Aristotle’s Ethics: The *Real* Reason for Luther’s Reformation?

Ronald N. Frost

What was it that stirred Martin Luther to take up a reformer’s mantle? Was it John Tetzel’s fund-raising through the sale of indulgences? The posting of Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses against the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences in October, 1517, did, indeed, stir the public at large. But Luther’s main complaint was located elsewhere. He offered his real concern in a response to the Diatribe … Concerning Free Will by Desiderius Erasmus:

I give you [Erasmus] hearty praise and commendation on this further account—that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous [alienis] issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like—trifles rather than issues—in respect of which almost all to date have sought my blood (though without success); you and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot.¹

The concern of this article, then, is to go behind the popular perceptions—the “trifles”—of Luther’s early activism in order to identify and examine this “hinge on which all turns.”

What was this vital spot? Luther was reacting to the assimilation of Aristotle’s ethics within the various permutations of scholastic theology that prevailed in his day. Indeed, Luther’s arguments against Aristotle’s presence in Christian theology are to be found in most of his early works, a matter that calls for careful attention in light of recent scholarship that either overlooks or dismisses Luther’s most explicit concerns.

In particular, historical theologian Richard A. Muller has been the most vigorous proponent in a movement among some Reformation-era scholars that affirms the works of seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism—or Protestant Orthodoxy—as the first satisfactory culmination, if not the epitome, of the Reformation.

¹Ronald N. Frost is Assistant Professor of Historical Theology at Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

as a whole. Muller assumes that the best modern Protestant theology has been shaped by Aristotelian methods and rigor that supported the emerging structure and coherence of Protestant systematic theology. He argues, for instance, that any proper understanding of the Reformation must be made within the framework of a synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotle’s methods:

It is not only an error to attempt to characterize Prote...