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TO IMPART TO EVERYONE
A LITTLE OF WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN ME
An Aspect of Luther as Preacher

Eduard Richard Riegert

Luther's concept of preaching as "teaching and exhortation" arises out of his passionate concern for "poor souls" who are caught and entangled in the subtle systems of the medieval church. This concern, expressed especially in the anger and anguish of his "fulminations," is demonstrated in his sensitivity to persons caught in three such systems (the penitential, the monastic, and the sacramental). In each instance, poor souls are caught in relentless rounds of "systemic" or "works" righteousness from which they could so easily be set free by means of the righteousness that comes graciously by faith. Teaching is therefore an essential task to help people recognize their captivity and the true righteousness offered in Christ. Exhortation is likewise necessary to encourage their movement from that bondage to freedom in the graciousness of God.

PREACHING AS TEACHING AND EXHORTATION

Since the publication of C.H. Dodd's *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* it has been customary to make a distinction between *kerygma* and

didache: the former being the announcement or proclamation of a *keryx* (herald), the latter being the teaching of a *didaskalos* (teacher). In a famous sentence Dodd asserted, "It was by *kerygma*, says Paul, not by *didache*, that it pleased God to save men."¹ So we have been accustomed to maintain a distinction between preaching and teaching. Teaching is instruction, the passing on of information; preaching is an event, a happening in which we participate. True preaching, we tend to say, is proclamation.²

Consequently—for North Americans³ certainly—Luther has been held up as a preacher-proclaimer *par excellence* because of his dynamic concept of the word of God. "I preach the gospel of Christ, and with my bodily voice I bring Christ into your heart, so that you may form him within yourself. If now you truly believe, so that your heart lays hold of the word and holds fast within it that voice, tell me, what have you in your heart? You must answer that you have the true Christ . . ."⁴

Therefore Luther asserts that "in all places there should be fine, goodly, learned, spiritual, diligent preachers without books, who extract the living word from the old Scripture and unceasingly inculcate it into the people, just as the apostles did."⁵

While on account of his dynamic concept of the word of God Luther may rightly be ranked with the "kerymatists" or herald-proclaimers, he does, however, seem quite consistently to describe his pulpit work in what appears to be just the other category, namely, as "teaching and exhortation"!

Such a description of preaching, by *Luther* of all people, comes as a surprise. The "teaching" part one could accept, but the "exhortation" part seems to contradict his primary stress on justification by faith and not by works. "Exhortation" is the nemesis of the preacher because it encourages works-righteousness; it is the "oughts", "shoulds", "musts", and "let us's" that make so many sermons into bad news and so many preachers into scolders. It is what Morris Niedenthal calls the "grammar of the law" which makes the future dependent on the past and thus leaves the hearer in bondage with no help in sight. It is thus the opposite of the "grammar of the gospel" which "opens a new and different future by declaring [proclaiming] an action of God which alters the meaning of the past" and creates strength "by ministering to need

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1. C.H. Dodd. *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1936), p. 8.
 2. The distinction inspired a whole generation or two of homiletical writers, e.g., James S. Stewart's 1946 Warrack Lectures, *Heralds of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd.) and Helmut T. Lehmann's *Heralds of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), and, as well, engendered a lively debate on the relationship between preaching and teaching, e.g., Robert H. Mounce, *The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1960). A recent book on preaching by Richard A. Jensen, himself a systematic theologian, distinguishes two "types" or emphases in preaching, "Didactic Preaching" and "Proclamatory Preaching" (*Telling the Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980).
 3. Although a European, Vilmos Vajta, in his book *Luther on Worship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), entitles the chapter on the word in worship, "The Proclamation of the Word."
 4. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. by Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 36 ("Word and Sacrament, II"), p. 340.
 5. *Luther's Works*, Am. Ed., 52 ("Sermons, II"), pp. 205f. See further Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 311ff.; Richard A. Jensen, *Telling the Story*, pp. 72ff.

and weakness.”⁶ It is, finally, that pernicious virus that turns so much religious life into moralism.

Nevertheless, it appears this is a consistent understanding of his preaching. In his Table Talk⁷ “preaching and teaching” issue as a synonymous breath from Luther’s mouth; “teaching and exhortation” are a working definition for him. He says for example, “A preacher should be both a dialectician and rhetorician; that is, he must be able to teach and to exhort. When he is about to treat a subject or topic he should first of all decide what it is all about; secondly, he should define it; thirdly, adduce passages of Scripture for support and proof; fourthly, he should explain and clarify it with illustrations; fifthly, adorn it with analogies; and finally, admonish and stir up the lazy and disobedient, earnestly rebuke false doctrine and the authors thereof—but so that everyone can see it is done not out of ill will, hatred or envy, but to honor God and to help and save people.”⁸

In an eight-point summary of Christ’s teaching in Mt. 5-7 Luther’s second point is this: “Of the preaching office: what and how one is to teach in the Christian church; namely, one shall salt and illuminate. That is, teach the law and the gospel, rebuke and comfort, and exercise faith.”⁹

