

# LUTHER'S WORKS

VOLUME 22

SERMONS ON THE GOSPEL  
OF ST. JOHN

Chapters 1—4

*Edited by*

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this volume are translated from Luther's writings or from Luther's German Bible.

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## *General Introduction*

THE first editions of Luther's collected works appeared in the sixteenth century, and so did the first efforts to make him "speak English." In America serious attempts in these directions were made for the first time in the nineteenth century. The Saint Louis edition of Luther was the first endeavor on American soil to publish a collected edition of his works, and the Henkel Press in Newmarket, Virginia, was the first to publish some of Luther's writings in an English translation. During the first decade of the twentieth century, J. N. Lenker produced translations of Luther's sermons and commentaries in thirteen volumes. A few years later the first of the six volumes in the Philadelphia (or Holman) edition of the *Works of Martin Luther* appeared. Miscellaneous other works were published at one time or another. But a growing recognition of the need for more of Luther's works in English has resulted in this American edition of Luther's works.

The edition is intended primarily for the reader whose knowledge of late medieval Latin and sixteenth-century German is too small to permit him to work with Luther in the original languages. Those who can, will continue to read Luther in his original words as these have been assembled in the monumental Weimar edition (*D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*; Weimar, 1883 ff.). Its texts and helps have formed a basis for this edition, though in certain places we have felt constrained to depart from its readings and findings. We have tried throughout to translate Luther as he thought translating should be done. That is, we have striven for faithfulness on the basis of the best lexicographical materials available. But where literal accuracy and clarity have conflicted, it is clarity that we have preferred, so that sometimes paraphrase seemed more faithful than literal fidelity. We have proceeded in a similar way in the matter of Bible versions, translating Luther's translations. Where this could be done by the use of an existing English version — King James, Douay, or Revised Standard — we have done so. Where

it could not, we have supplied our own. To indicate this in each specific instance would have been pedantic; to adopt a uniform procedure would have been artificial – especially in view of Luther's own inconsistency in this regard. In each volume the translator will be responsible primarily for matters of text and language, while the responsibility of the editor will extend principally to the historical and theological matters reflected in the introductions and notes.

Although the edition as planned will include fifty-five volumes, Luther's writings are not being translated in their entirety. Nor should they be. As he was the first to insist, much of what he wrote and said was not that important. Thus the edition is a selection of works that have proved their importance for the faith, life, and history of the Christian Church. The first thirty volumes contain Luther's expositions of various Biblical books, while the remaining volumes include what are usually called his "Reformation writings" and other occasional pieces. The final volume of the set will be an index volume; in addition to an index of quotations, proper names, and topics, and a list of corrections and changes, it will contain a glossary of many of the technical terms that recur in Luther's works and that cannot be defined each time they appear. Obviously Luther cannot be forced into any neat set of rubrics. He can provide his reader with bits of autobiography or with political observations as he expounds a psalm, and he can speak tenderly about the meaning of the faith in the midst of polemics against his opponents. It is the hope of publishers, editors, and translators that through this edition the message of Luther's faith will speak more clearly to the modern church.

J. P.  
H. L.

## *Introduction to Volume 22*

WITH the appearance of this volume we begin the publication in English of Luther's exposition of St. John. Although he is usually regarded as primarily an expositor of St. Paul's epistles, Luther valued the Fourth Gospel most highly and devoted himself to the interpretation of it throughout his career.

Indeed, it seems to have been on St. John that the earliest sermon of Luther's we possess was based. It was a Christmas sermon in Latin, preached to his fellow Augustinians in 1514 on the opening words of John's Gospel. He turned repeatedly to St. John in his sermons, disputations, commentaries, letters, treatises, and table talk. This Gospel belonged to his "inner canon," and in the *German Mass* of 1526 he suggested that the preaching service on Saturdays be devoted to sermons on St. John's Gospel (cf. p. 5, note 1). In 1537 Luther received the opportunity to follow through on this suggestion himself. The parish pastor in Wittenberg, Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), was called away, as he had been before (cf. *Luther's Works*, 21, Introduction, p. xix). And, as before, Luther substituted for him in the pulpit. To this substitution we owe the present exposition of St. John.

