

WHAT
LUTHER
SAYS

WHAT LUTHER SAYS

A Practical In-Home Anthology
for the Active Christian

COMPILED BY EWALD M. PLASS



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Foreword to First Edition

THIS SET OF BOOKS was prepared under the direction of the Committee for Scholarly Research, created by The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod in 1947. The original impulse for this particular project came in 1948 from the Pastoral Conference of Greater Milwaukee as supported by a resolution of the faculty of Concordia College in Milwaukee. After a careful study of the details suggested in the resolution of the pastoral conference the Committee for Scholarly Research approved the project on May 13, 1949. Shortly thereafter the Board of Directors of our Synod gave its consent to setting aside the necessary funds from the Centennial Thankoffering of 1947. The allocation of these sums has made it possible to publish this set at a most reasonable price.

The preparation of the materials contained in these volumes has, as of this date, been the second-largest project undertaken by the Committee for Scholarly Research. For this task the committee engaged the services of Professor Ewald M. Plass, Concordia College, Milwaukee, Wis., in the summer of 1949. The gathering of the quotations and their first translation was completed by him in 1956. Each reference was checked by Dr. Theodore Hoyer of Concordia Sem-

inary, St. Louis, Mo., with each of the three most authoritative editions of Luther's works. Final revision was undertaken by Professor Walter A. Hansen, a member of the editorial staff at Concordia Publishing House. To each of these persons the committee is greatly indebted. A special word of thanks is in order for Dr. O. A. Dorn, general manager of Concordia Publishing House, for his personal interest in the publication of these volumes.

Nothing like this anthology can be found anywhere in the English-speaking world. There have been one or two brief collections of Luther's most famous utterances. This present set, however, contains no less than 5,100 quotations on more than 200 subjects, from "Absolution" to "Zeal."

During the years in which these volumes were in preparation the following persons served in various capacities on the Committee for Scholarly Research: Dr. Walter F. Lichtsinn, Professor Martin H. Coyner, Dr. Arthur L. Miller (secretary), Dr. John W. Klotz, Professor Lorman Petersen, and Pastor Roger L. Sommer. The last of these had the specific responsibility of serving as liaison between Professor Plass and the committee.

St. Louis, Mo.
Concordia Seminary
April 17, 1958

MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN
Chairman, Committee for
Scholarly Research

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INTRODUCING MARTIN LUTHER

"He Being Dead Yet Speaketh"

MARTIN LUTHER

A. THE MAN

"What does Luther say about it?" is a question still being asked. The answer is of more than passing interest to many persons. Even those who do not agree with Luther's views recognize the great influence he has exerted. They know that in many respects the world in which we live is what it is because of the work and the writings of this dynamic character. They grant his great learning and the wide sweep of his thinking and are, therefore, at least curious to hear what he has to say about this or that matter of importance.

Others are ready to do much more than pay a kind of polite respect to the noted Reformer. They have great confidence in the judgment of the man, and they value his opinion highly. They do not hesitate to say that Martin Luther's endorsement of a particular view would at least move them to give this endorsement a very respectful hearing. These people hold that in the course of history few men have more honestly and successfully set themselves to seek knowledge concerning the will and the ways of God, as Scripture reveals them, than did Martin Luther. Moreover, they are persuaded that few who have been so interested in the other world have lived so sanely and soberly in this one. Here was a man of genius, one who may have had his head in the clouds but whose feet were firmly planted on the earth. Millions, therefore, continue to ask: "What does Luther say about it?"

1. *Luther's Influential and Voluminous Writings*

Unfortunately the question is often more easily asked than answered. Not that Luther has nothing to say. Very likely he has, for few matters that meant anything in a man's life escaped his attention or passed without comment from him. It is rather the voluminousness of what the man wrote and said that poses the problem. For example, the Erlangen edition of his works contains over 50,000 pages of text. True enough, there are indexes. But these, too, are so voluminous that many people do not have the time, while others lack the patience, to search for what they want. The subject index of the edition referred to has no fewer than 865 pages, and the corresponding volume in another edition offers an encyclopedic index of over 1,000 pages of near quarto format. The search, therefore, is likely to be a case of looking for a needle in a haystack.

The language problem causes further difficulty. About two thirds of Luther's books were written in German; those belonging to the other third were written in Latin. Both German and Latin are foreign and unknown tongues to hosts of people. Yet many of these people are interested in the man's views and writings. True, less than a generation after death had taken the pen from Luther's restless hand some of his writings appeared in an English dress; and, as time went on, more issued from the British and Amer-

ican presses. But even today, four centuries after Luther closed his eyes, what little is available in an English translation is but a small fraction of what he wrote and said. Many gems of thought lie buried in his works. These diamonds should be mined and cut. When this has been done, we may well dispense with some of our rhinestones.

2. *A Comprehensive Anthology Long Overdue*

Considerations such as these are largely responsible for the more than five thousand selections chosen from the complete works of Luther offered here in translation. They should prove that the Reformer continues to have something to say that is worth listening to. More than a decade of intensive study devoted to the works of Martin Luther has strengthened the compiler of this anthology in the conviction that there is much of abiding value in what the Reformer has to offer. As a result of this conviction, we do not pen these opening remarks in an apologetic vein.

