

ON PARTAKING OF THE DIVINE NATURE: LUTHER'S DEPENDENCE ON AUGUSTINE

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Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk; he acclaimed Augustine of Hippo as the greatest influence on theology after the Bible. Thus it seems appropriate to inquire about Augustine's influence on Luther.¹ Because of the variety of interpretations which have been made of Augustine over the course of the centuries, one must ask what Augustine himself said, how Luther interpreted him, and what the significance of "Luther's Augustine" was within the context of Luther's whole theology.

Such an undertaking is obviously far too massive for a brief article. My present proposal is somewhat more modest: to limit the question to the theology of grace as our partaking of the divine life. I shall note the general shape of Augustine's theology of grace, look at main lines of Luther's modification of Augustine's scheme, and finally make some observations about relationships between Augustine's and Luther's theologies of grace.

1. *Augustine's Theology of Grace*

Various scholars have attempted to distinguish Greek from Latin Christian thought about divine grace by asserting that the

¹Cf. Anders Nygren, *Augustin und Luther* (Berlin, 1958); A. G. Dickens, *Martin Luther and the Reformation* (New York, 1967), pp. 22-31; Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation* (New York, 1966), p. 127; Daniel Day Williams, "The Significance of St. Augustine Today," in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Roy W. Battenhouse (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1955, 1979), pp. 3-5; Frederick Brosché, *Luther on Predestination* (Uppsala doctoral dissertation, distributed by Almqvist and Wiksell International, Stockholm, 1978), pp. 19-20 (gives a basic bibliography about Luther's use of Augustine); Axel Gyllenbrok, *Rechtfertigung und Heilung* (Uppsala, 1952), pp. 3-5.

Greeks understood grace as "deification," and that the Latins understood it as a juridical forgiveness of sins and divine assistance to do good. "Deification" in this theological sense (the sense in which the term will be used in this article) is an ontological relationship between God and humanity based upon the participation of human beings in the divine perfection. God created all human beings in the divine image and likeness, and because they are so created, they have intrinsically certain godlike qualities. The creatures' qualities are genuinely like the divine, in a measure appropriate to their nature.

Such a position finds its philosophical foundation in the Neoplatonic notion of the participation of the "many" in the "One." But Greek theologians insist that the idea is deeper than merely the philosophical one.² This relationship established in creation is disturbed because of the reality of sin. Through the sin of Adam and Eve, humanity's relationship to God is changed; the image and likeness of God in human beings has been injured, darkened. In its new situation, humanity is not in right relationship to God. It shares in some of the divine perfections, but it has lost the divine friendship and communion which gives eternal life, unending life with God.

Human participation in the divine life must be restored and perfected; it must be returned to the communion with God which was intended in creation. Such participation in the divine life involves a process of "deification," in which through the work of God in Jesus Christ, who gives the Holy Spirit, we are transformed. Through our cooperation with this grace, we enter into a process of transformation into beings who are godlike and who imitate the divine goodness.

However, the notion of deification is not restricted to Greek theology. A central theme in Augustine's theology sees grace as a partaking of the divine life.³ Augustine especially stresses this theme

²Cf. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (London, Eng., 1975), pp. 138-139; W. Pesch and H. R. Schlette, "Participation," in *Encyclopédie de la Foi* (Paris, 1966), 3: 308-320.

³Victorino Capánaga, "La deificación en la soteriología agustiniana," in *Augustinus Magister* (Paris, 1954), 2: 745-754; Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Grace as Participa-

in his sermons and commentaries, wherein he addresses those who share his own beliefs.

Also in his commentaries, and particularly in the anti-Pelagian polemical works, another dimension of Augustine's theology of grace appears: His doctrine of sin underlines humanity's radical separation from God after the Fall. The image of God remained in fallen humans; but no saving, personal communion with God was possible, because the Holy Spirit, the giver of this communion, was absent from the human heart.

