

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

*M*artin Luther is among the most influential religious thinkers of all time. As a measure of his impact, he is said to have had more books and articles written about him than any other Christian figure.¹ More than a billion present-day Protestant Christians owe their form of worship to him. Impressively, the Roman Catholic Church, his old antagonist, recently acknowledged Luther's greatness as a reformer, and issued a stamp in his honor.

Luther's fame rests primarily on the fact that he started and led the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, a massive revolt against the scandal-plagued Roman Catholic Church of his time that reshaped the religious course of the Western world. Luther rebelled primarily because he believed that certain teachings of the church were causing great harm to her members. Most important was the issue of how a person pleases God and becomes "righteous."

Catholic doctrine has always stressed that right standing with God depends in part on following God's commands and

performing good works, such as charitable acts. After prolonged study and intense internal struggle, Luther came to a much different view: Righteousness depends completely on God's grace and a person's faith. This new perspective flew in the face of traditional teachings. As put by Harvard historian Heiko Oberman, "Luther's discovery rent the very fabric of Christian ethics. Reward and merit, so long undisputed as the basic motivation for all human action, were robbed of their efficacy."²

A great controversy has existed from Luther's time to the present day over why Luther came to believe so passionately in an idea that seemed extreme. Catholic polemicists argued for centuries that Luther was out of his mind and unable to think clearly. To make their case, they leaned on statements that Luther made about certain tormenting "spiritual trials" he experienced during the years when he developed his reformational beliefs. Luther described them as,

"Punishments so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and one who had not himself experienced them could not believe them At such a time God seems terribly angry, and with him the whole creation. At such a time there is no flight, no comfort, within or without, but all things accuse."³

Johannes Cochlaeus, a priest and scholar who debated Luther, published an influential biography arguing that Luther was controlled by Satan.⁴ This became the Catholic party line. As time passed, defenders of the Catholic faith shifted their emphasis to proving that Luther was insane. One well-respected German priest and theologian wrote that Luther was

“so overwhelmed by such a gloomy, depressing state of mind that he developed wildly confused, contradictory and destructive ideas that dominated his whole life and thought.”⁵ As recently as 1911, a well-known Jesuit scholar wrote that Luther’s mental imbalance was so severe that it prevented rational thinking.⁶ All the while, Protestant defenders countered just as vigorously that Luther had no significant psychological problems. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, they argued, Luther was simply tested severely.

One hopes psychiatrists brought a degree of clarity to the nature of Luther’s agonizing problems. In fact, two respected clinicians wrote books on Luther in the twentieth century, but these only caused more controversy. In 1937, Danish psychiatrist Paul Reiter published a two-volume work⁷ on the Great Reformer, diagnosing him with a degenerative disorder of the brain that began in his early twenties and developed into a frank psychosis. In 1958, the esteemed psychoanalyst Erik Erikson published his highly influential book *Young Man Luther*, in which he suggested Luther suffered from a “borderline psychotic state.”⁸ Yet the conclusions of both biographers were largely dismissed by Luther experts on the basis of inaccuracies in the authors’ accounts of Luther’s life. Since then, biographers and historians have generally avoided drawing conclusions about Luther’s psychiatric diagnosis. Luther’s most popular biographer, Roland Bainton, wisely observed in the mid-twentieth century, “The question [of Luther’s diagnosis] can be better faced when more data become available.”⁹

The data are available now. As a result of fifty years of intensive research into the cause and treatment of psychiatric disorders, we can now understand Luther’s terrifying fears in

an objective, clinical manner that was not possible even a few decades ago.

This book will demonstrate that, notwithstanding the difficulties involved in attempting to retrospectively diagnose a historical figure, Luther's agonizing spiritual trials represented a case of what psychiatrists today call obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). This condition, still much misunderstood by the general public, is a fairly easily recognized and relatively common anxiety syndrome that is marked by intrusive, tormenting thoughts and the repetitive acts that are done to relieve them.

The following chapters will show how Luther cured¹⁰ his disorder through discovering fresh new meanings in biblical texts. Much evidence points to the fact that Luther overcame his torment over a period of approximately six years immediately prior to the Reformation. Remarkably, rather than comforting himself with scripture passages that reassured him of his salvation (e.g., "God will honor me"), Luther focused his attention on texts that aggravated his fears (e.g., "I have done that which is evil"). This is exactly how we treat OCD in the present day. We encourage people to purposefully expose themselves to their most fearful thoughts in a forceful, structured manner. Through the use of this approach, obsessional fears gradually lose their sting. The book will demonstrate how, in a remarkable display of biblical scholarship, determination, and therapeutic intuition, Luther cured his disorder in a manner that would make a modern OCD therapist proud.

But there is more to the story. The book will also suggest that from a strictly clinical point of view (and without denying the possibility of supernatural intervention), it was through curing his spiritual trials that Luther learned his most important

lessons about what makes a person righteous in God's eyes. Luther himself tells us,

“I didn't learn my theology all at once. I had to ponder over it ever more deeply, and my spiritual trials were of help to me in this Only spiritual trial teaches what Christ is.”¹¹

Without the benefit of his obsessional fears, one could argue, the Great Reformer might never have strongly challenged the Roman Catholic Church, nor pursued the Reformation at all.