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LUTHER'S CONTINUING INFLUENCE

ON THEOLOGY

Egil Grislis

CREATIVE DIALOGUE WITH LUTHER

It has been observed that the study of Martin Luther has been directly influenced by the current trends of systematic theology. The history of Luther research closely parallels the main agenda of the serious theological discussion at large.¹ While it is possible thereby for a whole set of extraneous problems and questions to be forced on Luther, the dialogue is basically creative. Attempts to recast Luther into exclusively modern idiom can be forced but the results of such violence are always shallow; there can be no genuine dialogue with the past where modernity calls all the shots! When Luther's integrity and theological worth are respected, it is perfectly appropriate to direct very modern questions to Luther; Luther's creative influence need not be limited to what he accomplished during his lifetime.

A marvellous resiliency has been discovered by probing Luther in depth. Whenever systematic theology has been brave and wise enough to try, a conversation with Luther has enriched and stimulated it immensely.² For example, the rise of Neo-Orthodoxy witnessed many creative discussions with Luther the Bible scholar.³ Later, with the increasing Protestant and Roman

1. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970); Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Interpreters of Luther: Essays in Honor of Wilhelm Pauck* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).
2. Here numerous theologians could be listed; I shall mention two of my favourites: Paul Althaus and Gerhard Ebeling.
3. Heinz Bluhm, *Martin Luther: Creative Translator* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965); Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969); Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zur Luthers Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962); Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg, 1961); H. Ostergaard-Nielsen, *Scriptura sacra et viva vox: Eine Lutherstudie* (Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser, 1957); James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to Young Luther* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1969); Peter G. Sandstrom, *Luther's Sense of Himself as an Interpreter of the Word to the World* (Amherst, Mass.: Amherst College, 1961); A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969).

Catholic rapprochement leading up to Vatican II, Luther's medieval roots were explored in detail and some depth.⁴ Subsequently, after the rebellious sixties, it was quite relevant to observe how Luther related to the problems of conflict and change.⁵ Finally, the more recent attention to mysticism has evoked concern for Luther's spirituality.⁶ Although such approaches to Luther took place because of the larger context of contemporary theological thought, they nevertheless did occasion a creative encounter with Luther. Wise and seasoned enrichment from Luther's theology supplied a solid foundation for many a modern and one-sided question. Furthermore, in the encounter of contemporary theology with Luther, hermeneutical sophistication was increased.⁷

Luther scholarship at its best has never been an antiquarian project. It will continue in the future as Luther's unequalled fecundity continues to be appreciated. His creative contributions to the modern world far outweigh the occasional misinterpretations of him which result because he is misunderstood in the dim light provided by some of the contemporary would-be prophets. Let us not therefore try anxiously to protect Luther from the modern world by directing Luther research away from difficult current issues. Where such "protection" was tried in the past, it was sterile. It suffered the fate of any scholarship which withdraws from the real world -- the fate of self-destructing as it chokes to death on its own dust.

Admittedly, openness to contemporary issues does mean an acceptance of a considerable amount of uncertainty about the future agenda for the study of Luther. But this is not to be regretted. Not even the Church of Jesus Christ knows the full force of its future opponents and defenders. A trust in grace involves a risk which cannot be removed. Yet he who waits for grace in the company of Martin Luther will find sufficient support to enable him not to be afraid to open his eyes to the very latest developments in contemporary theology, be they wise or thoroughly wicked.

INFLUENCE FROM LUTHER'S METHODOLOGY

Luther study is influenced by some of the major methodological decisions made by Martin Luther himself. Three major positions of Luther, in particular, must

4. Gottfried Edel, *Das Gemeinkatholische mittelalterlich Erbe beim jungen Luther* (Marburg: Verlag Dr. R.F. Edel, 1962); Leif Grane, *Contra Gabrielem: Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Gabriel Biel in der Disputatio Contra Scholasticam Theologiam 1517* (Gyldendal, 1962); Bengt Hoeggund, *Theologie und Philosophie bei Luther und in der occamistischen Tradition* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1955); Steven E. Ozment, ed., *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels, Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle in Luther's Reformation* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1964).
5. Robert N. Crossley, *Luther and the Peasants' War: Luther's Actions and Reactions* (N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1974); Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford U.P., 1975); Harry Loewen, *Luther and the Radicals* (Waterloo: Wilfried Laurier Univ. Publications, 1974); Lloyd B. Volkmar, *Luther's Response to Violence: Why the Reformer Hurlled His 'No!' Against the Peasants* (N.Y.: Vantage Press, 1974).
6. Ivar Asheim, ed., *The Church, Mysticism, Sanctification and the Natural in Luther's Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967); Karl-Heinz zur Muehlen, *Nos extra nos: Luther's Theologie zwischen Mystik und Scholastik* (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1972); Bengt R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ. House, 1976).
7. E.g., Ruediger Lorenz, *Die unvollendete Befreiung vom Nominalismus: Martin Luther und die Grenzen hermeneutischer Theologie bei Gerhard Ebeling* (Guetersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1973).