How could humans come to know God truly and share in the divine life? Only through God's predestination and free election. By 396 or 397 Augustine clearly asserted this, in contrast to his earlier opinion, which identified merit as the cause of God's choice of people.⁴ The Pelagian controversy forced Augustine to clarify with increasing precision and rigor his concepts of the gratuitousness of the divine choice, double predestination, unmerited justification by grace alone, and sanctification dependent on God's gracious justifying. Augustine's juridical and moral concern derives from his focus on humanity's helplessness to achieve its own salvation and its need for redemption by God according to the inscrutable divine will.⁵

These two understandings of grace might at first appear to be in conflict. The one focuses on the *relationship* between God and the believer, on the Holy Spirit's dwelling in the person to aid the process of deification. The other lays stress on the *distance* between God and humanity, on the unmeritedness of grace, which no human deed can deserve or adequately respond to.

Seen in another way, however, these two understandings simply explain the divine/human relationship from quite different perspectives. When Augustine spoke of grace as participation in the divine life, his concern was *pastoral nurture* of his flock, to encourage and guide believers in their ongoing relationship to God. He encouraged their sense of incorporation into the eternal life of God, graciously

tion in the Divine Life in the Theology of Augustine of Hippo," *Augustinian Studies* 7 (1976): 135-152.

⁴Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (London, Eng., 1970), pp. 176-182.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 278-294, 313-338.

shared with humanity. On the other hand, when he wrote of predestination and human helplessness, he was concerned to *defend God's primacy* from sinful human beings, who attempted to usurp God's place as the center of both personal and world history. Predestination guaranteed divine primacy and confessed God's ultimate triumph in chaotic history. It underlay the mystery of personal lives and relationships to God, and asserted the power of God to draw and convert the previously unworthy. It explained, as well, the apparent indifference of those to whom all the "means of grace" had been made available.⁶ Thus, predestination tamed the "terror of history,"⁷ both personal and corporate.

When twentieth-century readers explore Augustine's works, they identify different strands of thought, with different origins, sources, concerns, etc. But at least until the Renaissance, such an approach was almost unheard of. Medievals almost exclusively read the corpus of Augustine's works as a whole. They solved any tensions, incongruities, or contradictions, either by explaining them according to a logical method (for instance Abelard's *Sic et Non*) or by ignoring or denying those parts of his works with which they disagreed.⁸ Part of the influence of Augustine's theology of grace on them involves their own transformation, change, or omission of various elements which Augustine had combined.⁹ We must try to understand their reading of Augustine as a living, authoritative totality to be dealt with. This must be borne in mind also as we analyze Luther's use of Augustine.

2. *Luther's Theology of Grace as Influenced by Augustine*

Luther's theology of grace emerged in a quite different age and spirit from Augustine's. James McCue has focused on one specific

⁶Frederick van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop* (New York, 1961), pp. 123-125; Wilson-Kastner, pp. 151-152.

⁷Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York, 1959), pp. 143-145, 153-154.

⁸Ives M.-J. Congar, *A History of Theology* (Garden City, N.Y., 1968), pp. 57, 72-73.

⁹No comprehensive study of Augustine's influence in Western theology has been written. For some studies with bibliography, see these articles of mine: "A

new concern (subsequent to Augustine's day), which influenced Luther's theology and his use of Augustine: the personal confession of sins—viz., the obligation, universalized in the thirteenth century, of confessing all of one's mortal sins as the ordinary condition of salvation.¹⁰ Such a responsibility could encourage either a complacency or a despair which had to be addressed in a theology of grace. Augustine himself never thought of grace within this context, and so Luther had to reformulate and restructure Augustinianism from a perspective which focused on the individual with a centrality and intensity that had never occurred to Augustine.

The full intensity of Luther's search for the individual conscience's perfect righteousness before God must be considered together with Luther's eschatology. Luther firmly believed that the end of the world was rapidly approaching, and that his time was the last of the six ages of the history of the world. The rule of the Pope and the reign of the Turk both pointed to the imminent end of the world, which the believer was helpless to change or stop; only God's intervention could help.¹¹

Thus, any account of Luther's worldview must note that Luther read Augustine with an urgent and personalized sense of hopelessness which Augustine did not share. Augustine did not expect the imminent end of the world, even though the Roman Empire was crumbling around him; nor was his doctrine of the radical need of the grace of God for salvation dependent on an insistence on individual guilt; Augustine's was a deeply felt confession about the condition of humanity as such.

