



# COUNSELING UNDER THE CROSS

HOW MARTIN LUTHER APPLIED THE  
GOSPEL TO DAILY LIFE

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BOB KELLEMAN

“*Counseling Under the Cross* exalts our Lord Jesus Christ. It has enlarged my appreciation for Luther and given me a new perspective on Luther as a pastoral counselor. I pray that the Lord will be pleased to use this book to call us back to the cross of Christ, that we might more fully follow the example of Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2 and Galatians 6:14 by glorying in the cross above all else. I am personally grateful for Bob and for the clear and practical teaching he has provided in this book about the centrality of the cross in counseling and by extension the entire Christian life and ministry.”

**Wayne Mack**, ACBC Member of the Academy; Director and Professor at Strengthening Ministries Training Institute; Counseling Pastor at Lynnwood Baptist Church; author of *Preparing for Marriage God's Way*

“And I thought I knew something about Luther! *Counseling Under the Cross* is such a well-researched and beautifully written book. Because Martin Luther desperately needed gospel counseling himself, he developed a perspective of soul care that reaches deeply into the heart of broken sinners who long for (and yet fear) intimacy with God. And although he wrote 500 years ago, we still need his perspective—a perspective that proclaims God's self-giving love for anxious sinners demonstrated by the perfect life and substitutionary death of the Son he loved. Perhaps if the church had paid more attention to Luther's paradigm for soul-care, she wouldn't have given herself over to the futile philosophies of the world as she has. Bob Kellemen has given us a gift that has been sorely needed by the church: a revival of Luther's deep, gentle, and loving counsel. What a gift!”

**Elyse M. Fitzpatrick**, Author of *Counsel from the Cross*

“In *Counseling Under the Cross*, Bob Kellemen has written an insightful work concerning the implications of Luther's theological observation that will greatly help the Christian pastor and biblical counselor address serious issues of the heart. Living under the cross changes people for the better! If you want to learn the theological impact of this truth, you must read this book! The transformation that occurred in the heart of Martin Luther happened because he was a fervent student of the Word. His observations concerning Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11 were completely life-transforming because he learned salvation was wholly a work of God, solely secured by the work of Christ on the cross.”

**John D. Street**, Chair, Biblical Counseling Graduate Programs, The Master's University & Seminary; President, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC)

“We all know Martin Luther, the Reformer who recovered the bedrock scriptural principles summarized in the great solas. Five hundred years later,

as the church stands in need of a recovery of biblical soul care, Bob Kellemen introduces us to Luther the biblical counselor. In *Counseling Under the Cross*, Bob shows how Luther faithfully ministered God's Word to those in his day who were simultaneously sinners and sufferers. Bob also shows how Luther addresses the challenges faced by biblical counselors today, including the proper balance of the gospel indicatives and the corresponding imperatives. One of the greatest benefits of this book is that it offers the reader the cream of Kellemen's years of extensive research in a very concise and readable format. I highly recommend it."

**Jim Newheiser**, Director of the Christian Counseling Program, Associate Professor of Counseling and Practical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC

"I LOVE this book! I'm with Bob. Martin Luther has instructed and encouraged and reformed my life and ministry, too. Beyond the helpful unpacking of the key elements of Luther's theology and methodology, *Counseling Under the Cross* reminds us that the issues that we wrestle with in our current soul care ministries are not new. What must be renewed in each generation is the courage to challenge the status quo—even within the church—with practical, biblical answers. This book will help you with that reforming process."

**Wayne A. Vanderwier**, Executive Director, Overseas Instruction in Counseling

"Think you know Martin Luther? Think again! Bob Kellemen has done a masterful job at highlighting the Augustinian monk's heart and pastoral care. Meticulously researched and thoughtfully presented, in *Counseling Under the Cross*, Kellemen brings his trademark organizational skill, creative writing, and warmth along with a compelling insight into an oft-overlooked aspect of Luther's ministry. Join Kellemen on this journey to the past and be encouraged that gospel-centered counseling is not so new after all."

**Jonathan Holmes**, Pastor of Counseling, Parkside Church; Council Member, Biblical Counseling Coalition

"Bob Kellemen's decades of experience as a counselor, teacher, leader, and author make *Counsel Under the Cross* a rare gift for pastors and counselors. This book provides an inspiring account of Luther's journey from fear to faith, a comprehensive explanation of the classic forms of pastoral counseling, a practical theology for helping sufferers and sinners, and a Christ-centered focus throughout—all leading to 'faith working through love.' Read *Counseling Under the Cross* and be encouraged, instructed, and equipped."

**Pat Quinn**, Director of Counseling Ministries, University Reformed Church

"When I first heard Dr. Kellemen talk about Luther as a soul physician, I was somehow surprised. After all, Luther is the bold Reformer, not a caring

shepherd of suffering people. However, *Counseling Under the Cross* proved me wrong. Bob masterfully describes the transformation of a fearful monk into a faithful, bold, and loving pastor. And he does so not in a merely historical fashion, but by applying eternal truths for today. Praise God for the work of the Cross then, now, and forever.”

**Alexandre “Sacha” Mendes**, Associate Pastor (Brazil); Director for Vision and Expansion of the Brazilian Association of Biblical Counselors (ABCB); Member of Board of Directors, Biblical Counseling Coalition

“Most know of Luther’s preaching, but Bob Kellemen powerfully and practically shows the commitment Luther had for using God’s Word in biblical counseling. Bob creatively shows how that commitment was rooted in the same great gospel that initially rocked Luther’s world at salvation. Luther, more than any other from the Reformation, has been the one I return to again and again. I love his passion, his raucous laughter, and the way he not only preached great sermons but poured his life into others at close range. *Counseling Under the Cross* demonstrates that in living color.”