What probably does call for an apology, or at least an explanation, is the unconscionable delay in the appearance of a work of this nature. If we are inclined to be charitable, we may ascribe the delay to the lack of time for undertaking so great a task; if we are inclined to be severe, we may attribute it to causes far less excusable. So much is certain: there have always been those who appreciated the writings of Luther. It is said that the great importance of Johann Sebastian Bach for music was not truly appreciated until years after this composer had passed away. Then others called the attention of the world to the beauty and profundity of his genius and his compositions. But it was not so with Luther. His contemporaries soon saw that he was no ordinary man.

3. *Luther Appreciated by Contemporaries*

The very origin of the *Table Talk* is enough to reveal how Luther's opinions were valued and how his words were treasured by those who lived in his days and associated with him. At times the proverb "Distance lends enchantment to the view" applies also to men. As a result, posterity ascribes a greatness to them which they never had or which escaped the detection of their contemporaries. But the towering greatness of Luther was recognized even in his own days. Nor was this evaluation made merely under the spell of a dynamic and compelling personality. Both friend and foe testify that Luther did exert an exceptionally strong influence upon all who met him. His was a personality so strongly marked that it was difficult to remain neutral toward him. Yet Luther's strength lay in what he said, not in what he was.

4. *A Continuing Influence*

The subsequent generation of theologians — a group that had never sat at Luther's feet nor seen the flashing of his deep eyes but merely bent over his books and pondered over his publications — was equally impressed by the man and the world of his thinking. Thus a generation later Martin Chemnitz, the "second Martin," a profound theologian in his own right, wrote of Luther: "A man may tell how far he has advanced in theology by the degree in which he is pleased by Luther's writings" (quoted in Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation*, p. 57). Years later another theologian called these writings "the garment of Elijah which he let fall at his ascension" (*Lehre und Wehre*, XXXIII, 306).

In subsequent generations the interest in Luther's writings was a veritable theological barometer which indicated the falling or rising interest in loyalty to

Scripture. "Back to Scripture" implied and involved, if it did not consciously call for, a return to Luther; for the two are often correlatives. The increased interest in the writings of Luther at the time of the revival of orthodoxy in the last century was, therefore, not a meaningless coincidence. In consequence, we are not surprised to hear Dr. C. F. W. Walther, the most prominent leader of this movement in America, say: "Thousands have recognized in Luther the greatest witness of the truth since the day of the apostles and prophets" (quoted in F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I, 290). And a generation ago a noted German scholar, Dr. Hans Preuss, wrote: "In the fog objects and persons appear greater than they are. This is often also the case with great men of history: they appear greater to us if we do not clearly see them, smaller when one really knows them. But in the case of Luther the reverse is true" (*Die Vorstellungen vom Antichrist*, p. 139).

5. *A Man for the Ages*

"Familiarity breeds contempt," therefore, applies to neither the person nor the writings of Martin Luther. It is our considered opinion that the reason why many people do not think more of him and read more in him is that they do not sufficiently know him and his writings. If they did, they would find no exaggeration in the following statement by the Presbyterian theologian Hugh Thomson Kerr: "Surely, he is one of the pivotal personalities of history, and he has always been acknowledged as such. His appeal is universal" (*A Compend of Luther's Theology*, v). The fact of the matter is that even Roman Catholic scholars of integrity do not hesitate to testify to the greatness of Luther's character and to the abiding importance of his writings. Thus the German Roman Catholic histo-

rian Joseph Lortz frankly says: "One may stand before Luther with reverence. . . . On one fact all presentations of Luther here and abroad ought to agree. Above all other qualities which may characterize him he was a religious man" (*Die Reformation in Deutschland*, I, 382 f.).

B. THE WRITER

1. *In the Vanguard of Modern Authors*

As a writer, Martin Luther became one of the first great authors in the modern sense. About a generation before his birth, in 1456, the first complete book printed from type left the press, and a new era began. The invention of printing was revolutionary to an extent almost impossible for us even to conceive. The printed book destined to usher in this new era was none other than the Bible in Latin. Many persons have regarded the historical proximity of Gutenberg and Luther as more than a coincidence. To this day the Bible leads the world in sales, and it was this Book which the Reformation was about to put into the hands of people everywhere in their own tongue.

Luther himself considered the invention of printing a providential preparation for the rapid spread of the restored Gospel. Moreover, few kept the printing presses of that day busier than did he; and others helped. Luther never intended the famous theses he posted on October 31, 1517, for the press, but they were soon being read in all Christendom. Then came the flood. Between 1518 and 1523 theological literature increased sevenfold, and most of it came from the busy pen of Luther. During these years over three hundred printings of his writings appeared, and more than 300,000 copies were sold. This enormous sale will appear the more remarkable when we remember the comparatively small population of Germany at the time. Gradually books became cheaper, and

people could afford to buy them. Particularly the rising middle class in the Free Imperial Cities offered a large and expanding market.