Luther's theological horizon was thus bounded by a sense of the imminent day of divine judgment for the world, interwoven

Note on the Iconoclastic Controversy," *AUSS* 18 (1980): 139-148; "Grace in the Soul: an Aspect of Augustine's Influence on Bonaventure," *Medievalia* 4 (1978): 161-178; "Andreas Osiander's Theology of Grace in the Perspective of the Influence of Augustine of Hippo," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 10/2 (Summer 1979): 73-91, esp. p. 75, n. 10, which discusses bibliography relevant for Luther studies as well.

¹⁰James F. McCue, "Simul justus et peccator in Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther: Towards Putting the Debate in Context," *JAAR* 48 (1980): 81-96, esp. pp. 92-94.

¹¹George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (Minneapolis, 1954), pp. 157-159, 176-177.

with a fear of judgment of the individual. His theology of grace, and especially his use of Augustine, reflected his reforging of Augustine's theology within this significantly changed worldview. Those elements in Augustine which responded to the new concerns were retained and emphasized by Luther; those which did not were shifted towards the edges of Luther's system.

Luther unquestionably perceived himself to be a faithful follower of Augustine. Indeed, in his preface to the *Theologia Germanica*, he places Augustine next to the Bible as a source of religious truth.¹² Even when in later works his appraisal of Augustine is somewhat less glowing, he still identifies Augustine as a major theological source, especially about grace.¹³ Luther continued to acknowledge his debt to Augustine as the interpreter *par excellence* of the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone. The question we must now ask is: How did he use the various strands of Augustine's theology of grace? Did he, for instance, appeal exclusively to the Augustine who spoke of election and predestination, and who in this setting opposed human claims to merit before God?

As one might expect, the answer to this question is extremely complex. One suggestion is that after a brief initial encounter with a theology of deification, Luther eliminated from his theology any suggestion of inhering grace.¹⁴ Yet, Luther's own relationship to medieval mysticism is more nuanced. This medieval mystical theology, while affirming the sanctification of the deified person, insisted also that such deification takes place within the context of absolute human helplessness and of utter dependence on God for the receiving of the divine life and for the ongoing process of "divinization."¹⁵ In the *Theologia Germanica*, which Luther edited

¹²*The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther*, trans. Bengt Hoffman (New York, 1980), p. 54.

¹³E.g., "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, N.Y., 1961), p. 12.

¹⁴Dickens, pp. 24-26.

¹⁵Bengt Hägglund, *The Background of Luther's Doctrine of Justification in Late Medieval Theology* (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 4-14, and p. 34, point 4; Bengt R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics* (Minneapolis, 1976), pp. 160-177.

in 1516, the author asserts that even if God became human in all people and they were divinized in God, unless it happened to *me*, "my fall and my apostasy would never be mended. . . . In this return and healing I can, may, or shall do nothing from myself. . . . God alone works here. . . ." ¹⁶ Both the notions of *sola gratia* and salvation *pro me*, so crucial for Luther's theology of grace, are present here, along with the notion of divinization.

Does this remain Luther's own position during the rest of his life, or does he change fundamentally, as some have suggested? ¹⁷ In a few pages, one can scarcely assess the voluminous writings of Martin Luther. A few references, however, from Luther's theology over the years indicate some of the complexity of Luther's relationship to a theology of deification.

Luther, in his *Preface to the Latin Writings* (1545) attributes his own formulation of a theology of grace to the influence of St. Paul's epistles. After he had gained his understanding through Paul, Luther asserts, he read Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, and found that Augustine also "interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us." Even though Augustine did not write of it perfectly and did "not explain all things concerning imputation clearly," nonetheless Luther judges him to have taught rightly about God's righteousness with which we are justified. ¹⁸

Luther wrote this about a year before his death. Even at this late time in his career, he perceived himself as being in fundamental agreement with Augustine about grace, even though Luther had arrived at his interpretation of Paul independently. The Reformer acknowledged differences between his own and Augustine's opinions, but he identified them as being due to Augustine's incompleteness or lack of clarity, rather than to any wrong understandings.