Ulrich Nembach, in a very methodical study, demonstrates that “teaching and exhortation” is Luther’s understanding of preaching. He does this on the basis of that material which (1) is genuinely from Luther (i.e., non-redactional), and (2) homiletical. This material consists of his writings on the reformation of worship, the *Kirchenpostille*, the *Bondage of the Will*, and, with some caution, the *Invokavit-predigten* (the eight Wittenberg sermons of 1522).¹⁰ Nembach notes that in the first sermon of the Christmas cycle of the *Kirchenpostille*, the text Titus 2:11-15 gave Luther opportunity “die Aufgaben des Predigtamtes zu beschreiben und damit eine Definition zu geben. ‘Merck, das eynsz predigersz ampt tzwey werck hatt, leren und vormanen.’ Die Lehre richtet sich an die, ‘die es nitt wissen,’ die Ermahnung an ‘die es wissen, das sie nitt abnemen, fawl werden odder umfallen, szondern fortt faren widder alle anfechtungen.’”¹¹

Nembach concludes his searches through these primary sources¹² with this statement and quotation: “Lehre ist . . . die Mitteilung und des Festhaltens an dem einmal

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6. Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, Charles L. Rice. *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 147-9.
 7. Eduard Richard Riegert, “Luther’s Table Talk About Preachers and Preaching,” S.T.M. Thesis, The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, 1960.
 8. *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, kritische Gesamtausgabe: Tischreden (Weimar: Herman Boehlaus Nachfolger), IV, #4097, s. 135.
 9. W.A. TR I, #1064, s. 540. See also VI, #6793, s. 193; V, #5252, s. 28; IV, #3975, s. 50; III, #3579, s. 428.
 10. Ulrich Nembach. *Predigt des Evangeliums: Luther als Prediger, Padagoge und Rhetor* (Neukirchner Verlag, 1972). The Tischreden and other sermons are secondary materials because of redactional realities. *De servo arbitrio* is included as the most important systematic work.
 11. Nembach, s. 35, quoting W.A. 73, 10, I, 1. 54, 12ff. (“to describe the responsibilities of the preaching office and so give a definition. ‘Notice that a preacher’s office has two parts, to teach and to admonish.’ Teaching is addressed to ‘those who are ignorant,’ admonition to ‘those who know, so that they do not depart from it, become lazy or fall down, but proceed against all assaults.’”)
 12. Important concepts of *The Bondage of the Will* are the “external clarity of scripture,” the dis-

Mitgeteilten. Lehre ist dabei die Mitteilung des Evangeliums Christi, d.h. die Mitteilung von Christus als *Christus pro nobis*. Ermahnung ist das Auffordern zum Festhalten an diesem Mitgeteilten. Lehre und Ermahnung werden deshalb zu den zentralen Aufgaben der Predigt, so dasz Luther das Predigtamt etwa von Paulus her entsprechend definieren kann. 'S. Paulus teylet das predigeramt ynn tzwey stuck Ro. 12 Doctrinam et exhortationem, lare und vormanen. Lare ist, szo man predigt, das unbekandt ist und die leutt wissend oder vorstendig werden. Vormanen ist, szo yderman schon woll weysz. Beyde stuck sind not einem prediger, drumb sie auch beyde S. Paulus ubett.'¹³

Nembach goes on to examine the implications of this definition of preaching;¹⁴ here the attempt is rather to discover *why* Luther conceived of preaching in this way.

Our point of entry is his "fulminations": those always vehement, often rowdy and rude, and sometimes bitinglly vicious, passages in which he attacks his opponents (especially the pope and the hierarchy) and the laws and practices of the medieval church. Luther's concept of preaching as "teaching and exhortation" arises out of his passionate concern for "poor" people (literally and figuratively) who are caught and enmeshed in subtle systems which crush the life out of them.¹⁵ The Luther material

tinctiveness or separateness of God and scripture, and Christ's presence in the word of preaching (Nembach, 45-52).

13. Nembach, 58f., quoting 10, 1, 2, 1, 19 - 23. ("Teaching is the sharing and the holding fast of what is shared. Teaching is the sharing of the gospel of Christ, i.e., the Christ for us. Admonition is the summoning [of the hearer] to hold fast to what is shared. Therefore teaching and admonition belong to the central responsibilities of the sermon, so that Luther, on the basis of Paul, is able to define the preaching office accordingly. 'St. Paul divides the preaching office into two parts, Rom. 12, *doctrina* and *exhortatio*, teaching and admonition. Teaching is telling what is unknown so that people come to know or to understand. Admonition is to urge people to cling to what everyone already knows well. Both parts are necessary to a preacher, and therefore St. Paul practices both.'")
14. Namely, the concept of the hearer (chap. III) and of the preacher (chap. IV), and the resultant form and style of the sermon (chap. V).
15. I happily acknowledge a heavy indebtedness to Aarne Siirala, *Divine Humanness* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970). The fulminations in Luther's sermons match very closely the spirit of "The Bondage of the Will." Siirala describes how in that debate with Erasmus Luther has generally been judged the loser: irrational, subjective, vindictive, close-minded, vulgar, intolerant, arbitrary (pp. 15ff.). But according to Siirala's analysis Luther had found through scripture that the threads of his own experience really extended "into the wide network of human existence" (p. 37). This meant he was not alone in his struggle, nor an aberration in the human scene (an extraordinarily important realization in light of the vexing question, "Are you alone right and everyone else wrong?"); and, furthermore, it meant that the "word of God" is not removed from or hovering abstractly above human life, but is present *in life*: "Luther uses the symbol *the word of God* to designate the soil and atmosphere in which life grows. This symbol, *the word, the word of life, or the word of God*, does not refer to any idea or concept with an exact and definable content. It stands for the fact that man's response to the speech of life is of central importance to the realization of humanness" (p. 60). Luther therefore "rages" against Erasmus's attempts to steer him into the calm and dispassionate waters of a "corrected" tradition because it is precisely that tradition that has squelched *the word of God*, and thus does profound injury to the human spirit and the human community: "Where you present God to me, there you must also present mankind to me, for they are not to be separated or torn apart from each other" (W.A. TR, 2, 248, 38-43, quoted p. 68).