2. A Versatile Writer

Early arrival, however, was not the only reason for Luther's distinction in an age that had suddenly been enriched by the art of printing. The book market soon revealed the amazing versatility of the great Reformer as an author. This man's genius obviously had many facets. The situation was different in other countries. In England, Tyndale translated the Bible; Cranmer prepared a book of prayer; and many years later the Westminster theologians wrote a catechism. But Luther worked and wrote in all these fields. Few men, if any, got closer to Luther than did Melancthon. This is his evaluation: "One is an interpreter; one, a logician; another, an orator, affluent and beautiful in speech; but Luther is all in all — whatever he writes, whatever he utters, pierces to the soul, fixes itself like arrows in the heart — he is a miracle among men" (quoted in Plass, *This Is Luther*, p. 298).

But Luther's writings do not only have a breadth in which practically every branch of theology is well represented; the amazing thing is the thoroughness with which he works in all these areas. J. A. Froude, the brilliant English historian, has said even of Luther's *Table Talk*, which is at best "chips of thought," that it is "as full of matter as Shakespeare's plays." True enough, people in Luther's day must have been far more startled by his writings than we are. To them his statements seemed like an introduction to a vast new world. He was opening vistas of thought that had been deserted for many centuries. Yet even in our own times there are few theologians who are not impressed by the pro-

fundity of, let us say, his *Commentary on Galatians* (1531) or his *Bondage of the Will* (1525), to mention only two of many.

3. Is Luther Repetitious?

It is true, Luther has been accused of being repetitious; and what seems to aggravate the charge is the fact that at times he himself makes it. To a degree the concept "repetitiousness," used in a derogatory sense, is relative. Great composers like Mozart and Beethoven are repetitious in their symphonies. Are they to be faulted? Someone has said: "He must have a trite message who hesitates to repeat it." Luther himself one day remarked concerning the doctrine of salvation by faith alone that a good song deserves to be heard more than once. So thought St. Paul (Phil. 3:1). Then, too, we must bear in mind that Luther was writing to a generation that needed to be grounded anew in the fundamentals of the Christian faith. As an educator no less than as a theologian he knew that the "hammering process" (*immer treiben*) of constant repetition was necessary to achieve the desired end.

But let us concede that at times Luther is repetitious to a fault. We hold that an investigation will reveal that the Reformer most frequently lapses into repeating himself when he treats of matters that are of particular concern to him. Prominent in this group of topics were the sanctity of the Word, and salvation through faith in Christ alone. His repetitiousness at such times seems to have been largely the result of an intensity of conviction concerning which we may say that "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" — and the pen writeth.

About the most senseless charge would be to consider such repetitiousness the padding of a writer eager to supply the market with something for bread-and-butter reasons. Martin Luther took no

royalties; he neither asked for them nor received them. The fact of the matter is that he did not want them. His publishers built splendid homes for themselves and lived in state at Wittenberg and elsewhere. In those days there were, of course, no copyright laws; moreover, much piratic, unauthorized (at times garbled) printing and reprinting was carried on. But Luther never looked upon any of these things as acts of injustice against himself. He never wrote a book to make money on it. With a humor that rarely left him he one day remarked that he wished to prove to the world that one actually could write books for unselfish and disinterested reasons. He took up his pen for the love of his God and His people; and he once said that the Savior had already repaid him a thousandfold for anything he might write.

4. *The Nachschriften*

Even the amazing total of Luther's own writings, however, does not represent the entire legacy he has bequeathed to later generations. In addition to the material that came from Luther's own pen, there is a large group of *Nachschriften*. In its precise meaning this word has no English equivalent. A *Nachschrift* was a sort of transcript made of a sermon or lecture while it was being delivered, as though a newspaper reporter had taken it down. But to all save the copyist himself it may have been rather illegible at the close of the church service or class session. True, we are told that Luther was a rather deliberate speaker and at times would repeat himself for the sake of emphasis and clearness. Yet the most adept copyist found it impossible to take down an entire discourse verbatim.

George Roerer, particularly, had in this way equipped himself for the copying of the lectures and sermons of Luther. After 1537, his adeptness in this sort of work having been generally recognized,

he was actually engaged on a permanent basis to make such *Nachschriften*. Thirty-three large volumes testify to the man's industry and conscientiousness. Luther scholars have not failed to recognize the dependability of Roerer. Thus Otto Scheel, otherwise rather critical of all that has not come from the pen of Luther himself, says of a certain sermon: "Since Roerer copied it, we are justified in considering it reliable a priori" (*Martin Luther*, II, 277, note 6). Before his death Roerer explained his system of abbreviations to Andrew Poach, who, after the decease of the noted Luther copyist, prepared for publication in readable German many of the sermons which he (Roerer) had taken down.

We shall probably never know how large a percentage of the material in these elaborated printings of Roerer's notations brings us the express words of Luther. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt, as the critical Weimar edition also points out on occasion, that these *Nachschriften* faithfully reproduce the views and the thoughts of Luther. To a large degree the great affection and reverence which the copyists had for the Reformer vouch for their accuracy and fidelity. In addition, they themselves have at times solemnly affirmed the uprightness of their intention (e. g., SL 5, 77). This situation certainly is a unique phenomenon in literary history.