engage our attention as we seek to understand the theology of Luther on its march toward the future.

First, Luther thought of himself as an opponent of philosophy.⁸ This conviction was central and powerful in Luther. He rejected reasoning with his reason, i.e., he astutely and precisely delineated the theological understanding and role of reason, placing reason within a creative dialectic of sin and grace.⁹ In this way Luther consciously limited his theology to a biblical theology as contrasted with late Nominalism, which was a predominantly philosophical theology. In doing so, however, Luther himself was not always free from the influence of Nominalism.¹⁰

It must be seen as a real tragedy that this development of late medieval thought was the only philosophical theology with which Luther was intimately acquainted. He really did not know or understand St. Thomas Aquinas; he viewed St. Thomas as an inferior and irreconcilable opponent, a misapprehension which contemporary scholarship has had to revise.¹¹ Also, with the possible exception of existentialism, Luther did not anticipate any of the major developments in modern philosophy. Thus, whether through circumstances or by default, Luther stood in opposition to philosophy.

There have been attempts to interpret Luther with the help of Aristotelian categories. More recently, Luther has been looked at from the point of view of process thought. But the result has always been a forced construct which has not lasted very long. There simply is no *philosophia perennis* that can be designated as authentically Lutheran. This observation is made not to scorn philosophy but to underscore the fact that the foundation of Luther's theology is the Bible. Lutherans must debate how best to interpret this Bible. Yet, in dependence on Luther they do not dispute the fact that revelation, recorded in the Scriptures, provides the content and modality for theological thinking and proclamation.

Is Luther's programme of dephilosophising theology then an asset or a liability? It can be either -- depending on how it is used. The faithful adherence to the categories of biblical theology assures an essential clarity within the proclamation of the Church. By contrast, wherever theology is built within a philosophical framework, the multiplication of various philosophies leads to an ever increasing pluralism. Karl Rahner, S.J.,¹² seriously holds that at the present time one

8. Wilhelm Link, *Das Ringen Luthers um die Freiheit der Theologie von der Philosophie* (Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser, 1955).

9. Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1962).

10. J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1954); Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, 2 vols. (N.Y.: Herder & Herder, 1968). A more positive evaluation has been suggested by Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1963).

11. Ulrich Kuehn & Otto H. Pesch, O.P., *Rechtfertigung im Gespraech zwischen Thomas und Luther* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1967); Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (N.Y.: Newman & Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969); Otto Hermann Pesch, O.P., *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquina: Versuch eines systematisch-theologischen Dialogs* (Mainz: Matthias Gruenewald, 1967); Stephanus Pfuertner, O.P., *Luther and Aquinas on Salvation*, with an introd. by Jaroslav Pelikan (N.Y.: Sheed and Ward, 1964); Hans Vorster, *Das Freiheitsverstaendnis bei Thomas von Aquin und Martin Luther* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965).

12. Karl Rahner, S.J., *Theological Investigations*, vols. XI-XIV (N.Y.: Seabury Press, 1974-76).

theologian can no longer fully understand another theologian who is equally sincere and equally Catholic but who has worked with a different philosophical system. In such a situation, mutual trust and a deep sense of personal responsibility needs to replace the former mutual understanding of the common theological task. Such essential pluralism, which Rahner sees at the very core of the faith of the Roman Catholic Church of the future, should be avoidable in a theology which takes its cue from Luther -- a theology which has appropriated the unifying structures of biblical theology. Luther's programme of dephilosophising makes it possible to relegate all other supportive skills and interdisciplinary resources -- be they philosophy, history, psychology or whatever -- to a subordinate secondary level. While pluralism may be inevitable in all modern fields of study, with Luther it is possible to note the exception offered by revelation and daily to note its centripetal rather than centrifugal dynamic.