This time it was to Denmark that Bugenhagen went as the reformer of church life. On May 16, 1537, Elector John Frederick wrote to Bugenhagen, granting him permission to accept the invitation of the Danish king, Christian III, but adding that Bugenhagen was not to be gone later than October 16 of the same year. "If you are willing to undertake such a trip," the elector wrote, "you will want to see to it that the parish and the pastoral care in Wittenberg are taken care of." Bugenhagen accepted the invitation of the king, and on July 5, 1537, he landed in Denmark. The parish and the pastoral care in Wittenberg were taken care of, largely through Luther's efforts.

And an effort it was, because Luther had been gravely ill during February and March of that year, so ill that his friends and his enemies had expected him to die. By midsummer, however, his convalescence had progressed sufficiently for him to undertake his duties in the class-

room and to add to those duties the assumption of responsibility in the pulpit: these sermons on John on Saturdays, and a series on Matt. 18–24 on Wednesdays, later changed to Sundays. As he wrote to Bugenhagen on July 5, 1537: "I have begun to preach and lecture once more; in fact, yesterday I preached in your place. . . . Christ lives; and we are Christs — with and without the apostrophe (*Christi sumus in nominativo et genitivo*)." The sermon to which he refers is the first on St. Matthew; but two days after this letter, on July 7, 1537, he began the series on St. John. It was also at this time, if Peter Meinhold's chronology is accurate, that Luther resumed his exposition of Genesis (cf. Vol. 1).

As Luther could have expected on the basis of his earlier experience with Bugenhagen's trips abroad, the amount of time originally allotted for the work in Denmark did not suffice. Shortly before the time was up, the elector wrote to Spalatin under date of September 4, 1537: "Luther is preaching and lecturing every week." But October 16 came and went, and still Bugenhagen was in Copenhagen. On November 21, 1537, Bugenhagen wrote to Christian: "I am troubled more than a little by the fact that I have received no letters or reports from Germany and no reply from my lord, the Elector of Saxony." A month later, on December 28, he wrote to Christian: "The visitation is progressing successfully. God be eternally praised for His grace, I do not regret my trip." Luther, however, was apparently beginning to regret it. In a letter that seems to have been written on December 7, 1537, he complained: "I am so overloaded with tasks and so troubled with sicknesses that I have often been compelled, and still am, to leave my duties unperformed." On April 8, 1538, Luther wrote to Justus Jonas, who was also on a trip, that while Jonas and Bugenhagen were absent, "we are overwhelmed . . . with cases and duties, to the point of weariness. As an old man who has served his stint (*senex et emeritus*), I should prefer to devote these days to an old man's pleasure, observing the miracles of God in the garden."

A week later, on April 17, 1538, the elector wrote to Bugenhagen that Christian had asked for Bugenhagen to remain in Denmark a while longer; and he gave his permission that "His Majesty retain you for another year, but only if this meets with your approval and desire." Apparently it did; at the end of April, Jonas reported that "Pomeranus will be staying in Denmark for an entire year from now." An entire year passed, plus one month; and on May 15, 1539, the elector wrote to Bugenhagen to tell him that Christian had asked to

keep him still longer but that Bugenhagen was needed for some forthcoming negotiations in Germany. Though the negotiations did not materialize, Bugenhagen did return to Germany, arriving in Wittenberg on July 4, 1539, one day before the second anniversary of his landing in Denmark.

All this time Luther had been preaching for Bugenhagen. On July 5, the day after Bugenhagen arrived, Luther preached on John 3:29 (cf. p. 435–441). For about two months after that, Luther continued to preach almost every week, apparently in order to complete the sermons on the third chapter of St. John. The date of the last sermon on that chapter (pp. 516–522) is not known, but the one preceding it was delivered on September 13, 1539. During the course of 1540 Luther preached the four sermons on chapter four of St. John. Thus the sermons on the first four chapters of St. John cover a period of more than three years, from July 7, 1537, to September 11, 1540. Theological conflict and repeated illness continued to harass Luther, and sometimes he was absent from the pulpit for prolonged periods. But despite the interruptions and the troubles of these years Luther managed to complete the commentary.