A word on our treatment of the *Nachschriften*. We have compared the elaborated text of the printing with the notations of Roerer, which the Weimar edition offers. At times the printed text does little more than, as it were, spell out the notes. In such cases we have translated it in its entirety. When it unduly expands the *Nachschrift*, we have taken as much as was necessary to express the notes clearly and coherently. A comparison of W 16, 142 with E 35, 168 may help to clarify matters.

5. *Luther as Preacher*

We have been speaking especially of Luther's sermons. Probably to most people of his day Luther was, above all, the preacher of the Gospel, although he entered the lecture room before he ascended the pulpit. He preached thousands of sermons. In 1515 the city council called him to serve as regular assistant in the *Stadtkirche* at Wittenberg. As will appear from our selections, he produced some of his finest work in the pulpit.

Although Luther was the ranking scholar of the world in which he moved, he delighted in plain, expository sermons. Luther was most impressive as a speaker. In fact, even as an author he is largely an orator. His written word is his spoken word in print. It has all the directness of a verbal communication. If the vigor and force of Luther's writings is to be fully appreciated, they should be read aloud. Whatever he wrote about was a very live issue to him, and he had a way of making his readers feel it as such.

Moreover, Luther's writings create the impression that these readers were very close to him. He envisioned them as present, wrote with his eyes resting on them. And so what he pens brings him very close to you. You do not seem to hear a voice echoing from the distant past, nor do you have a hazy mental picture of an otherworldly scholar in the seclusion and solitude of a Wittenberg monastery. In his writings Luther stands before you. "He being dead yet speaketh." His vividness makes him one of the truly great authors of all times. He is popular without ceasing to be scholarly, and scholarly without speaking or writing over the heads of people.

6. *Luther as Writer*

Luther's speaking and writing have another point in common. As a rule, Luther preached from an outline. His technique of composition was similar.

He would write from a more or less clearly conceived (mental) outline of his subject matter. He rarely sketched the sequence of thoughts in chapters and paragraphs in advance but trusted to the inspiration of the moment. With a mind as active and a memory as retentive as his, this method often worked well enough. No doubt the press of other work often made such a procedure a necessity. But Luther's very make-up and temperament also account for this writing technique. He had to give vent to the rush and pressure of his thoughts.

Therefore Luther wrote rapidly, dashed things off, so to speak. "I bring forth as soon as I conceive," he once remarked. His speed is reflected in his style. His has been called a "racy style," and the term is not inappropriate. In his eagerness to express the thoughts that come crowding in upon him he has no time carefully to select conjunctions and precisely to arrange his thinking in carefully graduated interdependent clauses. Moreover, while he is expressing one thought, another obtrudes and for the time deflects his thinking or at least becomes partly merged with the main line he has been pursuing. Some of Luther's sentences are, therefore, of great length, filling the greater part of a page in the duodecimo format of the Erlangen edition of his works (e. g., E 20 I, 480; 7, 298; 14, 141). Yet for all their length, they make comparatively easy reading, since they are at least not of that interdependent telescopic type which is the despair of many readers and seems to be the glory of some German writers.

7. *Little Interest in Literary Polish*

Luther rarely polished what he had written. Not infrequently the first part of his manuscript would be in the press while he was writing the rest. His Bible translation is an exception. Seriously begun at the Wartburg in 1521 and not completed until 1534, it was the object

of his constant concern through the years. The year of his death (1546) still found him engaged in its improvement. But for Luther the Bible was always in a class by itself. It was God's very own Word; and the most beautiful story, which it contained, deserved also the most beautiful linguistic dress.

But when Luther's own writings were concerned, the case was different. There only the content mattered. Luther wrote to satisfy religious needs, not to please literary and aesthetic tastes. The corrections, emendations, and additions of the original manuscripts of some authors of note make them almost illegible. But Luther seldom discarded or rewrote anything, as Beethoven did almost entire movements of his symphonies. From a purely literary point of view the Reformer might have improved some of his publications if he had rewritten them. But he was not interested in achieving literary polish and gaining applause for it.

8. *Luther's Singleness of Purpose*

Martin Luther's supreme interest in life was to glorify the God of grace, whom he had finally found in Christ, and to lead men to His Word. We know of no man's writings that are more saturated with Scripture than those of this great champion of the Bible. Typical is his impatient exclamation in a writing against a papal antagonist: "Give me Scripture, Scripture, Scripture. Do you hear me? Scripture." We repeat: The permeation of Luther's writings by both the letter and the spirit of Scripture is one of his outstanding characteristics as an author. In our many years of Luther study nothing has impressed us more deeply than this fact — with the sole exception perhaps of his great love for the Savior. Luther, of course, usually quotes the Bible according to the Vulgate, in which translation he had learned to know it.

9. *The Latin of Luther*

About one third of Luther's works are written in Latin, the language which the learned not only wrote but also spoke in his day and for many generations thereafter. The Reformer depreciated his Latin style in a letter to a humanist acquaintance in 1516, apologizing that "this barbarous Martin, accustomed only to cry out among geese," should have the courage to write to one so learned as his addressee. Probably this was the conventional thing to say. True, the Reformer did not affect the polish for which the humanists, enthusiasts for the classical (literary) heritage of the ancient world, were constantly striving. But occasionally Luther could write Latin that was presentable enough, as his book against the humanist and scholar Erasmus shows. It is, of course, not written in Ciceronian Latin. What Luther writes is the church Latin of his day. But his dynamic personality imbues the dry bones of this "dead language" with new life and vigor. Even his Latin makes interesting reading.