**Brad Bigney**, ACBC Certified Counselor; Lead Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church; author of *Gospel Treason*

“Would it surprise you to know that Luther, the Reformer, was also very much Luther, the tender shepherd? Passion for soul care grows best in the soul that needs care. In *Counseling Under the Cross*, Bob Kellemen shows how Martin Luther’s biblical theology, fashioned on the anvil of his own desperate need, inevitably shaped him to be a lover of souls who longed to see gospel truth bring freedom to fellow sufferers. We do well to sit with him at Jesus’s feet and learn, along with Bob Kellemen, what he meant when he called us to love one another. *Counseling Under the Cross* is accessible, insightful, instructive, encouraging, and it has been a means for me to worship God as Bob has masterfully portrayed his faithfulness to build his church one needy soul at a time.”

**Betty-Anne Van Rees**, Council Board Member of the BCC; Founding Member of the Canadian BCC

“With the flood of Reformation 500 books coming out, Bob Kellemen offers a unique contribution and perspective with *Counseling Under the Cross*. Like pulling up to Luther’s famous dinner table in Wittenberg for a table talk, Kellemen guides us through the pastoral care of one of the heroes of the faith. Luther’s counsel on suffering is particularly needed in our contemporary church. I’m happy to commend Dr. Kellemen’s book to any Christian wanting to know Luther and the God Luther served.”

**Steve DeWitt**, Sr. Pastor, Bethel Church; author of *Eyes Wide Open*

“While movements may bear a leader’s name, we must never forget the source of a leader’s fame—grace alone. Dr. Bob Kellemen, practically, powerfully, and beautifully illustrates how God ministers his grace to and through sinful and broken vessels—like Martin Luther and us! It is refreshing and encouraging to see our weaknesses and the all-sufficient grace of God mirrored through Martin Luther’s discovery and application of God’s grace to himself and others. Dr. Kellemen’s excellent work and writing in *Counseling Under the Cross* motivates us to thank God that our counseling does not lead to ourselves or any other human being but rather to the victory won at the cross!”

**A. Charles Ware**, President of Crossroads Bible College; Council Member, Biblical Counseling Coalition

“We know Martin Luther as the father of the Reformation, not as a counselor. But as you read Luther in *Counseling Under the Cross*, what you find is a theologian who cared deeply for God’s people: Luther’s cross-centered theology translated to gospel-centered counseling. Kellemen’s *Counseling Under the Cross* is a rich collection of Luther’s stories, quotes, and lively vignettes that trace out how Luther’s care of souls puts Christ squarely at the center of everything!”

**Deepak Reju**, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; author of *The Pastor and Counseling*

“When he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg 500 years ago, Martin Luther didn’t just spark a church reformation, he started a personal revival for soul care. Bob Kellemen’s insightful book, *Counseling Under the Cross*, keeps the Reformation alive. When it comes to the cure of souls, Dr. Kellemen writes like few others. Now we know why. He has been deeply influenced by the suffering and victory of Martin Luther, a man once under a hopeless works theology. Luther’s deliverance is ours too. Grace-saturated and gospel-focused, *Counseling Under the Cross* will change the way you counsel yourself and others. I highly recommend it.”

**Garrett Higbee**, President of Soul Care Consulting

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Bob Kellemen



[www.newgrowthpress.com](http://www.newgrowthpress.com)

New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404  
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Scripture quotations noted kjv are from The Holy Bible: King James Version.

Cover Design: Faceout Books, faceoutstudio.com

ISBN 978-1-945270-21-5 (Print)  
ISBN 978-1-945270-22-2 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kellemen, Robert W., author.

Title: Counseling under the cross : how Martin Luther applied the gospel to daily life / Robert W. Kellemen.

Description: Greensboro, NC : New Growth Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017036020 | ISBN 9781945270215 (trade paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Luther, Martin, 1483-1546. | Pastoral theology. | Pastoral counseling.

Classification: LCC BR333.5.P32 K45 2017 | DDC 253.5092--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017036020>

Printed in the United States of America

24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17      1 2 3 4 5

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THERE'S SOMEONE in my life who reminds me a great deal of Martin Luther—my daughter, Marie. As I write this, Marie is in her late twenties, and like Luther at that age, she persistently seeks peace with God through tenaciously clinging to Christ's gospel of grace.

As I crafted *Counseling Under the Cross*, I would email or text Luther quote after Luther quote to Marie. I'd often share, "This is *so you!*" Or, "Isn't this exactly what we were talking about last week in our own walk with Christ?"

Marie, you have been my motivation for sharing the heartbeat of Luther's pastoral counseling with the larger world. Our talks about Luther have so richly and deeply impacted both of us that I knew I had to share his grace-filled and gospel-centered wisdom with others.

Marie and I would both point to another person who is very Luther-like: my wife and Marie's mom—Shirley. No one in our lives has lived gospel truth in love more than you, Shirley. Thank you for your Christlike model of grace relationships.

I'd like to thank the team at New Growth Press. Your passion for this project has been an encouragement each step of the way.