largely used here is Vol. 52, “Sermons II”, of the American Edition, edited by Hans J. Hillerbrand, containing sermons from the *Kirchenpostille* on the Gospels appointed for Christmas Eve through The Epiphany, written 1521-22.¹⁶

FULMINATIONS

As an example of his “fulminations” one could cite the following: “For the word of God and the teachings of men cannot tolerate one another in one and the same heart. Yet these raving killers of souls, the papists with their Antichrist, the pope, state that we must believe and observe more things than are stated in the Bible. Thus they lead all the world into hell with their ecclesiastical estates and orders.”¹⁷

A most remarkable fulmination courses through more than fifty pages of his postil on the Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany, Matt. 2:1-12 where he deals with “the Spiritual Meaning of this Gospel.”¹⁸ The climax comes when Luther draws in the text of 2 Tim. 3:1-9 to describe “Herod”—and “Herod,” of course, “is the pope and his spiritual realm.”¹⁹ The words of 2 Tim. 3 are made to order for his purpose. “The last day will be dangerous, for men will come who will be lovers of self, misers, proud, arrogant, blasphemers, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, dissocial, slanderers, profligates, fierce, indifferent to good works, reckless, swollen with conceit, blind, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, who hold the form of a godly life but deny its power. Beware of such people . . .” Luther begins his onslaught. “It seems to me that here St. Paul did not mince words but, as it were, pointed at our ecclesiastical lords and Herod’s holy servants. To the very last letter of the text everyone can see a patent and powerful application to the ecclesiastical estate.”²⁰ Then with sarcasm, glee, indignation, humor, pathos, and rage he works his way through that list of evil attributes: “First of all we have the *Philauti*, those who are lovers of self . . . They consider heaven their exclusive privilege; they alone have identified the right way of life; they alone constitute the Christian church; they alone sustain heaven and earth . . . Especially, the chief lord, the pope, stinks of pure self-conceit and self-esteem throughout the world . . . God help us, how highly this abomination thinks of himself, how well he loves his position . . .”²¹

Twenty-seven pages and twenty points later he writes, “Let that suffice as com-

16. The *Kirchenpostille* was written by Luther for inexperienced preachers especially, and therefore is more like “sermon helps” than actual sermons. This is especially evident in “The Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany, Matt. 2:1-12” which runs to 128 pages in the Am. Ed., far longer than the one-hour long sermons customarily delivered. Yet Luther is writing for preaching and, moreover, expresses the wish that pastors would read from the postil in whole or in part: “I would soon make a preacher out of a man if he would follow my directions. For I would bid him take the Small Catechism in his hand and read it word for word from the pulpit. On Sundays I would have him read a piece from the Postil, and then have him repeat what he read” (W.A., TR, V, #5393, p. 124).

17. Am. Ed., 52, 137.

18. Am. Ed., 52, 201ff.

19. Am. Ed., 52, 204.

20. Am. Ed., 52, 212.

21. Am. Ed., 52, 213.

ment on the passage from St. Paul. We now return to the gospel and its interpretation."²² But he has by no means exhausted his capacity for fulmination!

There is no better word for these fulminations than "raging." One "rages" either when one is profoundly assaulted and is relatively helpless to counter the assault or when one sees an awesome threat advancing upon or engulfing others which is so subtle that it is extremely difficult to perceive it, much less withstand it. Luther's "raging" is primarily of the latter kind, though a note of desperation deriving from the former can also be heard: ". . . God allows us to be torn asunder and trampled to pieces by the pope, the bishops, priests, and monks, of whom all the world is utterly and completely full . . . so that there is no more knowledge of the faith, no Christian life, no love, no fruit of the Spirit, and nothing but firewood, hedges, and thorns, i.e., dissemblers, hypocrites, who presume to be Christians with their vigils, masses, foundations, bells, churches, recitations of the Psalter or of the rosary, cult of the saints, celebration of holy days, cowls, tonsures, robes, fasting, pilgrimages, and all the other foolishness without number. O Lord God, completely torn asunder, completely trampled to pieces, O Lord Christ, completely desolate and forsaken are we miserable men in these last days of wrath? Our shepherds are wolves; our watchmen are traitors; our protectors are enemies; our fathers are murderers; our teachers are seducers. Alas, alas and alas! When? When? When will your harsh wrath cease?"²³