10. *Luther's German*

The works written in German, however, truly reveal Luther's linguistic mastery. What the German language owes to Luther can hardly be measured or expressed. When Luther arose, the language of his country, like its political scene, was rather chaotic. He was largely instrumental in helping the three dialects then commonly used — High, Middle, and Low German — to find a common level. In consequence, the modern German man or woman still largely speaks the language of Martin Luther. The formative influence of his Bible translation on the German language can hardly be overestimated. Many of the German idioms of today stem from Luther or were given general currency by his writings. Philologists saw and acknowledged this long ago.

11. *Luther's Strong Language*

Luther is at times vitriolic in his denunciation. Many have faulted him for this explosive and vehement language. One must, however, not ignore certain mitigating circumstances. The truth is that the age in which Luther lived was not particularly noted for its refinement. There were, of course, authors in whose writings few if any vulgarities occurred. But these men were the exceptions. The contemporaries who wrote against Luther matched much of his language. We must remember, too, that the term "abusive" is relative. Where are the inviolable canons of literary decorum? Who does not know that in daily life the line between, let us say, prudent caution and cowardice may be debatable? The same problem is present in anger and in its manifestations. There is a righteous anger no less than a sinful one.

Moreover, why should a man not call a spade a spade? What of the names Christ and St. Paul called the enemies of the truth? In a letter of February 16 (?), 1520, to his close friend Spalatin, Luther unburdens himself thus: "I cannot deny that I have been more vehement than I should. . . . But they set against me and God's Word so criminally and fiercely that were I not moved to write warmly, even a mind of stone might be moved to war by indignation. Far from having such a mind, however, I am naturally warm and have a pen that is not at all blunt. I am, therefore, carried beyond the bounds of moderation by these monsters (!). Moreover, I wonder whence this new scrupulousness is born which calls all that is said against an opponent scurrility. What do you think of Christ? Was He scurrilous when He called the Jews a perverse and adulterous generation, the offspring of vipers, hypocrites, and children of the devil? Paul speaks of dogs, vain babblers, seducers, unlearned, and in Acts 13 so rages against a false

prophet that he might seem to be insane, saying: 'O full of guile and all villainy, thou son of the devil, thou enemy of all truth!' Why did not Paul rather flatter him in order to convert him than thunder in this way? The consciousness of truth cannot be patient against the stubborn and unconquered enemies of the truth" (W-Br 2, 44 f).

12. *Luther's Humor*

However differently people may continue to judge the vehement language which the Reformer occasionally uses, all evaluate alike another characteristic of his writings. This is his native wit and his sense of humor. We find these not only in his intimate *Table Talk*, where we would expect the Doctor to unbend, but at times even in his sermons. The Reformer had no desire to impress anyone in or out of the pulpit with an air of professional dignity. There was nothing stiff or unctuous about the man. He was very human; and he could afford to be what he was. His character was great enough and his personality impressive enough to dispense with any artificial props. In consequence, a subtle humor now and then is at play in the discussion of the most serious matters, a humor that adds lightness but not levity to the subject. We know of few writers who so readily had at their command wit and humor, irony, satire, and sarcasm as did Martin Luther. His writings, therefore, have a sprightliness and a verve that people do not ordinarily associate with the productions of a great scholar and a profound theologian.

13. *His Forcefulness*

All this adds up to power. "A voice and a pen — this is all. But there is more power in this voice and this pen to shake and mould the world than in all the bulls of a pope or the armed strength of emperor and kings." So writes James Mac-

kinnon in his *Luther and the Reformation* (III, 138). Both history and experience prove that he has not overstated the case. The Reformer's style rushes along like a mighty torrent, sweeping the reader irresistibly onward. His sentences are like hammer blows, "his words are half-battles." "I cut down trees," he once remarked. Then again he is as gentle as a whispering zephyr. All this moved the historian Leopold von Ranke to write: "In no nation or age has a more commanding and powerful writer appeared; and it would be difficult to find another who has so perfectly united popular and intelligent style and such downright homely good sense to so much originality, power, and genius" (*Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation*, II, 56). And the American Preserved Smith says: "Whatever his faults, Luther remains one of the greatest writers. His fury and his mirth are alike Titanic" (*The Life and Letters of Martin Luther*, p. 234).

14. *The Practical Value of His Writings*

It did not take men long to discover the forcefulness of Luther's writings or to observe their practical value. After reading some of the Reformer's publications, Duke John Frederick, later Elector of Saxony, remarked: "Dr. Martin Luther's books touch the heart, they penetrate to your innermost being (*gehen durch Mark und Bein*), and one little page has more substance and strength and more comfort, too, than entire sections of other writers" (E 1, xiv).