¹⁶*Theologia Germanica*, p. 63.

¹⁷E.g., Dickens, p. 24.

¹⁸"Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings," Dillenberger ed., p. 12. One must balance Luther's image of being "clothed" with grace, underscoring its alien character, with the picture of the divine Word imparting its qualities to the soul like a heated iron in the fire, an image which emphasizes the transforming power of grace. I am indebted to James McCue for pointing out to me in private discussions that both of these notions in Luther's theology have to be taken together.

Where does Luther differ from Augustine about deification? Most often, scholars suggest that Luther insists that grace works in human beings through imputation. According to A. G. Dickens and Bengt Hägglund, Luther's notion of alien righteousness is his distinctive contribution to the theology of grace.¹⁹ Such a notion of grace would appear to be radically different from one which underscored the idea of gradual transformation.

However, Luther himself does not seem to have found the two notions mutually exclusive. Luther identifies the righteousness which Christ gives us as foreign to our own intrinsic human capabilities (in much the same way that original sin is also foreign or alien to our basic, God-given humanity). The alien character of righteousness expresses the gratuitous character of grace; it comes from God alone and not from anything within us.²⁰

When in a sermon in 1519 Luther describes alien righteousness, however, his metaphor provides contrast to a coat—an object which is not of human substance and which never changes nor is changed in relationship to the person wearing it. Rather, he insists that this alien righteousness is “not instilled all at once,” but has a beginning, increases, and “is perfected at the end through death.” Furthermore, alien righteousness produces in us a second kind of righteousness, “our proper righteousness,” through which we crucify ourselves and draw closer to God and love our neighbors. This righteousness in us destroys sin, follows the example of Christ, and is transformed into his likeness.²¹

It appears that to Luther the notion of alien righteousness does not in and of itself exclude a process of real change and transformation. At the same time, he insists that God's energy, not the person's, is the source of any change. In that sense, the change is not inherently the person's, but it is an inhering change. Righteousness is alien, inasmuch as it is not produced by the person; but it is not opposed to human capabilities or human character. Furthermore, it does indeed cause change and progress in a person.

¹⁹Dickens, p. 30; Hägglund, p. 34.

²⁰“Two Kinds of Righteousness,” in *Martin Luther*, ed. John Dillenberger, p. 88.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

In his biblical commentaries, Luther takes a similar position. As a focus for identifying his opinions, I will refer to his comments about two key texts which were used in the early and medieval church's teaching about grace and deification: Ps 82:6, "I have said that you are gods and all of you sons of the Highest,"; and 2 Pet 1:4, "That through these . . . you may become partakers of the divine nature." If Luther were specifically to repudiate any notion of transformation of the person through grace—of "deification" in this theological sense—these *loci classici* would surely provide him with an excellent opportunity.

In 1530, Luther commented on Ps 82, outlining the duties of a Christian prince. He notes concerning verse 6 that "the Word of God hallows and deifies everything to which it is applied."²² This deification does not derive from an intrinsic characteristic of the person or offices, but from their living relationship to the Word of God. The "holiness and divinity" which they possess is not theirs, for it derives from God's Word; nonetheless, it is really and truly in them because of the divine call.

In an earlier set of lectures on the Psalms, completed in 1515, Luther's exegesis moved in a more traditional direction. There he distinguished these "gods and the sons of the Most High," who anagogically are the children of God, from those who are sinners and will die, as is proper for those who are not God's children.²³ He did not depart from the classical identification of the children of God by grace as "gods"; he perceived the term as expressing their relationship to God. He did not ask about the ontological character of the person before and after grace enters the soul; nor would he assume that to be an answerable question for us. He focuses on the human relationship to God.