But there are also certain shortcomings in Luther's programme of dephilosophising. It has enabled Lutherans to assail one another and to break up their fellowship even from within a *sola Scriptura* perspective. It is cold comfort to say that in the midst of bitter disagreement the Lutherans agree that the Word of God is still the final norm for truth! What is the value of a norm in principle which cannot be agreed upon in practice?! Even more damaging has been the occasional but emphatic extension of the programme of dephilosophising beyond the boundaries of theology. There Lutherans have turned with suspicion against all sophisticated appreciation of culture, and boorishly exulted ignorance as if it were a virtue.

Rather than turn his followers into despisers of this or that dimension of culture, the precedent of Luther should turn them into free men and women who, while adhering to the scriptural centre of their faith, are at liberty to think in the most cogent way open to them. In our generation such an understanding of Luther is widely in vogue. Students of Luther's theology are increasingly turning their attention to the problems of contemporary theology and culture, while they are also committed to the affirmation of the final authority of the Bible. The vigor of this outlook suggests that it shall be present for some time to come.

Second, from within Luther's thought there resounds the affirmation of the significance of the Church.¹³ To acknowledge the importance of the ecclesial dimension of Luther's theology is not to claim that his view of the Church was either thorough or consistent. Yet, the powerful historical fact remains that from within the Reformation there emerged not merely a movement of protest or a sentiment of criticism, but a very distinctive Church. This occurred not as a mere accidental by-product to a grand struggle, but as a conscious consequence of Luther's break with Rome. Here, too, Luther's thinking was not primarily philosophical, institutional or sociological, but -- clearly biblical.

Luther believed that the Word of God, wherever it is authentically proclaimed, creatively establishes the Church. Thus the Church is never a human construct,

13. Ivar Asheim and Victor R. Gold, eds., *Episcopacy in the Lutheran Church? Studies in the Development and Definition of the Office of Church Leadership* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Spirit versus Structure: Luther and the Institutions of the Church* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1968); Karl Gerhard Streck, *Lehre und Kirche bei Luther* (Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser, 1963); Joseph Verduyseyne, S.J., *Fidelis Populus* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1968).

but a creation of Christ by grace through faith. As for the administrative structures of the Church, the doctrine of the ministry, even the interpretation of the meaning of the sacraments, Luther was prepared to state and to re-state, learning and teaching as he grew in grace.

There was also a development in Luther's grasp of ecumenicity.¹⁴ At times Luther's attitude toward his theological opponents in general -- and the Anabaptists in particular¹⁵ -- failed to exhibit a full loyalty to the Scriptures. But Luther did not claim to be perfect; in fact, he understood very well that even the best efforts would fail to reach absolute conformity with the will of God. Still, the main point remains and stands out as a powerful and significant landmark: The Church always emerges from an obedient response to the *sola Scriptura*, enabled by grace through faith! As such the Church is always dynamic and developing. To formulate the doctrine of the Church in this manner is to underscore that Luther's outlook was thoroughly Christocentric. The Church was present where Christ was present as Lord and Saviour.

The statements concerning the Jews and the Muslims which Luther made as a consequence of such an insight may at times appear to us intolerant or even ruthless. On strictly formulated Christological grounds Luther regarded Jews and Muslims as eternally lost. The theological problem does not lie in the fact that Luther made some embarrassingly angry statements against the Jews¹⁶ and the Muslims;¹⁷ they were a reflection of the narrow mindedness of his age, and not particularly characteristic of Luther alone.¹⁸ The real theological issue is not intolerance, but Christocentric exclusivism: Intolerance is amenable; exclusivism on the grounds of a clear principle is permanent.

To be sure, many wise Luther scholars have disagreed with Luther's position *vis-a-vis* other religions. And there have been good Lutheran churchmen who have also been noted experts in the field of the history of religions, e.g., Nathan Soderblom and Rudolf Otto. Still, the *sola Scriptura* thrust of Luther remains a powerful warning against seeking revelation outside the Bible. As such it has influenced the followers of Luther to a considerable degree. This may explain why the study of the world religions, so popular in our time, has not found an easy theological linkage with the theological heritage built on Luther.