It is in the latter part of this fulmination ("O Lord God . . .") that we sense that Luther perceives some horror against which he ceaselessly launches an all-out attack. In the postil on the Gospel of the Second Sunday after Christmas, after having referred to "our Lord's fattened pigs in his sty" who "condemn, forbid, curse, and persecute the truth," he says, "I say this because I wish to have performed my duty and to have pointed out to every Christian the danger in which he lives, so that he should know how to protect himself against the pope, the universities, the clergy, where God's word does not prevail."²⁴ The "danger" which he sees threatening the Christian is the danger of getting so enmeshed in a "system" that he is drawn down by it and perishes. The system is the system of the medieval church, i.e., "vigils, masses, foundations, bells, churches, recitations of the Psalter or of the rosary, cult of the saints, celebration of holy days, cowls, tonsures, robes, fasting, pilgrimages, and all the other foolishness without number."

It is precisely the story of Herod cozying up to the magi, under pretense of great piety, in order to seek out the child to kill him, that throws Luther into this great fulmination. Herod, the foreigner, is ruler over the people of God, and can bring either salvation or destruction. The utterly despicable thing he does is to bring destruction under the guise of salvation. He pretends to be pious and devout; he searches the scriptures for guidance; he persuades them that his intentions are of the highest "that I too may go to worship him." Herod, writes Luther without demur, "cannot signify anything other than a spiritual government which does not rule people by faith and the gospel, but by works and human doctrines; yet it has the ap-

22. Am. Ed., 52, 240.

23. Am. Ed., 52, 100 (The Gospel for St. Stephen's Day).

24. Am. Ed., 52, 118 (The Gospel for the Second Sunday after Christmas), emphasis added.

pearance of showing the way to heaven and teaching people what is right, when, in fact, it is none other than the gate and wide road to hell. In short, Herod is the pope and his spiritual realm . . . Consciences want to and may be led, fed, and kept by God's word alone; so he leads and feeds them with his own snot and slobber, with indulgences and religious orders, with celebration of masses and prayers, with fasting and the like."²⁵

ENTANGLING SYSTEMS

The subtle way in which the "Herodists" enmesh and suffocate "poor souls" is demonstrated by Luther in a series of contrasts between what the gospel is and how the "Herodists", while not denying the gospel, use it arbitrarily, twist it, and rob it of its power. The "Herodists" "are just like Herod, who learns everything about the star and yet wants to destroy that which the star signifies."²⁶ For example, they do not deny "that salvation depends entirely on faith"; but then they "assert that faith without works is useless, and so they secretly move from faith to works . . ."²⁷ Again, they agree that Christ is Savior, but nullify this by teaching "that man can merit God's grace by his own natural powers and works"; if so, why should Christ die?²⁸ Yet again, they do not deny grace, yet "they teach all manner of satisfaction for sins, set up orders, procedures, and stations of penance in order to purchase forgiveness of sins from God with these things and to pay for grace."²⁹

By examining this fulmination it is possible to identify at least three specific systems within the total medieval ecclesiastical system against which he rails.

The Penitential System

The twentieth point of his great fulmination takes up 2 Tim. 3:6, "For among them are those who make their way into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, always learning and never arriving at a knowledge of the truth." Luther sees a direct reference to the church's system of penance.³⁰ "This cannot be interpreted in any other way," he says, "than as pointing to the mendicant orders which the apostle clearly foresaw." For the mendicants pass through parish churches as they please and "are virtually in control of confession" by papal permission. This control of confession, maintains Luther, "is truly the devil's game and the women fall for it, especially those who are secretly tormented by serious and grievous sins, or, as St. Paul says, are burdened with sins [II Tim. 3:6]. For as soon as their consciences plague them and they do not know where to seek help and advice, these foolish women run and disgorge their troubles into a cowl and think they have succeeded in getting rid of them. But they become really enmeshed and keep on bringing and donating whatever they can and own. The holy fathers

25. Am. Ed., 52, 204.

26. Am. Ed., 52, 240.

27. Am. Ed., 52, 240.

28. Am. Ed., 52, 241.

29. Am. Ed., 52, 242.

30. Am. Ed., 52, 235ff.

then arise and preach about the need to confess sins and cite many examples of women who are eternally damned and appeared after death and stated that they were damned because they had failed to confess something. Thus the greatest of popish lies so surround us, that the stones might well tremble and sweat.”

Women, writes Luther, “are by nature faint-hearted and bashful,” and these mendicant confessors prey on them. In their sermons, women are terrorized into confession; yet their timidity and bashfulness may keep them from confession and so their guilt is compounded, and their consciences are “bound and condemned.” He who does this, Luther rages, “deserves to have not only his body but also his soul torn apart by all devils and pulverized into a hundred thousand pieces. What a horrible murder of souls is perpetrated throughout the world by these hellish traitors and popish liars! Oh weep whoever can weep, over such lamentable destruction of poor souls!”