Finally, eternal thankfulness to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort—it's all about him. And eternal praise to his Son and our Savior through whom we have peace with God—in Christ alone.



# **INTRODUCTION:**

## **MARTIN LUTHER REFORMED MY LIFE AND MINISTRY**

I ADMIT it. This is an unusual title for an introduction: “Martin Luther Reformed My Life and Ministry.” It is, of course, something of a play on words, since we know Martin Luther as a Reformer—the man who launched the Protestant Reformation. It is a title you might expect in the Acknowledgments—acknowledging people who influenced me or motivated me to write this book. More than a play on words, this is an honest confession. Martin Luther reformed my Christian life and my counseling ministry.

### **Martin Luther Reformed My Christian Life**

I had been a Christian for over two decades when I first started studying Martin Luther. I was a graduate of an evangelical Bible college and of an evangelical seminary. I had been Counseling Pastor at an evangelical mega-church, and I had been Senior Pastor at an evangelical church. I was teaching at an evangelical seminary. And yet, before Luther, I only applied half the picture of my salvation.

Before studying Luther, I pictured my salvation like this: God is a holy and righteous judge, and I am on trial before him because of my sins. God is about to pronounce me guilty when Christ steps up and says, “Charge me instead. Put Bob’s sins on me, and put my righteousness on Bob.” God the judge accepts his holy Son’s payment on my behalf and declares me, “Not guilty. Pardoned. Forgiven.”

That's pretty amazing. But before Luther, my picture used to stop there. God is the judge; he forgives me; then he sends me away on my own and says, "Next case."

But that's not the full picture of salvation. Luther paints a more beautiful, more biblical picture—Christ takes me from the courtroom by the hand and leads me into the Father's house, walking me into God's presence. When we enter the living room, the Father, my Father, is not in his judge's robes. He's in his family attire. When he sees me, it is just like the portrait in Luke 15 of the prodigal son. My Father runs to me, throws his arms around me, and kisses me. He puts the family ring on my finger, ushers me back home, and celebrates with me!

Martin Luther reformed and transformed my Christian life by showing me that through Christ, God is not only the judge who forgives me; he is my Father who welcomes me. Out of his grace-love, God the Father sent his Son to die for me. With the barrier of sin demolished, nothing stands between me and my loving heavenly Father. I can fellowship with God person-to-person and son-to-Father.

I could have told you the theology of all of this before I read Martin Luther, but I was not experiencing the reality of it. In Ephesians 3:18–19, Paul tells us how we come to truly understand the love of God in Christ: "we grasp it together with all the saints." As I read Luther, he helped me grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and I came to know this love that surpasses knowledge.

I am praying for you as you read *Counseling Under the Cross*. My prayer is that you will grasp together with Martin Luther, Bob Kelleman, and God's people how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and come to know in a richer way this love that surpasses knowledge.

## Martin Luther Reformed My Counseling Ministry

People frequently ask me, "Who has been the greatest influence on your approach to biblical counseling?" Some of the names I mention

include modern authors and counselors such as David Powlison, Steve Viars, and Ron Allchin. However, people are often surprised to hear me respond, “The person who has most impacted my understanding and practice of counseling is Martin Luther.”

I had been counseling for a decade when I first started examining Martin Luther’s pastoral counseling. For that entire time, I had been seeking to ask and answer one fundamental question: “What would a model of counseling look like that was built solely on Christ’s gospel of grace?”

As the title of this book suggests, Martin Luther’s counseling is gospel-centered and cross-focused. It is grace-filled and gospel-rich. But that does not mean that when Luther encountered a suffering saint, he simply shouted, “Gospel!” It does not mean that when Luther counseled a saint struggling against a besetting sin, that he simply yelled, “Gospel!” In *Counseling Under the Cross*, you will read firsthand accounts and real-life vignettes of Martin Luther’s pastoral counseling. In a hundred different ways you will see what I saw—Luther richly, relevantly, robustly, relationally applying the gospel to suffering, sin, sanctification, and people’s search for peace with God.

As you read *Counseling Under the Cross*, I am praying that your counseling—your personal ministry of the Word, your one-another ministry—will be enriched with the gospel of Christ’s grace. That’s what is happening in my ministry, by God’s grace, as I learn from Martin Luther, the master pastoral counselor.

Luther is teaching me how to apply the apostle Paul’s counseling focus from Colossians 1—2. When Paul ministered to saints struggling against sin and enduring suffering, he pointed people to Christ alone—the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). With all of God’s energy powerfully working within Paul (Colossians 1:29), he proclaimed Christ alone (Colossians 1:28). To people receiving all sorts of counsel from a myriad of sources, Paul pointed people to the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge—Christ alone

(Colossians 2:4, 8). Martin Luther is equipping me to counsel like Paul by pointing me to the counsel of the cross, to the sufficiency of the gospel of Christ's grace. I pray that as you read *Counseling Under the Cross* you will be further equipped to counsel in Christ alone.

## What Formed and Reformed Martin Luther's Counseling?

For Luther's counseling to reform us, it will help us to ponder what formed and reformed Martin Luther's counseling. In Section 1 of *Counseling Under the Cross*, we will learn together two shaping factors that formed Luther's counseling. The first shaping factor (chapter 1) was incredibly personal—Luther's own spiritual trials—his doubts about ever being able to find a gracious God. In turn, this factor became incredibly pastoral—Luther's desire to help others to find peace with God.