The result of that work is the commentary printed in this volume. Once more it was George Röer who transcribed the sermons, together with Gregory Solinus and a third anonymous scribe. These three sets of notes were collated by Luther's famulus, John Aurifaber (d. 1575), who was also the first to edit Luther's letters and table talk. The commentary on chapters one and two (Weimar, XLVI, 538–789; St. Louis, VII, 1538–1849) appeared in the second volume of the Eisleben edition of Luther. There Aurifaber also announced his intention to publish the commentary on chapters three and four (Weimar, XLVII, 1–231; St. Louis, VII, 1848–2147) in a later volume. But these chapters remained in manuscript form for about three centuries. In 1847 Wilhelm Hoeck of the library in Wolfenbüttel finally published them for the first time. There are marks of the redactor's work in this commentary (cf. p. 329, note 41, for one instance); but, as in the case of the *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, the extreme skepticism of certain scholars regarding the general reliability of the material appears to be unwarranted (cf. *Luther's Works*, 21, Introduction, pp. xx–xxi). In a favorite expression of Luther's, taken from Genesis 27 (cf. p. 528, note 24), the hands may sometimes be the hands of Aurifaber; but the voice is the voice of Luther.

J. P.

# SERMONS ON THE GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN

Chapters 1–4

*Translated by*  
**MARTIN H. BERTRAM**

SEVERAL CHAPTERS OF ST. JOHN  
THE EVANGELIST

*namely, the first, second, third, and fourth, explained in sermons by the man of God, Dr. Martin Luther, during the absence in Denmark of Dr. Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus, pastor in Wittenberg, collected with all diligence by me, Johann Aurifaber, from Magister Georgius Rorarius and Magister Gregorius Solinus, and also from a written copy found in the library of Michaelis Cölius, pastor in Mansfeld. 1537.*

*These sermons have never before appeared in print*

## CHAPTER ONE

**I** NEITHER know nor can I ascertain from anyone where our pastor, Dr. Pomeranus, broke off in his sermons on the evangelist St. John, which he preached to us on Saturdays.<sup>1</sup> Therefore I make bold to go back to the beginning with my commentary on the evangelist. For the world – and particularly we in the church, who possess, preach, and confess God’s Word – must remain conversant with this evangelist; to this end we must familiarize ourselves with his way of speaking. Therefore we propose to consider his Gospel in the name of the Lord, discuss it, and preach it as long as we are able, to the glory of our Lord Christ and to our own welfare, comfort, and salvation, without worrying whether the world shows much interest in it. Nonetheless, there will always be a few who will hear God’s precious Word with delight; and for their sakes, too, we must preach it. For since God provides people whom He orders to preach, He will surely also supply and send listeners who will take this instruction to heart. The text reads as follows:

1. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word.*
2. *He was in the beginning with God.*
3. *All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.*

From the very beginning the evangelist teaches and documents most convincingly the sublime article of our holy Christian faith according to which we believe and confess the one true, almighty, and eternal God. But he states expressly that three distinct Persons dwell in that same single divine essence, namely, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father begets the Son from eternity, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the

<sup>1</sup> Luther’s *German Mass* of 1526 had prescribed that the Gospel according to St. John be the basis of sermons on Saturdays (Weimar, XIX, 79), and Bugenhagen had apparently been following that prescription before his trip to Denmark. See also the Introduction to this volume, p. ix.

Son, etc. Therefore there are three distinct Persons, equal in glory and majesty; yet there is only one divine essence.

The Second Person, the Son, and neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit, assumed human nature. He was born of the Virgin Mary when the day of redemption was to dawn. This Son of God, born of the Father in eternity, John first calls "the Word." He says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word." Later he speaks of His incarnation when he says (1:14): "And the Word became flesh." St. Paul speaks similarly in Galatians (4:4): "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman."

I am wont to submit a rather plain and crude illustration in an effort to make this birth of the Son of God somewhat intelligible: As a human son derives his flesh, blood, and being from his father, so the Son of God, born of the Father, received His divine essence and nature from the Father from eternity. But this illustration, as well as any other, is far from adequate; it fails to portray fully the impartation of the divine majesty. The Father bestows His entire divine nature on the Son. But the human father cannot impart his entire nature to his son; he can give only a part of it. This is where the analogy breaks down.