Such poor women, he continues, wanting “to be pious and devout” seek help, but are taught not of faith in Christ (which would free them!) but “to do penance for their sins by works and satisfactions.” That leads to being swayed by various impulses. “They then begin to fast with bread and water, go on pilgrimages in bare feet, want to visit the saints. Some whip themselves until they bleed, some make gifts to the church, others donate a chalice. There is no end or limit to the various impulses that sway them. They fall on anything they hear as being good for the expiation of sins, and with utter seriousness they are anxious to emulate it and yet they cannot find peace. Meanwhile the spiritual, holy father sits tight, for he has trapped the poor animal and its value for him far surpasses the possession of so many cows that can be milked. Once the women are trapped, their men are soon caught too and must accommodate themselves to the extortions of secret confession.”³¹

Clearly Luther’s heart goes out to persons thus trapped, and that is exactly why he rages. Such entanglement is unnecessary. It is so easy to set such poor souls free!

The Monastic System

No system provokes quite the same rage in Luther as does the monastic system. Since the monastic experience was so crucial a period in his life this is not surprising.

In the same postil he examines especially the vow of chastity because it is precisely in this intimate area that the killing power of the system is painfully evident.³² The vow of chastity many “find impossible to keep, particularly in the virtual absence of the special natural gift for such a life.” Discharges in men and women, awake and asleep, are natural, Luther writes. Moses wrote extensively about them, and “there is probably a need for everyone, particularly the youth, to be informed and educated in this regard.” Furthermore, “where man and woman do not come together, nature will nevertheless, take its course and cannot be restrained, so that it would be better that men and women lay with one another, in accordance with God’s creation and nature’s demands . . . I ask: What advice will you give to a person who is unable to

31. Parallels come readily to mind: itinerant and electronic religion hucksters; over-zealous stewardship campaigns; the enormous influence of commercials and advertisements; ideological persuasion.

32. Am. Ed., 52, 250ff.

restrain himself? You say: Restrain him with prohibitions! [the “system”!] Very good, but one of three things is bound to happen: because that high gift is absent, men and women will get together wherever they can, as is now the case among the priests; or nature will relieve itself; or, where neither occurs, there will be a continual burning, an external sexual desire and a secret suffering, and you will have made a devil’s martyr of such a person . . . All who have chaste ears should, and I am sure, will pardon me, but if I am to give any advice at all I must get to grips with this sickness of souls, like a doctor who has to examine the excrement and private parts. Now God does not desire a forced, involuntary chastity. Indeed in his eyes, unless it is voluntary, it is no chastity at all, just as any other service we offer God must be voluntary, if he is to accept it. What do you achieve if you keep such a poor person all his life in unchaste chastity so that without ceasing he sins in his heart against his vows? Might it not perhaps be better if the man sometimes had a girl in his room, and the girl a boy? Some teach that it is enough if a person is willing to take upon himself the vows of chastity and to enter upon such a life and that it will stand him in good stead if later he becomes unwilling; in view of his voluntary entry into that life, this will not harm him. O you deceivers and blind leaders of the blind! You judge service to God according to works and not according to the spirit! Everything that is done unwillingly is done in vain and it were better to leave it. For it may well happen that men and women who come together have less sexual passion and desire than such a single man and single woman. But the greater the desire, the greater the sin of unchastity. So there is no help or advice for these three kinds of people. The pope lets them manage as best they can with their discharges, their flaming sexual desires, their sufferings, so that in my opinion, they are the children who were sacrificed and burnt as an offering to the fiery idol Moloch among the people of Israel.”

The monastic rule has thus turned things topsy-turvy, “the chaste are the unchaste”; God’s commandment “is subject to the pope’s authority;” and so poor souls who have not the “high gift” of celibacy are unconscionably tormented. The deep cruelty of the monastic system is clearly seen in the vow of chastity, because it is the only vow “they insist is absolute and irremissible; yet of all vows it surely ought to be the most flexible and remissible . . . Is this not a horrible perversity? The evil one has done so, that he might more powerfully keep souls in the bondage of unchastity and catch them where they are weakest and easily held. He knew very well that the other vows could be more easily observed. That is why he did not insist on them, but concentrated entirely on this impossible one, in order to establish his tyranny more securely. O Lord God, behold the deception and tomfoolery with which he ensnares those who are in holy orders!”³³

The Sacramental System

A third system to whose entangling and crushing power Luther is sensitive is that of the “Herodian” worship. Herod put on a front of great piety when the magi came, he consulted the scriptures, and he instructed the magi to return and tell him where the child was so that he too could go to worship him. Luther accuses the medieval sacramental system of similarly deluding devout souls and exploiting them.

Among the “Herodists,” he writes, “there you see many different religious founda-

33. Am. Ed., 52, 270.

tions and orders and monasteries, none of which has anything in common with the other. The one has a large, the other a small tonsure; the one wears grey, the other black, the other white, the other woolen, the other linen, the other coarse hairy clothes; the one prays on certain days and at certain times, the other on other days and at other times; the one eats meat, the other fish; the one is a Carthusian, the other a Franciscan; the one observes one kind of ceremonies, the other another; the one prays on a stool at Rome, the other on a bench at Jerusalem; the one celebrates mass this way, the other in another way; the one is bound to this monastery, the other to another; the one bawls in this choir, the other in another, and like swarms of bees they fill the churches with the hum of their mumbling. They also observe the celibate life and are subject to manifold disciplines. Who can list all the innumerable, sectional, particular, sectarian parts? Now this worship has grown beyond measure and has given birth to an immoderation that is even greater. There is no limit or moderation to the churches, chapels, monasteries, building of altars, founding of masses and vigils, establishing of hours, vestments for mass, choir caps, chalices, monstrances, silver images and precious stones, candlesticks, candles, tapers, incense, memorial tablets, casting of bells—what an ocean, what a forest of such things we have here! All this fully absorbs the religious fervor of the laity; they give dues, money and possessions, and so worship of God is increased and the ministers of God are cared for, as the pope states it in his sacred decrees.”³⁴