These words of John Frederick point to the practical value of Luther's writings. He was one of the first to appreciate this value and throughout his life was a regular reader of the Reformer's publications. Subsequently he underwrote the printing of the first edition of Luther's works at Wittenberg. He felt that what

Luther had to say was by no means of value only to scholars and theologians.

How right he was! Luther never wrote anything merely to satisfy his scholarly urge, merely because his research in a field in which he was interested had discovered something of significance to the learned world. He had no patience with a speculative theology that is exhilarated by soaring into the infinite. In Luther's writings the most abstruse doctrine, such as that of the Trinity, is correlated to man's problems and is pursued because of its direct bearing on human salvation. Luther held that God had revealed nothing merely to gratify the curiosity of man. He was sure that the Christian religion was, above all, practical and functional and that all the golden truths of Scripture were to be coined into conduct, were designed to make man not merely wiser but also better. He illustrates this principle in his treatment of the love of God. He does not lose himself in ecstatic hymns on a love to God which is little more than an emotional intoxication. There is little room for such selfish emotional introversion in Luther's theology. A Christian's love is practical; it goes to work, and all the world becomes its beneficiary.

15. *Is Luther Systematic?*

If we wish properly to evaluate Luther's writings, we dare not lose sight of this practical approach and outlook of the Reformer. These qualities made his writings not academic treatises but tracts for the times. His publications were largely what the Germans call *Gelegenheitsschriften*, writings designed to satisfy present needs and to solve pressing problems. This circumstance also accounts, at least to a large degree, for the fact that the Reformer produced no voluminous systematic study of the entire body of Christian doctrine. He recognized his mission in the exposition and the application of Scripture to the needs of men

as they arose and as he saw them. We submit that in this respect his writings resemble Scripture. The books of the Bible do not provide us with a systematic treatment of the body of Christian doctrine. They, too, bear the character of occasional writings, inspired to meet the needs of the people of God as they arose.

At times one hears or reads the statement that Luther was not a systematic theologian. True, the Doctor did not write a comprehensive set entitled *Systematic Theology* or *Christian Dogmatics*. But to say that Luther was an unsystematic thinker, who never integrated his theological views and saw them as a whole — this, we contend, is not borne out by the study of his writings. There are, of course, “loose ends” in his publications, theological gaps. But these must be there because they are in Scripture; and where Scripture does not admit light, Martin Luther knew that he was not authorized to install a window. Yet we know of few theologians who are more systematic than Luther in two vital respects. In the first place, in the center of his writings (except the earliest ones) stands Christ Crucified. The doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone is the pivot and the pillar, the source and the center, of all his theology. Moreover, he finds this Christ in Scripture alone. Therefore he orients all his theology according to Scripture. What is not Scriptural is, for Luther, not theological, and what does not glorify Christ cannot be Scriptural. In this systematic way Luther teaches theology.

16. *His Theological Development*

As a theologian, Luther naturally grew and developed; and, like all growth, this progress from medieval Romanism to evangelical Christianity took time. Nor are all its steps dated in the writings of the Reformer. At times he himself seems

to have been scarcely aware of them. In his earliest writings, which date from about 1513, we frequently find the papal point of view. But not for long! Of the thoroughly “Catholic Luther” there is not much in the Reformer’s writings.

Naturally, scholars are not agreed as to just when the “Lutheran Luther” may be said to have arrived. But they are at one in recognizing three periods in the theological development of the Reformer: the original Roman one, the time of transition, and the period of maturity. The last period may be said to have begun in the late 1520’s. So far as Luther’s major writings are concerned, our studies have inclined us to agree with the judgment of Hugh Thomson Kerr, who, in his *A Compend of Luther’s Theology*, says that the difference between the earlier Luther and the later Luther has often been greatly exaggerated. Yet the difference exists, and none other than Luther himself calls attention to it and asks readers to forgive the papal remnants that still mar his earlier productions. He would have readers judge all he wrote in the light of Scripture.

This stipulation makes the task of determining what is typically “Lutheran” comparatively easy. Luther disavows everything and anything that does not square with Scripture. What is not Scriptural should not be considered Lutheran. In this respect therefore “Lutheran” is in reality a personal and dated name for an impersonal and undated principle: unquestioning loyalty to Scripture as the Word of God.

17. *Luther Evaluates His Own Books*

Largely because of his reverence for Scripture as the very Word of God, Luther had a modest opinion of his own books. After all, he argued, what was good in them “had not grown in his own garden” but had been borrowed from the Bible. In 1537 he wrote a friend: “Since

we are human beings, there are things in my views that are human; in fact, even such as taste after the flesh" (W 45, 422). He wrote to direct men not to himself but to Christ in the Word. Thus in 1522: "You must not be Luther's but Christ's disciple" (W 10 II, 22).

But it will also appear that when the Reformer looked at his books from another point of view, the matter was different. He was conscious of having honestly tried to expound the Word of God to men in its plain, literal Spirit-intended sense. Therefore he was sure that his name and his message would endure, "for the Word of God abideth forever." With this truth in mind he could write in 1522: "Rest assured that you shall destroy neither my name nor my doctrine" (W 10 II, 106).