The second shaping factor (chapter 2) was richly theological. Luther's search for gospel grace and gospel peace led him to his cross-shaped theology which led to his cross-centric counseling. To understand Luther and his pastoral counseling, we must understand these shaping influences on his life and ministry.

We not only want to understand what formed Luther's pastoral counseling. We also want to understand the form or the shape of Luther's counseling. Chapter 3 introduces this form and chapters 4–11 explore it—how Luther followed a four-fold historic Christian approach to pastoral care—sustaining, healing, reconciling, and guiding. These four counseling compass points will be our GPS as we discover how Luther took this historic approach and infused it with the gospel—demonstrating the rich relevance of the gospel for daily life.

# SECTION ONE

## WHAT SHAPED MARTIN LUTHER'S PASTORAL COUNSELING?

NO APPROACH to ministry develops in a vacuum. Two primary factors shaped Martin Luther's pastoral counseling ministry.

First, Luther was shaped by his spiritual trials—his spiritual separation anxiety. Chapter 1 narrates how Luther lived his life terrified that he would never find peace with God. During the first chapter of his life story, Luther sought that peace through works. He tried to address spiritual trials through self-sufficient, self-counsel. Chapter 1 ends where Luther's early life ended—in despair.

Second, Luther's counseling ministry was fashioned by his cross-shaped theology. Luther faced his spiritual trials face-to-face with Christ alone. Chapter 2 travels with Luther on his reformation journey to salvation by faith alone through grace alone. It tells the story of salvation as a justification-reconciliation journey back to the heart of a God who is a loving Father—not an angry judge. The cross of Christ displays God's gracious heart, and it became the heart of Luther's pastoral counseling ministry.



# CHAPTER ONE

## TERRIFIED BEFORE GOD: LUTHER'S SPIRITUAL TRIALS

COMPELLED BY intense pastoral concern, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The same day, Luther dispatched a cover letter to Cardinal Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz, outlining his soul care concern that motivated his Reformation ministry. Luther began his letter by expressing alarm for his flock—many of whom were journeying to the Dominican, John Tetzel, in an attempt to purchase their freedom from guilt: “I bewail the gross misunderstanding among the people which comes from these preachers and which they spread everywhere among common men. Evidently the poor souls believe that when they have bought indulgence letters they are then assured of their salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

The Reformer then directly addresses the Cardinal, “O great God! The souls committed to your care, excellent Father, are thus directed to death. For all these souls you have the heaviest and a constantly increasing responsibility. Therefore, I can no longer be silent on this subject.”<sup>2</sup> Luther, the pastor and shepherd, inspired Luther the Reformer.

### Luther's Pastoral and Personal Motivation

McNeil rightly observes, “in matters concerning the cure of souls the German Reformation had its inception.”<sup>3</sup> Sproul concurs, “To be sure, the Ninety-Five Theses posted on the church door at Wittenberg were penned in Latin as a request for theological discussion among the faculty members of the university. But what provoked Luther to request

such a discussion? Simply put, it was pastoral concern.”<sup>4</sup> Tappert further explains:

Martin Luther is usually thought of as a world-shaking figure who defied papacy and empire to introduce a reformation in the teaching, worship, organization, and life of the Church and to leave a lasting impression on Western civilization. It is sometimes forgotten that he was also—and above all else—a pastor and shepherd of souls. It is therefore well to remind ourselves that the Reformation began in Germany when Luther became concerned about his own parishioners who believed that if they had purchased letters of indulgence they were sure of their salvation.<sup>5</sup>

Luther empathized deeply with his flock's fears because long before he nailed his Theses, he wrestled personally with the demons of doubt about the grace and forgiveness of God: “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that anything that I thought or did or prayed satisfied God.”<sup>6</sup> The thought of standing face-to-face with a holy God created in Luther a lifelong dread and constant apprehension that he would never find peace with God.

In the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther's agonizing personal search for a gracious God merged with his pastoral care for his confused flock: “It is crucial to realize that Luther became a reformer who was widely heard and understood by transforming the abstract question of a just God into an existential quest that concerned the whole human being, encompassing thought and action, soul and body, love, and suffering.”<sup>7</sup> For Luther, theology is for life. It provides the answer to life's ultimate question, *How do we find peace with a holy God?*

We can best grasp Luther, the pastoral counselor, from an autobiographical viewpoint. His personal struggle for perfection and acceptance before God was an elemental spiritual one in which he searched

for the assurance that God was gracious to him even though he was a sinner. Luther's personal quest for God's grace not only animated his personal religious experience, it also motivated his Reformation agenda and his pastoral work.

As a soul physician, "with all of Germany for his parish,"<sup>8</sup> Luther guided his flock toward the ultimate Soul Physician on a journey to grasp the grace of God. As a fellow pilgrim, Luther journeyed with the Soul Physician on his personal search for peace with God.