For example, a scholarly but devout study like *Death and Eternal Life*,¹⁹ discusses Christian, scientific, and world-religion views on eternal life as if they

14. Hans-Werner Gensichen, *We Condemn: How Luther and 16th Century Lutheranism Condemned False Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967).

15. John S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

16. Johannes Brosseder, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden im Spiegel seiner Interpreten* (Muenchen: Max Hueber, 1972); Gordon Rupp, *Martin Luther: Hitler's Cause — or Cure? In Reply to Peter F. Wiener* (London: Lutterworth, 1945).

17. Egil Grislis, "Luther and the Turks," *The Muslim World*, LXIV, 3-4 (1974), 180-193, 275-291.

18. Joseph Lecler, S.J., *Toleration and the Reformation*, 2 vols. (N.Y.: Association Press, 1960).

19. John H. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1976).

were on the same level. When a Christian steeped in Luther reads such a book he is bound to register a protest that revelation is evaluated from the point of view of reasonableness and relevance. Since when does man have standards to judge the wisdom of God?!

Thirdly, Luther's methodological position that truth is more important than unity certainly flies in the face of much of the popular ecumenical sentiment. To such a situation one can respond with a measure of practical realism, learned from Luther: contemporary ecumenicity has offered high hopes, but brought a low yield. Beyond the establishment of mutual good-will and the calling of innumerable conferences, actual church mergers have been very few indeed. Much of Christian existence still takes place in the mode of being "separated brethren."²⁰

Where mergers have occurred without prior theological agreement, only perennial theological chaos and a hollow celebration of perpetual change in the name of Christian growth has been established. At the same time, where Lutherans have arrived at a sense of oneness in doctrine, they have not hesitated to think in terms of long-range commitments.

To state this does not overlook the needed sociological qualifications. The interpreters of Luther's theology are not necessarily followers of pure truth; they have also fallen prey to human sentiments, prejudices, and administrative lust for power. Still, Luther made a decisive contribution when he viewed revealed truth as the norm and regarded the subsequently established unity as a result -- never as means toward an uncertain end. Of course, Luther did not entirely create such insights. He reflected here his roman Catholic heritage with its conviction that truth as such is clear, that dogmas are essential, that heresy is despicable, and above all, that ambiguity is a vice -- certainly not a virtue!

With this decisive emphasis on the Bible, on Christ, and on the true Church, Luther established a powerful precedent for a far-reaching and lasting inflexibility. To those who appreciate Luther's thought, his contribution is seen as a very valuable support for Christian stalwartness, and hence an occasion of joyous praise.

His opponents may well see him as short-sighted and intolerant. Nevertheless, the contribution remains, i.e., the powerful insight that revelation in Scripture is a norm, and not a matter for negotiation.

Herein lies the great challenge to the followers of Luther: to proclaim and live this truth in sincere love. Indeed, when revelation is approached mechanically and unimaginatively, the authority of the Word of God lapses into mere authoritarianism. Such disciples of Luther hardly differ from other conservatives who seek to face the future with past methods and insights. Luther's own view of the Word of God as living, dynamic, and ever fresh, suggests a norm which can be

20. Robert Lee, *The Social Sources of Church Unity: An Interpretation of Unitive Forces and Movements in American Protestantism* (N.Y.: Abingdon, 1960); Paul M. Minus, Jr., *The Catholic Rediscovery of Protestantism: A History of Roman Catholic Ecumenical Pioneering*, Foreword by Avery Dulles, S.J. (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1976).

grasped only by growing in faith and love. As such, it continues to exercise a powerful appeal.

LUTHER'S PERCEPTION OF CENTRAL ISSUES

Luther's weightiest and most positive contribution to the later course of theology may be seen in his incisive selection of the most central theological issues for the agenda of faith and Christian life.

First, Luther had the insight and the courage to proclaim that authentic faith emerges only from within a personal wrestling with God.²¹ Mere believing was an inadequate substitute for a personal, daring, and risk-conscious commitment. The analysis of such characteristically central formulations as Law and Gospel, Wrath and Love, and *simul iustus et peccator*²² should never overlook the fact that these were Luther's own personally discovered but biblically received road-signs of the encounter with a living God; they were not just speculative constructs. "By living, indeed by dying and being damned, one becomes a theologian, not by thinking and reading and speculating." (W.A. 5,163, 28f.)²³

To be a theologian was never a matter of controlled experimentation with God, where the theologian could initiate and supervise the encounter. As Luther saw it, by the very definition of the situation of faith, the entire event must get out-of-hand! Of course, it should not be too surprising that Luther's account of such encounters with God, which he called tribulations (*Anfechtungen*), would subsequently attract theological and even psychological attention.²⁴ To watch a great man sway and stagger as he speaks of God is a strange and fascinating spectacle.