Now Luther was not a Biblicist in the sense that he was blind and deaf to whatever others had produced. His continued quoting of noted churchmen makes his at-

titude abundantly clear. Although Scripture was the judge of everything, men of learning might well serve as witnesses. Moreover, such witnesses may well present a matter in a clearer light than we are able to do. Luther, therefore, says in his exposition of Psalm 101 (1534): "They say that he who has no mortar must do his masonwork with mud. Well, this is constructing masonry, too, and copying the work of masons, although it may not be done equally well. And what does a sick person who wants to match the work and the pace of a strong one accomplish besides ruining himself the more or actually killing himself? Therefore if Dr. Martinus is not able to write epistles or to preach as well as St. Paul did to the Romans or as St. Augustine did, then it is an honor to him to open the book and to beg a morsel from St. Paul or from St. Augustine and to reproduce their thoughts in his sermon (*predige ihnen nach*)" (W 51, 213).

INTRODUCTION TO ANTHOLOGY

A. PREPARATION

1. *Previous Anthologies*

As early as 1565 a German thesaurus of Luther's works appeared in Frankfurt. The compiler was Timothy Kirchner, who had given his work the impressive title: *German Thesaurus of the Highly Learned, Widely Renowned, and Precious Man Dr. Martin Luther, Wherein All Chief Articles of Christian, Catholic, and Apostolic Doctrine and Faith Are Explained and Expounded, Together with a Constant Refutation of All Errors and Falsifications of the Pure, Divine Truth Gathered from His Writings and Books, etc.*

Probably the best known comprehensive anthology is entitled *Geist aus Luthers Schriften*. It came off the presses

from 1827 to 1831 in Darmstadt, in four volumes, and was compiled by five scholars. At the completion of their "extremely laborious task" the compilers had selected no fewer than 10,301 items from the old Halle (Walch) edition. As the full title indicated, these selections were topically arranged, as a *Concordance of the Views and Judgments of the Great Reformer Concerning the Most Important Matters of Faith, Learning, and Life*. Unfortunately there are no indexes, and no description of the context is given.

In 1903 Dr. George Buchwald, the noted Luther scholar who was on the editorial staff of the Weimar edition, published a compendious anthology of about 300 pages entitled *So spricht Dr. Martin Luther*. Prepared almost exclusively on

the basis of the Erlangen edition, this little volume, too, offers no contextual information but it enjoyed considerable popularity a generation ago.

Despite the renewed interest in Luther, our own times and country have seen little in the way of Luther anthologies. In 1948 Hugh Thomson Kerr of Princeton Theological Seminary published *A Compend of Luther's Theology* compiled largely from the Holman (Philadelphia) edition of *Works of Martin Luther*. This 250-page book also presents its selections without dates and context. Its arrangement follows the pattern of systematic theology. Although it professes to be "elementary in character and method," it has to a degree filled a need in English theological literature.

2. *Our Selections*

The anthology herewith submitted to the reading public resulted from the carrying-out of a resolution of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. In the spring of 1949 the Pastoral Conference of Greater Milwaukee and the faculty of Concordia College of Milwaukee suggested the publication of a comprehensive Luther anthology to the Committee on Developing Scholarly Research of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. The Board of Directors of this Synod, recognizing the great value of such a work, placed its stamp of approval on the project. Thereupon the undersigned was engaged to compile such an anthology from the complete works of Luther. In order to be able to do so he was given part-time release from classroom duties.

The principal purpose of the more than 5,000 selections herein offered is distinctly practical. It is not at all the intention of this work to present a critical discussion and evaluation of moot questions. An anthology, a collection of literary flowers, is hardly the place for scholarly analysis; its design is not to

offer a course in botany but to display bouquets of flowers to all who have an eye for beauty. At the same time the reader will find that the footnotes do briefly examine some of the problems, both the real ones and those due to a superficial knowledge of the Reformer's writings or to some preconceived notion.

It will appear from what has been said above that this procedure is entirely in the spirit of Luther. He meant, above all, to instruct and to inspire, to confirm and to comfort people in general; he addressed men as his fellow sinners rather than his fellow scholars. To Martin Luther learning was the means to an end, not an end in itself; it was the scaffolding, not the building. Therefore we have selected from his complete writings passages which, it seems to us, refer to matters of abiding and practical importance, and state truths concerning these matters in a peculiarly striking manner, making reading and quoting an educational and inspiring experience.

But while we believe that our selections are truly representative of the best in Luther, we are far from contending that they comprise all that is worthy of note and deserving of preservation. Reluctantly we had to forgo submitting additional dozens of passages, lest the anthology become too voluminous.

B. PROBLEMS

1. *Difficulties in Preparing a Luther Anthology*

There are those who are skeptical of Luther anthologies. They tell us that the meaning of the Reformer should be derived not so much from his "individual ideas" and "compends of his utterances" as from an interpretation of his writings as a whole.

We readily grant that few writers can be misconstrued more easily than Martin Luther when quoted out of context. The problem is complicated because there is

the "Roman Catholic Luther," the "Luther in transition," and the "Lutheran Luther." Such considerations have moved us to date every selection as precisely as possible and to cite it in the light of its context. In this way the dangers of what has been called "the proof-text method" are reduced to a minimum, if not entirely eliminated.