Kittleson succinctly captures Luther's focus: "Luther's sole compulsion was to discover how a Christian could live with a righteous God whom he could never possibly satisfy."<sup>9</sup> *Where do we find the grace of God and peace with God?* This was Luther's primary soul care question. He asked and answered this question in his letter to Cardinal Albrecht. Even at this early stage of his reforming career, Luther insisted that the pure gospel of grace be preached because it was the sole hope for peace with God: "The first and only duty of the bishops, however, is to see that the people learn the gospel and the love of Christ. For on no occasion has Christ ordered that indulgences should be preached, but he forcefully commanded the gospel to be preached."<sup>10</sup>

Three years later, Luther wrote another letter to the Cardinal. His Christ-alone (*solus Christus*) conviction had only strengthened, as had his rhetoric: "My humble supplication to Your Electoral Grace is, therefore, that Your Electoral Grace refrain from leading the poor people astray and from robbing them, and present yourself as a bishop and not as a wolf. It is sufficiently well known that indulgences are nothing else but knavery and fraud and that Christ alone should be preached to the people."<sup>11</sup>

Luther was not only a theologian, not only a writer, not only a preacher; Luther was a pastoral counselor who engaged in the personal ministry of the Word. Luther not only reformed theology; he reformed the art of pastoral counseling—under the cross. Luther is the father of cross-centered counseling that applies Christ's gospel of grace richly,

relevantly, and robustly to suffering, sin, sanctification, and the search for peace with God. As his sons and daughters in the faith, we have much to learn from his life and ministry.

## Luther's Spiritual Separation Anxiety

Before Luther could teach us about grace-based counseling, he had to learn a new view of Christ—a view that was a universe apart from the religious culture of his day. A man of his times, Luther viewed God as his vindictive enemy and merciless judge: “I lost hold of Christ the Savior and comforter and made of him a stock-master and hangman over my poor soul.”<sup>12</sup> Luther was not alone. He inhabited a world where people “thought a threatening God kept a suspicious eye on every human act” and where “their religious ventures taught them to be consumed by the threat of damnation.”<sup>13</sup> And if this God was angry with Luther, then Luther was plenty angry with him:

I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.<sup>14</sup>

## An Anxious Pilgrim in a Vale of Tears

The spiritual milieu of Luther's day helps us identify with Luther's sense of foreboding in the face of an angry God. Shortly before midnight on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Margarethe Lindemann Luder gave birth to a son. Martin was named after St. Martins of Tours, whose feast day was November 11. Luther's father, Hans, moved to Eisleben to work in the copper mines, eventually becoming

a leaseholder of mines. In 1484, Luther's parents moved to Mansfield where they stayed for the rest of their lives.

Life was hard and the people were harder. Years later, in a table talk shared during the winter of 1533, Luther reflected upon the evil that lurked around the edge of everything in Mansfield: "Luther said many things about witchcraft and nightmares, and how his mother had been tormented by a neighbor woman who was a witch."<sup>15</sup> Spells, poison, and death inhabited the air they breathed.

In our relatively safer society, it can be challenging for us to relate to a world where death marched around every corner. In the summer of 1505, just before entering his final course of studies, Martin visited his family. It was a difficult time for the region. Erfurt had been struck by the plague that had killed so many people that entire cities were left empty, and some of Luther's friends and teachers had died.

Because this life was so difficult, people hoped at least for a better eternal life after their earthly vale of tears. However, Luther, like the people of his day, worried about death because he feared he had not done enough to please God. He was terrified of the *jungsten Tag*—the day of final reckoning when Christ would return to judge the world. It seemed impossible to him that even his best efforts in cooperation with grace could ever prove anything but inadequate. No one could love God as the Bible required, and God stood ready to condemn and destroy in that last day of judgment.<sup>16</sup>

Just as they struggled to achieve physical and material security in their daily lives, so Luther and the people of his day searched for and struggled to achieve spiritual security. Salvation was something to be earned; theirs was a religion of works; and their God was a God of wrath. Christ was commonly pictured seated on his throne, from one side of his head came a lily (symbolizing the resurrection), and from the other side came a sword. The burning question was, "How can I avoid the sword and earn the lily?"<sup>17</sup>

In a December 1531 table talk, Luther depicted how his religious environment had impacted him personally: “It’s very difficult for a man to believe that God is gracious to him. The human heart can’t grasp this.” In the same table talk, Luther illustrated his sub-biblical view of God from an event from his student days:

This is the way we are. Christ offers himself to us together with the forgiveness of sins, and yet we flee from his face. This also happened to me as a boy in my homeland when we sang in order to gather sausages. A townsman jokingly cried out, “What are you boys up to? May this or that evil overtake you!” At the same time he ran toward us with two sausages. With my companion I took to my feet and ran away from the man who was offering his gift. This is precisely what happens to us in our relation to God. *He gave us Christ with all his gifts, and yet we flee from him and regard him as our judge.*<sup>18</sup>

Luther, like the men and women of his day, lived in ultimate fear of God and terror of eternal separation from God—spiritual separation anxiety. Martin experienced incessant torment in his soul because he believed that no matter what he did, he could never obtain the love of God. Luther’s every human effort only made matters worse: “For I had hoped I might find peace of conscience with fasts, prayer, and the vigils with which I miserably afflicted my body, but the more I sweated it out like this, the less peace and tranquility I knew.”<sup>19</sup>

Before he came under the influence of the cross, Luther lived life as a man terrified that he would never find peace with God because his God was not a God of peace. Luther lived with a constant sense of guilt and dread in the face of a terrifying, angry, and unforgiving God.

### A Hopeless Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God: Luther's *Anfechtungen*

Always the astute soul physician, Luther even supplied a spiritual diagnostic label for his spiritual trials: *anfechtungen* (the plural form of the German word *anfechtung*). No single English word can translate

*anfechtung*, but an image captures the idea: an angry, finger-wagging, judgmental, harsh, condemning, aloof, holy God. *Anfechtungen* paint the image of a hopeless sinner in the hands of an angry God.