Luther's theological and psychological maturity, even greatness, consists in the steady courage not to hide his tribulations, but rather to reflect on their religious relevance. How does a man as sinner ever stand before God? If the justice of God is taken seriously, can His wrath be escaped? Before the absolute Law of God, who can remain upright? Instead of compromising either the majesty of God or downplaying the human degradation in sin, Luther carved out the account of the believer's route to salvation. Precisely in submitting to the just judgement of the Law and hence to the annihilating Wrath of God in faith, the believer comes to experience the love of God. Instead of damnation, which he accepts as deserved, he

21. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966); Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (N.Y.: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), especially ch. XXI "The Struggle for Faith."

22. Egil Grisli, "Luther's Understanding of the Wrath of God," *Journal of Religion*, 41 (1961), 277-292 and "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God," *McCormick Quarterly*, 21 (1967), 81-94; Kjell Ove Nilsson, *Simul: Das Miteinander von Goettlichem und Menschlichem in Luthers Theologie* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966).

23. Steven E. Ozment, p. 236.

24. Horst Beintker, *Die Ueberwindung der Anfechtung bei Luther* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1954); Paul Buehler, *Die Anfechtung bei Martin Luther* (Zuerich: Zwingli Verlag, 1942); Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1958); Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Psychohistory and Religion: The Case of Young Man Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

encounters salvation -- Gospel, Love, Jesus Christ, undeserved and freely bestowed!²⁵

This is not the appropriate occasion to debate at length whether Luther's own understanding of *sola gratia* was without powerful precedent in Catholic theology -- he thought so, while much of contemporary scholarship, myself included, is inclined to disagree.²⁶ Nevertheless, the epoch-making role of Luther's evangelical breakthrough remains: for himself and for his followers the individualistic and personal road to salvation is described with theological precision and unmistakable personal authenticity. For such a great witness there must be great gratitude.

Insofar as insight facilitates experience and experience in turn deepens insight, Luther's precedent continues to communicate meaning, thereby witnessing to the saving power of Jesus Christ. But does modern man really understand sin and the majesty of God and does he care about his own justification?²⁷ Obviously it is not wise to overstate the thirst of modern man for salvation; nor is it appropriate, however, to overlook that the sixteenth century also had problems with the *sola gratia* message! Not everyone in the sixteenth century became Lutheran, and even among the good followers of Luther an in-depth and precise understanding of justification was not all that commonplace.²⁸ This being so, the appreciation of Luther's doctrine of justification cannot be recorded on the grounds of popularity; profundity will have to suffice.

Second, Luther recorded his theological awareness with great personal intensity, witnessing that the Lord and Saviour²⁹ who is encountered in justification has a central and ongoing role in all Christian existence. Luther highlights this role most effectively through his interpretation of the Lord's Supper³⁰ and prayer.³¹ Even though Luther scholarship has not ordinarily

25. John R. Loesch, *Wrestling with Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1976); Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976); Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1953).
26. Hans Kueng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, Intro. by Karl Barth (N.Y.: Thomas Nelson, 1964); also cf. above, fn. 12; an older view is re-stated by Heiko A. Oberman, "The Tridentine Decree of Justification in the Light of Late Medieval Theology," in: Ernst Kaesemann et al., *Distinctive Protestant and Catholic Themes Reconsidered* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 28-54.
27. Lutheran World Federation, "Christ Today, 1963," *Messages of the Helsinki Assembly* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, n.d.).
28. Ernst W. Zeeden, *Die Entstehung der Konfessionen* (Muenchen-Wein: R. Oldenbourg, 1965).
29. Ulrich Asendorf, *Gekreuzigt und Auferstanden: Luthers Herausforderung an die moderne Christologie* (Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1971); Ian D. Kingston Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1970).
30. Paul C. Empie and James I. McCord, *Marburg Revisited: A Re-examination of Lutheran and Reformed Traditions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966); Hartmut Hilgenfeld, *Mittelalterlich-traditionelle Elemente in Luthers Abendmahlsschriften* (Zuerich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971); Albrecht Peters, *Realpraesenz: Luthers Zeugnis von Christi Genenwart im Abendmahl* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1960); Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959); Carl F. Wisloff, *The Gift of Communion: Luther's Controversy with Rome on Eucharistic Sacrifice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964).
31. John Peter Pelkonen, *Martin Luther's Theology of Prayer, Its Systematic Structure and Its Significance for Michael Agricola, the Reformer of Finland* (Duke Univ. Ph. D. diss. supervised by Egil Grisliis, 1971);