Herodian worship is superbly regulated; it offers a fine show. But it seduces and “daily leads astray many saintly and pious people”—like the magi who believed Herod’s lies. “The common people are unable to withstand [the temptation to depart from true worship] unless valiant bishops and preachers take their stand and rightly proclaim true worship, hold the people to the pure word of God, and do away with false worship . . . Such preaching is a matter of life and death and will not be tolerated by Herod, the pope, and the holy clergy. It damages their purse too much and promotes the salvation of too many souls which is more than the devil, their teacher, will suffer.”³⁵

What outrages Luther most of all is the way in which the sacramental system so subtly entangles devout and well-meaning Christians. They want to worship sincerely, they hunger for God, they are looking for guides, they are eager to be fed; yet “the forest of things we have” only put such folk on an endless and costly treadmill.

THE GOSPEL OF FREEDOM

Luther’s fulminations, then, arise out of his perceptive and sensitive awareness of how the various systems of the medieval church enmesh poor souls.³⁶ His raging

34. Am. Ed., 52, 247.

35. Am. Ed., 52, 249f.

36. Another would be the authority system of the church over-riding parental responsibility (the Fourth Commandment) in matters of (1) monasteries receiving sons and daughters who enter against their parents’ wishes, and (2) the church’s honoring of betrothals made against or without the father’s will (Am. Ed., 52, 216-220). Still another, and an exceedingly fascinating system, is the occult. Luther deals extensively with medieval superstition, witchcraft, astrology, etc. in the Festival of the Epiphany postil, prompted, of course, by the text’s account of the magi, the star, and the warning dream (Am. Ed., 52, 159ff, 182, etc.).

becomes vehement and urgent because, on the basis of the gospel, it is so simple to set people free! The gospel of Christ sets people free!

That poor woman caught in the penitential system is unnecessarily tortured. How simple to restore her. "Where the true royal road to freedom is preached, they will say, Dear women, if anyone among you is burdened by sin, let her confess it, if she so desires. But whether she confesses or not, let her have the firm faith that Christ forgives her sins, and let her secretly confess to him with a full and hearty trust in his grace which he has promised to all who seek it and do not doubt it, and so her sins are most certainly forgiven. Let her thereafter avoid such sins and practice good works towards her neighbors who are in need of them; let her invite the poor, wash their feet, and humbly serve them. Behold, that would be the right way to restore a sinful woman, and all of it would be done with joy and good will, without burdening the conscience, and so would be well pleasing in the sight of God." Instead, she is launched into a vicious circle of "vigils, masses, foundations . . . recitations of the Psalter or of the rosary, cult of the saints, celebration of holy days . . . fasting, pilgrimages, and all the other foolishness without number."³⁷

Those caught by vows in the monastic system can also be freed. Parents whose child has entered a monastery without their permission, and who fear for their child, may, on the authority of the Fourth Commandment, "take courage and remove your child from that monastery, out of habit, out of tonsure, and out of whatever else is worn. Do not be concerned even if a hundred thousand vows were made and all bishops gathered to give their blessing. God entrusted your child to you and will call you to account if you allow your child to be destroyed when you might have given help and good advice."³⁸ In other cases, the First Commandment takes precedence over all others; any vow conflicting with that Commandment is automatically negated. With respect to chastity, which is exalted by the monastic system and a profound cruelty especially to youth and those who have not the high gift for it, Luther counsels: "Dear boy, do not be at all ashamed that you desire a girl, or that a girl longs for a boy, but see to it that it leads to marriage, and not fornication. Then there is nothing disgraceful about it—as little as eating and drinking is a disgrace. Celibacy is supposed to be a virtue, but it is a veritable miracle of God, just as if a person did not eat or drink. It is beyond the capacity of a healthy boy, not to mention the incapability of sinful and depraved human nature. There are not many virgins to whom God granted a long life; rather hurriedly he whisked them out of this world, like Cecilia, Agnes, Lucia, Agatha, and others like them. I know full well how noble the treasure is, but also how difficult it is to preserve for any length of time . . . O Lord God, I believe that unchastity would not have become so prevalent and spread in such a terrible way, if it had not been for this rule and vow of chastity. What a Sodom and Gomorrah the devil has created through these rules and vows! How vulgar has he made this odd chastity, causing unspeakable anguish. No brothel stimulant is as dangerous as these rules and vows invented by the devil."³⁹

Youth who entered orders "before they felt the stirrings of flesh and blood . . . should be immediately released, if they so desire. Their vow after all is useless . . .

