relationship between faith and reason. The "via antiqua," as exemplified by Thomas Aquinas, saw faith and reason in harmony; rightly understood, reason did not contradict Revelation nor faith. Thomas is known for using the philosophy of Aristotle to demonstrate this harmony.

In the schools Luther attended in his youth, the "via moderna" separated reason and Revelation, so that faith stood apart from human reason or philosophy. Both "via" or "ways" supported Catholic tradition and doctrine. With Luther, however, the difference between the two schools becomes significant, as seen especially in the result of Luther's concentration on Revelation, Holy Scripture, as distinct from Catholic tradition.

Later, in the Catholic reaction to the Reformation, the "via antiqua" will be officially approved, the "via moderna" rejected; and Thomas Aquinas will become the authoritative theologian of Catholicism.

10) According to Luther, when reason is used to understand Revelation and faith, reason must go wrong, because it is but another aspect of sinful human life. When the "via antiqua" combines reason with faith, it lets the wolf into the sheep's pen. However, when reason is encompassed by spiritual rebirth of the whole person through the Holy Spirit, it is taken into the service of faith.

11) The following quotations are statements about the conflict between faith and reason. They are taken from Luther's Commentary on Galatians (1530-31).

"Human reason and the flesh, which even in the saints themselves resists the Spirit, and in the wicked mightily reigns, is naturally delighted with pharisaical superstition: that is to say, it takes more pleasure in measuring God by its own imaginations than by God's Word."

"The world does not measure the excellencies of God by the Word of God, but by the judgment of impious, blind, and foolish reason."

"They require, that God should act according to human laws, and do what seems right unto men, or cease to be God! 'His secrets of Majesty, they say, do not better His character in our estimation. Let Him render a reason why He is God.'"

"By this doctrine of yours, concerning 'the principal part of man' [reason], it will come to pass that man will be exalted above Christ and the devil both: that is, he will be made God of gods, and Lord of lords!"

10) In more recent theology – for example, in that of Karl Barth – modern scientific reason apart from faith constructs a "closed universe" that admits no intrusion by a supposed "God." To accomplish such construction, reason necessarily elevates itself above all that it constructs.