focussed attention on these doctrines together, it is appropriate that they be so viewed. Through his distinctive shift in emphasis from an Augustinian to a realist vocabulary, Luther's perspective retains a powerful and common thrust: the gift of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the eucharist is genuine! Real presence is the central meaning of the Lord's Supper.

Luther's view of the real presence is not without problems. The scriptural language, when employed with faithful vigor, incurred the charge of cannibalism. The theological explanation, making use of traditional scholastic concepts (even though doing it in a new way), provoked the accusation of offering a merely reformulated Catholic dogma.

Despite his earlier use of Augustinian and hence spiritualizing categories, the mature Luther refused to adopt a theory of a merely spiritual presence of Christ, such as eventually emerged in Reformed and Anglican circles. Whether or not Luther fully explained the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, Luther definitely accomplished a celebration of it. And so it has continued; Luther's followers are best known for their devotion to the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. To be sure, Luther's followers over the centuries have made several attempts to improve on Luther's formulation of the eucharistic doctrine. Perhaps such attempts will continue. However, the ongoing impact has been best sustained through the centuries in thoughtful loyalty to Luther's formulation of the real presence, which organizes scriptural concepts into a meaningful summary without at the same time presuming to dissect the eucharistic event.

In a way, the same holds true of the exposition the doctrine of prayer. Since the believer addresses himself to God in prayer, the finite self cannot fully account for the encounter with the Infinite. The only cogent and accountable way through this experience is possible with the assistance of scriptural guidelines. Here we may note that Luther's own intensity and humility in the act of prayer reflects the importance he ascribed to the faithful response to God. Any attentive reader of Luther soon realizes that Luther prayed far more often than he formally spoke of prayer. He lived in the presence of God. It is this total portrait of Luther -- his teaching interpreted with the assistance of his example -- that continues to draw attention and inspire discipleship.

Finally I should note that Luther, though a man of faith, was also a political realist.³² The dialectic of Law and Gospel had freed Luther from the impossible demands of idealism as well as from the pharisaic blindness to the will of God. Precisely because man could in no way initiate the receiving of grace and because grace was a free and undeserved gift, Luther felt free to serve God within realistically reachable limits. In other words, Luther had come to recognize that

Gunner Wertelius, *Oratio Continua: Das Verhaeltnis zwischen Glaube und Gebet in der Theologie Martin Luthers* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1970).

32. William H. Lazareth, ed., *The Left Hand of God: Essays in Discipleship and Patriotism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); Heinz-Horst Schrey, *Reich Gottes und Welt: Die Lehre Luthers von den zwei Reichen* (Wege der Forschung, 107 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969)); Guenther Wolf, ed., *Luther und die Obrigkeit* (Wege der Forschung, 85 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972).

most of our choices are not between good and evil, but between the lesser and the greater evil. Luther's faithfulness and concern for a responsible obedience to God did not freeze him into inactivity; he was prepared to "sin boldly," i.e., to do his best under circumstances which were not ideal. In this way Luther found a creative middle way between being an idealist and a cynic, thereby being freed for Christian activism in the world. The fear of some sin would not keep him from doing a partially virtuous act. Conversely, in the midst of spiritual success, Luther would not smugly congratulate himself; he knew that the good which had been accomplished was, as always, by grace alone.

Irenaeus once observed that it was not necessary to drink the entire ocean in order to know how it tasted. Perhaps the brief sampling of some of the major themes of Luther's theology may suffice for the claim that past vitality is a good sign for theological longevity. In an increasingly secular age where faith is daily assailed, it is assuring to look at the great spiritual truths which have lasted through the centuries and have remained intact. Unbelief may well claim that everything will eventually become outdated. Luther maintained that truth does not turn into dust, and the durability of his own major insights stands as a humble witness to the appropriateness of this conviction.



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