Thus a painting of wine may possess the semblance and likeness of wine, but wine it is not. It does not quench the thirst and gladden the heart of man (Ps. 104:15). Likewise, a painting of water may have the appearance of water, but it is not real water which can be drunk or used for washing and cleansing. Similarly, a human father imparts his nature to his son, but not his complete nature, only a fragment of it. In the Godhead, however, the entire divine nature and essence passes into the Son; yet the Son, who remains in the same Godhead with the Father, is one God together with Him. Likewise, the Holy Spirit partakes of the same divine majesty and nature with the Father and the Son.

This must be accepted by faith. No matter how clever, acute, and keen reason may be, it will never grasp and comprehend it. If it were susceptible to our wisdom, then God would not need to reveal it from heaven or proclaim it through Holy Scripture. So be governed by this fact and say: "I believe and confess that there is one eternal God and, at the same time, three distinct Persons, even though I cannot fathom and comprehend this. For Holy Scripture, which is God's Word, says so; and I abide by what it states."

## CHAPTER TWO

*On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with His disciples. When the wine failed, the mother of Jesus said to Him: They have no wine. And Jesus said to her: O woman, what have you to do with Me? My hour has not yet come. His mother said to the servants: Do whatever He tells you. Now six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them: Fill the jars with water. And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them: Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast. So they took it. When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him: Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now. This, the first of His signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.*

*After this He went down to Capernaum, with His mother and His brothers and His disciples; and there they stayed for a few days.*

*The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple He found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. And making a whip of cords, He drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and He poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And He told those who sold the pigeons: Take these things away; you shall not make My Father's house a house of trade. His disciples remembered that it was written: Zeal for Thy house will consume Me. The Jews then said to Him: What sign have You to show us for doing this? Jesus answered them: Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said: It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days? But He spoke of the temple of His body.*

*When, therefore, He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.*

*Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in His name when they saw His signs which He did; but Jesus did not trust Himself to them, because He knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for He Himself knew what was in man.*

**S**INCE it is customary to preach on the opening verses of this chapter annually on the Sunday after Epiphany, you recently heard a sermon on them.<sup>1</sup> This makes it unnecessary to expound them further; in fact, it would be a waste of time. Therefore I now proceed with the following verse:

12. *After this He went down to Capernaum with His mother and His brothers and His disciples; and there they stayed for a few days.*

Here the evangelist presents a bit of Christ's biography. He tells us that Christ lived in Nazareth until after His Baptism, when He entered upon His appointed office. Probably Joseph had died in the meantime, for Holy Writ does not mention him after his return from Egypt to Nazareth (Matt. 2:21-23). And now as Christ is to begin His preaching ministry, He moves to Capernaum. Matthew informs us that He established His residence here (Matt. 4:13). This city was to be His parish, where He would preach and perform miracles. Since Christ lived here with His mother, brothers, and disciples, the Gospel calls Capernaum His city. Undoubtedly His brothers and disciples were honorable and poor folk, who moved away from Nazareth to this city by the sea because of prospects for a better livelihood.

Now the question may occupy us how Christ could have brothers, since He was the only Son of Mary, and the Virgin Mary bore no children besides Him. Some say that Joseph had been married before his marriage to Mary, and that the children of this first wife were later called Christ's brothers. Others say that Joseph had another wife simultaneously with Mary, for it was permissible for the Jews to have two wives. In the Book of Ruth we hear that a poor daughter was often left on the shelf (Ruth 3:10 ff.). This displeased God; therefore He commanded that such daughters be provided for. Thus it became incumbent upon the nearest relative or friend to marry such a poor orphan girl. Mary, too, was a poor little orphan, whom Joseph was obligated to marry. She was so poor that no one else wanted her. Any children born to Joseph by other wives would have been half brothers of Christ. This is the explanation offered by some. But I am inclined to agree with those who declare that

<sup>1</sup> On the First Sunday after Epiphany, January 13, 1538, Luther had preached on this Gospel (Weimar, XLVI, 139—144).