37. Am. Ed., 52, 237.

38. Am. Ed., 52, 217.

39. Am. Ed., 52, 273.

Consecration is valueless in this case, nor does it matter whether he is a priest, a deacon, or has entered some other holy order. Those consecrations are frauds and have no validity in the eyes of God.”⁴⁰

Likewise the endless rounds of the sacramental system need to be cut through, and an understanding of true worship will do that for all those souls spinning around in it. True worship is “that you know God, honor and love him with all your heart, place all your trust and reliance on him and never doubt his goodness, in life or in death, in sin or in well-doing, as the First Commandment teaches. Such worship we can attain to only through the merits and blood of Christ who has purchased such a heart for us and gives it to us when we hear his word and believe.”⁴¹

PASTORAL CARE: PREACHING AS TEACHING AND EXHORTATION

Running through Luther’s fulminations is an enormous human and pastoral concern for the “poor souls” caught in one or more of the systems within the total web of the medieval church. He cannot stand by and see them crushed, exploited, and badgered when it is so simple to set them free! “Whoever is silent about all this,” he fumes with reference to women caught in the penitential system, “and does not risk body and soul to expose it, is not a true Christian, nor does he love his neighbor’s salvation as his own. If only I could be more moderate in my attacks on them. But they set the town on fire and then tell me not to shout ‘Fire, fire’ or extinguish the blaze.”⁴²

It is because of this concern that Luther adopts “teaching and exhortation” as his concept of preaching. For one thing, those caught in a system most often do not realize how captive they are, how they are not helped toward but kept from the truth. “The poor people are always taken captive by show and pretense and are hindered and kept back from attaining the truth. It is the same with these magi in Jerusalem. They are kept back by Herod, who pretends to be searching the Scriptures. The spiritual pomp in our time achieves no more than that it hinders people from coming to faith and truth, because the outward appearance is so fine, and it is so very much like service of God.”⁴³ Therefore thorough and careful teaching is mandatory; the common people must have their captivity revealed.

Furthermore, those caught in a system need help. It is precisely the helplessness of

40. Am. Ed., 52, 273. Luther is very conscious that his detractors may accuse him and others of being unable to bear “the burden of the cowl,” saying, “All he wants is a woman! Let them heap their slander and mischief upon me, those chaste hearts and great saints. Let them keep their hearts of iron and stone, let them puff themselves up, as long as they do not deny that you are human, a person of flesh and blood. For the rest let God judge between these angelic, staunch heroes and you, a sick and despised sinner! I should like to think that I have reached a point in life where by the grace of God I will remain as I am, although I am not yet over the hill and dare not compare myself with those chaste hearts. Indeed it would be a pity if I did, and I pray that God in his mercy may save me from that. For if you knew them as they really are, those men who pretend such great chastity and make such a public show of their self-discipline . . . then you would consider that their highly praised celibacy was not even worth a prostitute wiping her shoes on it” (Am. Ed., 52, 272f.).

41. Am. Ed., 52, 245.

42. Am. Ed., 52, 238.

43. Am. Ed., 52, 239.

poor souls that wrings not only a cry of rage but of anguish from Luther. "But some may ask what should those do who are in spiritual bondage and trapped in the erroneous worship of Herod in monasteries and religious foundations. I answer . . .," and he answers at length.⁴⁴ The preacher teaches.

But most of all, those entangled in systems need to be freed and realize their freedom. It is quite unnecessary and shameful for the youth to be entangled in unnatural vows; it is wrong that "free Christian schools became reformatories and monasteries, faith was transformed to works, and freedom was bound and destroyed by vows."⁴⁵ Luther does not naively advocate the termination of any of these systems, but the gospel reform of them (note how long he hesitated before he produced a liturgy, fearing that it would become a new worship system just as enslaving as the one it replaced). At base, the issue is righteousness. Those caught in a system (and that includes those who administer and enforce the system) tend inevitably to confuse "righteousness" with what the system requires. One is "right" when one lives within the system; deviance can be tolerated only within narrow limits. But this is not genuine righteousness; it is merely systemic righteousness, a doing of what the system requires, and has nothing to do with the *heart*. It is *works* righteousness. The most one can say of it is expressed by Jesus. "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty' (Lk. 17:10). St. Paul recognizes this in Phil. 3:6f., ". . . as to righteousness under the law [translate: system] I was blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

Genuine righteousness can never be gained systemically; it can only be given by and received from God. It is a matter of grace and faith. It is that righteousness "which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil. 3:9). This righteousness Luther experienced after so much fruitless anguish in the system of monasticism and the system of penance. The "rightness" of the systems just would not do before God; there, it showed up for what it was, "garbage" in Paul's words, "works" in Luther's. It satisfied the system (Luther was advanced in the monastic system) but it satisfied neither God nor Luther's conscience. And it did not liberate him from fear and guilt and death; indeed, a system ultimately condemns and kills because it is never satisfied ("once for all"), it never relents, it is always stern.

A potent example of the killing nature of a system may be seen in the movie *Gandhi*. Gandhi is called in to meet with the British rulers. The spectre of the massacre at Amritsar is fresh on their minds. But Gandhi shows that the massacre is not an aberration, not a regrettable excess. "What happened at Amritsar," he says evenly, "is merely the logical extension of the system [of British rule]." Behind his words lie the beatings he suffered while resisting the system of apartheid in South Africa, the beatings his followers are receiving in the course of their non-violent resistance activities, and the hidden but body- and soul-destroying exploitation being endured by the dye- and cloth-makers of countless Indian villages.