With *anfechtung*, Luther pictured the opposite of the father in the parable of the prodigal son: “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). *Anfechtungen* are spiritual doubts that we could ever be forgiven and welcomed home as the Father’s son or daughter. They are spiritual doubts that we could ever find peace with God, ever have a relationship with a forgiving Father. Luther used *anfechtung* to picture God as angry with and incensed against him: “When I was in spiritual distress [*anfechtung*] a gentle word would restore my spirit. Sometimes my confessor said to me when I repeatedly discussed silly sins with him, ‘You are a fool. God is not incensed against you, but you are incensed against God. God is not angry with you, but you are angry with God.’”<sup>20</sup>

Luther obsessed about how to calm his terrified conscience and was desperate to know how he could find rest for his soul. The Reformer felt hopeless as he faced the eternal dilemma of not being able to satisfy God at any point. He asked, *How can I face the terror of the Holy?* “The words ‘righteous’ and ‘righteousness of God’ struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified. If God is righteous, I thought, he must punish me.”<sup>21</sup>

Bainton emphasizes the importance of *anfechtung* in Luther’s life and ministry, while also providing a working definition:

Toward God he was at once attracted and repelled. Only in harmony with the Ultimate could he find peace. But how could a pygmy stand before divine Majesty; how could a transgressor confront divine Holiness? Before God the high and holy Luther was stupefied. For such an experience he had a word. The word he used was *Anfechtung*, for which there is

no English equivalent. It may be a trial sent from God to test man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy man. It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, terror, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of man.<sup>22</sup>

*Anfechtung* was Luther's label for his "grinding sense of being utterly lost. By it he intended the idea of swarming attacks of doubt that could convince people that God's love was not for them."<sup>23</sup> *Anfechtung* is the experience of always falling short and never measuring up because our human balance sheet always shows a deficit before a perfect God.

Martin Marty links Martin Luther's personal spiritual struggle to the cultural milieu of his day: "He makes the most sense as a wrestler with God, indeed, as a God-obsessed seeker of certainty and assurance in a time of social trauma and personal anxiety, beginning with his own."<sup>24</sup> Luther, as a man of his times, was always asking the question, *Where can I find peace with God?* Despairing of any hope for finding peace, Luther lived constantly haunted by the ultimate fear of estrangement from God—spiritual separation anxiety.

To read Luther is to come to know a person who saw his soul and the souls of others in despair. His pastoral care of his own soul and of others, therefore, focused upon *anfechtungen*—spiritual doubts about acceptance by God, spiritual depression because of feelings of rejection by God, spiritual despair over ever pleasing God—all caused by a sense of alienation from God.

But what was Luther to do? Before he discovered Christ's gospel of grace, he did what everyone in his day did: he sought peace through works. During the early chapters of his life story, Luther strove to address his spiritual trials—his *anfechtungen*—through self-sufficient self-counsel.



## Luther's Story of Self-Sufficient Self-Counsel

In his dread and despair, Luther trusted in his own human wisdom and his own human works. Instead of clinging to the sufficiency of Christ and Scripture, Luther attempted to cure his soul through the self-sufficient methods common in the medieval church of his day.

### In Sheer Terror, Luther Made a Vow

A fearful external storm and an even more tumultuous internal soul storm led Luther to enter the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt. Fear of physical death, terror of spiritual death, and horror at eternal separation from God led Luther to make a vow. Bainton offers the classic account of Luther's vow to become a monk:

On a sultry day in July of the year 1505 a lonely traveler was trudging over a parched road on the outskirts of the Saxon village of Stotternheim. He was a young man, short but sturdy, and wore the dress of a university student. As he approached the village, the sky became overcast. Suddenly there was a shower, then a crashing storm. A bolt of lightning rived the gloom and knocked the man to the ground. Struggling to rise, he cried in terror, "St. Anne help me! I will become a monk." The man who thus called upon a saint was later to repudiate the cult of the saints. He who vowed to become a monk was later to renounce monasticism. A loyal son of the Catholic Church, he was later to shatter the structure of medieval Catholicism. A devote servant of the pope, he was later to identify the popes with Antichrist. For this young man was Martin Luther.<sup>25</sup>

Miners prayed to their popular protector, St. Anne, known to them as the mother of the Virgin Mary: "The pious, hoping such saints would shield them, feared a God who judged and punished them." Luther, the son of a miner and the son of his times, terrified of God, did not seek the solace of a Savior, but the succor of St. Anne.<sup>26</sup>

In a letter to his father, Luther explains, "I told you that I had been called by terrors from heaven and that I did not become a monk of my own free will and desire, still less to gain any gratification of the flesh, but that I was walled in by the terror and the agony of sudden death and forced by necessity to take the vow."<sup>27</sup> Like his contemporaries, Luther believed what the church taught. And the church taught that sensible people would not wait until their deathbed to make an act of contrition and plead for grace. Rather, from beginning to end, the only secure course was to lay hold of every help the church had to offer: confession, spiritual disciplines, sacraments, pilgrimages, indulgences, and the saints' intercession and merits. These were ideas on which Luther and his peers were nurtured. There was nothing peculiar in Martin's beliefs or his responses save their intensity.