## CHAPTER FOUR

**T**HESSE words recorded by John are plain, yet they are not very easy to grasp.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the third chapter he had said: "The Father loves the Son. And he who believes in the Son has eternal life." Now John tells that Jesus fled from Judea and returned to Galilee when He learned that the Pharisees knew that "He was making and baptizing more disciples than John." John deliberately chooses the words "When the Lord learned." Well, we might think that He should not have resorted to flight but should have stood His ground. But we have to understand this and judge it correctly. He who really knows this Man has the Holy Spirit and can judge everything (1 Cor. 2:15). But he who does not know Christ, be he ever so learned, remains ungodly and condemned, as was said earlier in chapter three: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life" (John 3:36). Here we find it said that He fled from the Pharisees. Where is the man in Him? He claims to be Lord, and yet He is afraid of the Pharisees and flees into Galilee.

John purposely described this with great diligence so that we might see how differently Christ acts according to each of His two natures. He is life Himself, and yet He dies. He is all, and simultaneously He is nothing. Since He is all, however, He is surely deserving of worship. Thus these words refer to Christ's sovereign majesty: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life." If He can confer life, He must surely be God; for no creature or angel is entitled to this power, but only the Son of God, who shares equal might with the Father. Therefore whoever believes in the Son and worships Him has eternal life. Yet He is also Mary's Son. More than this: here He takes flight, and later He lets Himself be killed. Thus St. John always places the eternal omnipotence of Christ in juxtaposition with His immense frailty. Faith in Christ, the Son of God, saves; and yet it is true, as we read here, that this same Lord Christ flees. Our Christian Creed professes this. Now it is a matter of "take it or leave it" for us, of "believe it or do not believe it."

<sup>1</sup> This is the beginning of the first sermon on chapter four, dated "the Saturday before Laetare Sunday," March 6, 1540.

Human reason would prefer to have it otherwise. Yet what else would you want our God to do? What sort of ways and means would you suggest to Him? The one might reply: "I shall enter a cloister." The other might declare: "I will don armor and go on a pilgrimage to St. James." But God says: "I have a uniform plan for you. I will issue My Ten Commandments to you; you people resort to such diverse methods. I will tell you what you must do (Ex. 20:3, 7): 'You shall not have any other gods. You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.'" How do we react to this? Alas, we could not bear to hear it; for the voice was one of angelic majesty. What now? "If I do not speak to you," God says, "you will all go astray, each following his own way." Therefore God directs us all to follow the same path, yes, a highway, as He promulgates the Ten Commandments. Whatever we may choose and whatever our own wisdom may dictate lacks validity with Him, just as we refuse to accede to His decrees. Thus the Children of Israel say to Moses (Ex. 20:19): "You speak to God, and whatever He commands us we shall do; just that we do not have to hear God ourselves." Moses also says to God: "They cannot bear to hear Thee; for when Thou speakest Mt. Sinai emits clouds of smoke." God replies: "Since they cannot endure My voice, I will change My method. Henceforth I will no longer address them from heaven with thunder and lightning and in My majesty. I will select one of their brethren, who will speak to them gently and sweetly. On the mountain you asked Me to communicate with you in a different way. Now God has fulfilled your request. He will grant you a Prophet in whose mouth He will put His words. And God Himself will take him to task who ignores this Prophet." These are the two ways in which God conversed with us. Our own choice, which is so multiform, is worthless. Now we also reject both of God's methods. We cannot endure it when God addresses us in His majesty, surrounded by myriads of angels. It would be best, of course, to abandon our own ideas and simply listen to God in His majesty. But we cannot bear that language. Now God declares: "Well and good, then I shall utterly submerge My majesty; I shall let My Son become man; I shall let Him be born of a virgin; I shall have Him do good to men and preach remission of sin to them. My Son shall speak most affably to you. Nevertheless, I want you to remember that this Man is the same as He who spoke to the Children of Israel at Mt. Sinai in the wilderness. Therefore believe that it is God whom you are hearing." His majesty is concealed in humanity. He does not