The Early Luther and his Theological Development

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Hamm's book, a collection of nine articles already published (with the exception of two), is a masterpiece of Luther research. It deals with the theological development of the young or, as Hamm puts it, the early Luther – a problem very much debated by Luther scholars in the last century. In 1545, in the preface to his Latin works, Luther reported how he struggled with the understanding of the phrase ‘righteousness of God’ in Romans 1:16f and how the insight that it means the righteousness by which God makes us righteous opened the gates of Paradise for him. Researchers have tried to identify the first appearance of this insight in Luther's early lectures and publications. This has turned out to be difficult since there are several places where the structure of this insight can be found, but the same writings do not offer the idea of justification by faith alone, or they understand faith as humility or self-accusation which is different from the later understanding of faith grounding in the promise of Christ alone. Luther mentions that, to his surprise, he found this understanding of ‘the righteousness of God’ also in Augustine, even though Peter Lombard's Sentences has this quotation in a prominent place (book I, dist. 17) and it can be found in countless medieval Bible commentaries. Thus it has been quite unclear and a matter of endless debates what the precise content of Luther's decisive insight was and when he gained it. That preface seems to point to 1518. Some theologians identified Luther's insight as the
understanding of the word of God as promise. Oswald Bayer first found it in a disputation of 1518 on the sacrament of penance (WA [Weimar Edition of Luther's Works], vol. I, 630-3). It is interesting that this disputation is summarized by referring to Romans 1:17. Hamm criticises the assumption that there was one moment in time when Luther gained his insight, so that one can distinguish a ‘before’ and ‘after’, a pre-reformatory and a reformatory Luther. He calls this a Wende-Konstrukt (construct of a turn). Instead, Hamm dissolves the old conflict of interpretations diachronically by proposing a sequence of realignments or qualitative steps in Luther’s thinking (see the sub-title of his book: Etappen reformatorischer Neuorientierung). This is not a new idea, but Hamm realises it in a very logical, detailed, and well documented way. But what is more, he takes very seriously the principle that one can understand the Reformation only through the medieval times. He possesses an outstanding knowledge of late medieval theologies and different streams of spirituality and relates Luther’s development carefully to different late medieval traditions, showing how they helped Luther to evolve. The late medieval period is presented in a fascinating way as a highly complex reality and anything but monolithic. Hamm is masterly in presenting different streams and basic lines. Nevertheless, he always claims that Luther was not only in a line of continuity with these traditions, but transformed them in a way that can only be described as a break. The basic transition is expressed in the title of his first chapter: From medieval love of God to Luther’s faith (‘Von der Gottesliebe des Mittelalters zum Glauben Luthers’: pp. 1-24). Already in Luther’s time in the friary of the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt (1505-11) Hamm sees something that can be called reformatory, namely Luther’s Anfechtungen (afflictions), even though we hear Luther speaking about them only much later. He perceives them as the culmination point of a basic late medieval crisis that did not consist in grievances of pastoral care or the externalisation of piety but in taking spiritual life very seriously. There was an increasing conflict between introspection and self-awareness of oneself as weak, sinful, and nothing, on the one hand, and the requirements and attempts to lead a perfect life, on the other. People were urgently looking for the security of salvation, but in the late medieval system they could not find it. Through the Anfechtungen the idea of any active righteousness that could be offered to God collapsed for Luther. He suffered from the ‘holy closeness of God’ (p. 39) and the demand of a judging God; his ‘longing for spiritual top efficiencies’ mirrored an ‘obsessive image of God’ (p. 41) with his wrath. Some Roman Catholics have argued that Luther’s Anfechtungen reveal a psychological disease and