### In Superhuman Effort, Luther Sought a Holy Standing before a Holy God

Luther entered the monastery to quiet his soul and to find peace with God. It did not work. The occasion of saying his first mass was like another thunderstorm—this one in his spirit: "When at length I stood before the altar and was to consecrate, I was so terrified of the words *aeterno vivo vero Deo* [to Thee the eternal, living, and true God] that I thought of running away from the altar and said to my prior, 'Reverend Father, I'm afraid I must leave the altar.' He shouted to me, 'Go ahead, faster, faster!' So terrified was I by those words!"<sup>28</sup>

Luther reported that at these words (to Thee the eternal, living, and true God), he was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. He thought to himself:

With what tongue shall I address such Majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say "I want this, I ask for that?" For I am dust and ashes and

full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God.<sup>29</sup>

Since Luther did not believe that he could appear before the tribunal of a holy God with an impure heart; he must become holy. Thus he had a great thirst for spiritual purity but unanswered questions about where he could find it. Luther's quest for a fellowship-through-holiness took him through the path of the spiritual disciplines.

In the religious atmosphere of his day, where better to stalk holiness than in the monastery? As Luther preached in a sermon on June 24, 1524, "The greatest holiness one could imagine drew us into the cloister. . . . We fasted and prayed repeatedly, wore hair shirts under woolen cowls, led a strict and austere life. In short, we took on a monkish holiness. We were so deeply involved in that pretentious business that we considered ourselves holy from head to toe."<sup>30</sup>

In the monastery, one found heroic, spiritual athletes who rigorously attempted to take heaven by storm. One of the privileges of monastic life was that it freed the sinner from distractions and allowed the monk to strive to save his soul by practicing the spiritual disciplines: charity, sobriety, love, chastity, poverty, obedience, fasting, vigils, and mortifications of the flesh. Luther became a monk among monks: "Whatever good works a man might do to save himself, these Luther was resolved to perform."<sup>31</sup> Luther's own words highlighted his obsessive dedication. If the apostle Paul could say that he was a Hebrew among Hebrews, then Luther could certainly proclaim that he was a monk among monks:

I was a good monk, and I kept the rules of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.<sup>32</sup>

Luther later reflected on how “I almost fasted myself to death, for again and again I went for three days without taking a drop of water or a morsel of food. I was very serious about it.”<sup>33</sup> He was equally vigilant in his routine of prayers:

When I was a monk I was unwilling to omit any of the prayers, but when I was busy with public lecturing and writing I often accumulated my appointed prayers for a whole week, or even two or three weeks. Then I would take a Saturday off, or shut myself in for as long as three days without food and drink, until I had said the prescribed prayers. This made my head split, and as a consequence I could not close my eyes for five nights, lay sick unto death, and went out of my senses. Even after I had quickly recovered and I tried again to read, my head went 'round and 'round. Thus our Lord God drew me, as if by force, from that torment of prayers. To such an extent had I been captive to human traditions!<sup>34</sup>

Despite Luther's desire to find peace with God, all the rigors of the ascetic life could not quiet his conscience: “I was very pious in the monastery, yet I was sad because I thought God was not gracious to me. I said mass and prayed and hardly ever saw or heard a woman as long as I was in the order.”<sup>35</sup> Luther could not satisfy God at any point.

### **In Abject Failure, Luther Turned to the Merits of the Saints**

For Luther, no amount of human effort worked: “I saw that I was a great sinner in the eyes of God and I did not think it possible for me to propitiate him by my own merits.”<sup>36</sup> Since his own merits would not suffice, Luther the monk fled to the merits of the saints.

Luther, who had prayed to St. Anne for her protection before he entered the monastery, exponentially expanded the list of saints he clung to once he arrived at Erfurt: “I chose twenty-one saints and prayed to three every day when I celebrated mass; this I completed the number every week. I prayed especially to the Blessed Virgin, who

with her womanly heart would compassionately appease her Son.”<sup>37</sup> Notice Luther’s goal: that the merit and mercy of Mary would mollify the Messiah.

Alas, for meticulous Martin, even the merits of twenty-one saints would not be enough. So, wanting to take full benefit of the transfer of merits (indulgences), Luther felt himself highly privileged when an opportunity arose for him to go to Rome. Rome, like no city on earth, was richly endowed with spiritual indulgences so Luther could seek to appropriate for himself and his relatives all the enormous benefits available.

After a lengthy pilgrimage to Rome, Luther finally began to ascend the *Scala Sancta*—the twenty-eight marble steps thought to be those Jesus walked on the way to his trial before Pilate. Luther climbed Pilate’s stairs on his hands and knees repeating a *Pater Noster* for each stair and kissing each step in the hope of obtaining grace from the merit of the saints.

But doubts assailed him. At the top, Luther raised himself up and exclaimed, “Who knows whether it is so?” He later described that he had gone to Rome with onions and returned with garlic.<sup>38</sup> Now another tenet of hope was shattered. Luther did not receive the merit necessary to earn God’s grace, nor did the church have the means to quell his conscience and free his soul.