It is apparent in this movie that systemic righteousness is a righteousness of "law";

44. Am. Ed., 250ff.

45. Am. Ed., 52, 258.

it is “works” righteousness. It cannot “save” anything but the system—and ultimately not even that.

This is the burden of Luther the preacher. “I am not at all concerned if the clergy will be angry, and not Christ, for I myself am bound to give advice to miserable consciences and souls, to help them, and to impart to everyone a little of that which God has given me. I do not want to burden myself with guilt for shirking my duty . . .”⁴⁶ So he teaches and exhorts.

The exhortation too is necessary, because the poor souls need encouragement and reminder. There is the ever-present danger of falling back into the entanglements of systems. God “would and should give to us all things, even as he works in us all things. Indeed, he wills that we should expect this of him. But the doctrines of men impel us to anticipate him in every work; we desire to seize the initiative and seek God; he may come later and watch us.”⁴⁷ So the system subverts us again and again,⁴⁸ and preachers must continue teaching and exhortation.

CONCLUSIONS

(1) “Systems” can be a helpful way to understand what is meant by “law” both in St. Paul and in theology. The word is used like that in the New English Bible translation of Galatians 2:18. “No, if I start building up again a system which I have pulled down, then it is that I show myself up as a transgressor (of the law).” “Law” is the righteousness or rightness of a system, whether that system is religious, theological, political, economic, moral, legal, educational or any other. I have found it very instructive to read Galatians in this way. “O senseless Galatians, who has bewitched you . . .?” cries Paul in his own fulmination (3:1).

(2) Luther’s own experience of being caught in the medieval ecclesiastical systems (and, as in the Peasants’ War, in medieval political and economic systems), and his exhilarating experience of breaking free from them into the freedom of Christ, afforded him a “tool” with which to get at those systems and to liberate the poor souls enmeshed in them. That “tool” was “law and gospel.” “Law” signified those policies and procedures and structures which we build up in order to get done things that need to be done (even parish registers and constitutions!); then, inevitably we are caught in our own constructions, and doomed to our own processes. “Gospel” signifies the freedom God intended and intends always to give us, which is the status of his children. It is, at its most profound and ultimate levels, a freedom possible only by dying to the ultimate demands of the system. If this is so, then “law” and “gospel”

46. Am. Ed., 52, 272 (emphasis added).

47. Am. Ed., 52, 283.

48. Luther offers three ways to avoid the “doctrines of men” or, in our terms, the “systems”: (1) Do them freely and as freely do them not: “But that is a deep insight which few people have and which can be gained only through God’s Spirit in the heart . . .;” (2) Avoid them both in conscience and in deed: “This way is most necessary and best for the sake of the weak consciences in order to lead them out of their narrow confines and to make them as perfect and free as those strong people of the first group;” (3) Avoid them in deed but not in conscience, i.e., disregard them and yet believe it is wrong to disregard them: “Unfortunately, such a conscience can be found in the average man everywhere . . . This group needs a good instruction in the freedom of the Christian faith and in putting aside the false conscience” (Am. Ed., 52, 284ff.).

are much more the dynamic polarities of life than substantive entities or contents. It seems significant that in all his fulminations, teachings and exhortations Luther draws as much upon the commandments and especially the First Commandment (e.g., in describing what is true worship) as upon St. Paul.

This is not to say that all of our procedures and structures and processes are evil or innately sinful, and should best be abolished forthwith. Systems are needed to regulate and make mutually protective and beneficial the societal life of people. Even churches cannot get on without systems! Luther's fulminations make plain the care with which systems must be handled and administered, always with an eye to pastoral care so that persons, and not the system, are served and humanized.

(3) One may also genuinely reappropriate teaching as a large and legitimate part of preaching, especially when the need for the freeing of "poor souls" becomes apparent in the shifting ecclesiastical and social scene. It may well be that these are such times. The present economic concerns expressed by the Canadian Roman Catholic bishops, the broad consensus on the need to halt the nuclear arms build-up, and the growing recognition of the exploitative role we play in the North over against the earth, the environment, and the Native peoples, all suggest that we are caught in huge systems which may have served us well but are now tending massively toward their ineluctable denouement.

(4) One should be instructed in the true meaning of exhortation. Generally speaking, we have used exhortation in two ways: (1) to convict people of their sinfulness, and (2) urge them to "shape up." Both ways are essentially captivating rather than liberating; that is, both put us "under the gun." Luther's sense of exhortation seems to have little to do with convicting of sin (except of those in charge of the systems, the "Herodists") and everything to do with the encouragement toward freedom in Christ.

One such exhortation in conclusion, expressed very near the end of his postil for the Festival of the Epiphany. "That is the final conclusion, that we should avoid the doctrines of men and not again be ensnared by them once we have been freed, just as these magi who once they were rid of Herod did not again return to him. For the sake of the salvation of our souls (and lest we fall into the disfavor of God), I therefore declare that we should avoid the laws and teachings of the pope and all papists, especially since we have recognized the pure, evangelical truth."⁴⁹

49. Am. Ed., 52, 283.