In his commentary on 2 Peter (1523), Luther identified the promise offered in 1:4 as unique in the OT and NT. How do we partake of the divine nature? Through faith. "But what is the divine nature? It is eternal truth, righteousness, wisdom, everlasting

²²"Psalm 82," in *Luther's Works*, American ed. (hereinafter cited as *LW*), vol. 13, *Selected Psalms II*, p. 71.

²³"Psalm Eighty-two," in *LW*, vol. 11, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, pp. 110-111, 115.

life, peace, joy, happiness, and whatever can be called good." One who is a partaker of divine life has eternal life, the joy and peace of God, and is "pure, clean, righteous, and almighty against the devil, sin, and death." Just as God has eternal life and truth, so does the Christian. Such riches, Luther underscores, are ours through faith, not because our works lay a foundation for them.²⁴

Augustine would have agreed with such an explanation of our partaking of the divine nature, and with the reality of our sharing qualities of the divine nature through our participation in them. However, Luther appears to have changed one central aspect—or at least, emphasis—of Augustine's theology of human participation in the divine life. Augustine asserts that we share in God's life through charity; that is, through the Holy Spirit poured out into our hearts, through whom we are made able to partake of God's own life. For Luther, we share through faith, and our ability to respond to God always remains by grace through faith.

Even though Luther was willing to accept the classical notion of humanity's being created in the image of God and therefore intended for a higher life with God through its creation, his notion of salvation insisted on the distinction between creation and redemption. The gospel restores the image of God and makes it something better in us, Luther asserts in his commentary on Genesis (1535). However, the change comes through faith and the grace of trust in God.²⁵ Even though Luther employs Augustinian language about humans as "image of God," redemption is not by love (a divine quality that is mirrored only imperfectly in our love), but by faith, a human need which has no counterpart in God. To make faith rather than love the link between human beings and the divine nature only underscores the discontinuity in this present life between the divine and the human.

²⁴"Sermons on the Second Epistle of St. Peter," in *LW*, vol. 30, *The Catholic Epistles*, p. 155.

²⁵Comment on Gen 1:26, in *LW*, vol. 1, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5*, pp. 55-68.

3. *Conclusions*

Several important conclusions emerge from this comparison of Augustine and Luther with respect to their theologies of grace and from the analysis which has been made concerning Luther's use of Augustine in the Reformer's own formulation of the doctrine of grace.

1. When they are writing about the *activity* of divine grace, both Luther and Augustine consider this to be the partaking of the divine nature. The notion is unquestionably present throughout Luther's theology, although it is not so central as in Augustine's theology. Luther also professes a belief in the Christian's growth in sharing of the divine life, in partaking of righteousness.

2. Luther repudiates both the notion of inherent sin and inherent goodness in human beings. Although Luther admitted an *imago Dei* in humanity because it was created as such by God, the Scripture references to "the image of God" serve to remind us of what humanity has lost through sin, how blemished our present condition is, and what we will be given when we are reborn to a condition which is even greater than a restoration to Adam's state in the garden of Eden. For us in our present condition, both sin and grace must come from God alone. Any quality in the human which might indicate some inherent relationship to God cannot be the link between God and humanity. Only an intervention from God can save; only faith given by God can bind God and humanity.

3. Two reasons why Luther never explicitly dealt with the ontological dimensions of grace ("deification") may be suggested. One was his nominalist theological training, which would not have given him the theological systematic framework to integrate Augustine's notion of a participation in God by nature. More importantly, Luther did not really care about the ontological foundations of participation in God either by nature or by grace. In certainty that he was preaching God's unmerited grace to a world to be judged on the last day, Luther correspondingly shaped the content of his preaching and his commentaries. If the language of participation in the divine life and transformation in God could be used within the context of *sola gratia*, Luther would employ that part of the theological tradition. Only if such language was thought to obscure the absolute primacy of grace, did Luther omit or change it. At the same time, both Luther's pastoral context on an individual

level (to console the scrupulous and chasten those trying to justify themselves before God) and his historical and eschatological setting and outlook were significantly different from Augustine's. This difference insured that for Luther "deification," or participation in the divine life, would not have either the same significance or meaning as the concept had had for Augustine.