### In Obsessive Scrupulosity, Luther Confessed Meticulously

Luther thought that if he could not acquire heaven by becoming a saint or by the merits of the saints, then perhaps he could do so by the confession of every known sin. Even Luther’s pilgrimage to Rome focused on scrupulous confession: “My chief concern when I departed for Rome was that I might make a full confession of my sins from my youth up and might become pious, although I had twice made such a confession in Erfurt.”<sup>39</sup> This too became a futile remedy for Luther, as his own words attest: “While I was a monk, I no sooner felt assailed by any temptation than I cried out—‘I am lost!’ Immediately I had

recourse to a thousand methods to stifle the cries of my conscience. I went everyday to confession, but that was of no use to me.”<sup>40</sup>

For a Christian of Luther's time and place, the whole sacramental system was designed to mediate God's help to sinners. Luther, seeing himself as the chief of sinners, made frequent use of this means of forgiveness. He “quickly became a virtuoso self-examiner, boring his mentor during six-hour confession sessions.”<sup>41</sup> He believed that every sin, in order to be absolved, had to be confessed. Truly penitent sinners were expected to search their hearts for sins of action and of motivation. Therefore, Luther would review his entire life, to be sure of remembering everything, until his confessor grew weary:

I often made confession to Staupitz, not about women but about really serious sins. He said, “I don't understand you.” This was real consolation! Afterward when I went to another confessor I had the same experience. In short, no confessor wanted to have anything to do with me. Then I thought, “Nobody has this same temptation except you,” and I became as dead as a corpse. Finally, when I was sad and downcast, Staupitz started to talk to me at table and asked, “Why are you so sad?” I replied, “Alas, what am I to do!”<sup>42</sup>

Assurance still escaped Luther. His soul would recoil in horror when, after six hours of confession, a new sin would come to mind which he had not remembered. Even more frightening was the realization that some sins were not even recognized as such by sinners. Luther's despair only escalated:

I tried to live according to the Rule with all diligence, and I used to be contrite, to confess and number off my sins, and often repeated my confession, and sedulously performed my allotted penance. And yet my conscience could never give me certainty, but I always doubted and said, “You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left

that out of your confession.” The more I tried to remedy an uncertain, weak, and afflicted conscience with the traditions of men, the more each day found it more uncertain, weaker, and more troubled.<sup>43</sup>

Feel the hopelessness.

### In Human Hopelessness, Luther Stood Naked before a Holy God

A hopeless Luther had availed himself of every resource of the medieval church for assuaging the anguish of a spirit alienated from God. When Staupitz met Luther, he met a man in the midst of the most frightful insecurities. Panic had invaded Luther’s spirit. His soul was tortured by despair because his sin left him alienated from God.

Luther entered the monastery to find peace with God. Though driven there for rest for his soul, monastic life failed to ease his guilt: “Then, bowed down by sorrow, I tortured myself by the multitude of my thoughts. ‘Look,’ exclaimed I, ‘thou art still envious, impatient, passionate! It profiteth thee nothing, O wretched man, to have entered this sacred order.’”<sup>44</sup>

Luther failed to find peace for his anxious soul in his works of righteousness, for all his strivings simply increased his despair. The purpose of his good works was to compensate for his sins, but he could never believe that the ledger was perfectly balanced. He could not satisfy a holy God at any point. None of Luther’s good works worked. At this stage of his life, Luther finds himself standing stark naked and emptyhanded before the God who is “Holy, Holy, Holy.” What now? What next?

### Timeless Truth for Life and Ministry Today

The first chapter of Luther’s life story ends like the Old Testament—begging for more; pleading for hope; despairing for grace; hoping for the good news, for the gospel; longing for the Christ of the cross.

Luther's life story mirrors Israel's story in Jeremiah where the Israelites have committed two sins: they forsook God—the spring of living water, and they dug their own cisterns—broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13). In this passage, the ultimate Soul Physician diagnoses why God's people choose empty, broken cisterns over living spring water: they find fault with God and hold onto faulty views of God (Jeremiah 2:5). They forsake the LORD their God because they have lost their awe of God (Jeremiah 2:19).

In the beginning, the Israelites were devoted like a bride who loved God and followed him through the desert (Jeremiah 2:2). But now, rather than follow God in the desert, they see him as a desert, as a land of great darkness (Jeremiah 2:31). Because they have lost their awe of God, their faulty, foolish, and unbiblical view of God leads them to flee from God (Jeremiah 2:31) and trust in anyone and anything but God (Jeremiah 2:13, 36–37).

Luther follows a similar path. Every works-righteousness cistern that Luther dug was broken beyond repair. But why keep turning to broken cisterns when God, the spring of living water, is inviting Luther to drink? At this point of his life, Luther had a faulty, non-Christ, non-cross, non-gospel, non-grace view of God.

Reflecting upon this time in his life, Luther told his students of Satan's bewitching deceptions. Referencing Galatians 3:1, Luther explains, "To tell the truth, he [Satan] sometimes assails me so mightily and oppresses me with such heavy cogitations, that he utterly shadows my Savior Christ from me and, in a manner, takes Him out of my sight."<sup>45</sup> Satan was cropping the Christ of the cross out of Luther's picture.

What's missing throughout the first chapter of Luther's story? The Christ of the cross is missing. In fact, we can encapsulate the primary gospel-centered counseling lesson of chapter 1 with this tweet-size summary:



We desperately need counseling under the cross because Satan seeks to crop the Christ of the cross out of our salvation picture so we'll flee from the Father and entrust ourselves to anyone but God.

Think back on Luther's spiritual journey from chapter 1. Imagine that you could time travel back 500 years to counsel Luther when he is crying out, "Alas, what am I to do!"

Would our counsel be works-centered? Would we tell Luther what to do? Or, would our counseling be cross-centered. Would we invite Martin Luther into a gospel conversation about what Christ has already and eternally done? In chapter 2, we discover what biblical counsel Luther uncovers in the second stage of his spiritual journey.