2. *On Interpreting Luther*

We feel that at times there has been too much interpretation of Luther and not enough reading of Luther. In his own days Luther expressed a complaint about Scripture study which is not out of place in our own times. He said that there was an unfortunate tendency to rush to commentaries before carefully studying Scripture itself and basing one's faith on its bare text without comment. This observation applies, though to a lesser degree, also to Luther's writings. Too many persons depend on interpretations (if not misinterpretations) of Luther's words. They accept as the Reformer's view what they get at second hand. Especially some modern "interpretations" of Luther are found to turn contrasts into contradictions and Luther's paradoxes into doctrinal impasses.

The Reformer himself foresaw and foretold that some of his statements would be misconstrued. In fact he experienced this in part even during his lifetime. Toward the close of his life he told his class: "After my death many will adduce my books and will thence 'prove' (*confirmant*) all sorts of errors and their own imaginings (*deliria*)" (W 43, 453). How right he was! Lord Byron speaks of people who have "just enough of learning to misquote" (*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, l. 66). Luther study, too, has had its share of such folk.

There is, of course, such a thing as unintentional misrepresentation or, if not actual misrepresentation, a shifting of

emphasis. The result is a picture that does not truly reflect the original, the colors being too heavy at one place and too light at another. In 1933 the late Charles Beard said in his presidential address to the American Historical Society: "Any selection and arrangements of facts pertaining to any large area of history is controlled inexorably by the frame of reference in the mind of the selector and arranger." This principle is undoubtedly correct. Absolute objectivity is an unattainable ideal. We commonly consider that person objective who agrees with us.

3. *Let Luther Speak for Himself*

Ranke's famous school of historians set itself the commendable objective of describing the past precisely as it was. That aim has been ours also. We have endeavored to present Luther as he was, or rather, to let Luther present himself and speak for himself. We have been content merely to introduce him, as a master of ceremonies would do. The choice of our selections followed no pre-determined pattern other than this, that the passages must present Scripture truths. Fortunately, there is little in the Reformer's writings that does not pass this test. Such passages will be touched upon in the footnotes.

So far as emphasis is concerned, our selections will show that we have allowed Luther to place his emphasis where he wanted it. He is commonly regarded as the great champion of the sole sufficiency of Christ and of the sole authority of Scripture. His defense of these basic truths of the Christian faith is superb and in a class by itself. Therefore we have included many selections under these and related headings. If, on the other hand, relatively few passages are to be found under a subject that looms large in modern religious thinking, it is because it received less attention in

the days of Luther. Marshaling all available references to such matters would be slanting Luther, developing an emphasis that does not exist in his writings. The approximately two hundred subject headings here listed cover the area of faith and life fairly well.

To conserve space and avoid unnecessary duplication we have divided longer selections if their progression of thought carried over into another subject (e. g., E 17, 419—421). Luther's *Small Catechism* is an exception; his classic explanation of the Creed, for instance, appears under *Catechism* as well as under *Creed*. But there are no more than about a dozen such intentional duplications in the 5,100 selections.

C. PROCEDURE

1. *The Make-up of the Work*

The general arrangement of the work was decided on after mature deliberation and consultation with men who had worked in this field or whose judgment we respect. One of our main objectives was to facilitate the finding of any desired passage. This consideration prompted the use of devices like the topical arrangement and the references to the main Luther editions after each selection.

Since the selections contained in this anthology are arranged alphabetically and topically, some may consider a topical index unnecessary. In many instances their view is correct. But there are many exceptions. We must bear in mind that Luther's writings have certain peculiarities. For example, the Reformer is not always strictly logical in his development of a thought. He often introduces ideas which his active mind suggests to him even though they are only distantly related to the line of thought he is pursuing at the time. Some of these parenthetical ideas are of sufficient value to be noted by themselves. Yet they cannot be torn out of their surroundings.

Luther may be speaking about affliction, for example, and, as he does so, he may intersperse the statement that the medical profession is unable accurately to diagnose all diseases. In such a case his remark about physicians would appear in the topical index under SICKNESS. This procedure enables the reader to give attention to many of Luther's statements which otherwise might be overlooked. Those who make use of the topical index will find that the anthology contains far more than 5,100 thought selections from the writings of the Reformer. Therefore the reader is encouraged always to consult the topical index when studying the selections under any particular subject heading.

If the reader fails to find the subject heading for certain thoughts, he should consult the topical index. Here he may discover that what he is looking for appears under a different heading. For instance, he will not find TAXES given as a subject heading; but the topical index will direct him to selection 1311 under the heading ECONOMICS. Here he will be able to find some of Luther's statements concerning taxes.

An anthology is always in danger of lacking coherence, of seeming to be atomistic, disconnected, a literary mosaic. To overcome this difficulty as much as possible we have not only arranged the material under each caption in a logical sequence but have also supplied transitional thoughts, mental steppingstones, from one passage to another. The selections under any given heading may, therefore, be read (more or less) as a topical unit. To make quick and accurate reference easier each selection has been given its own number.

2. *On Translating*

A word is in order on the principles we observed in translating. All selections were done into English from the original

German or Latin. Where available translations existed, these were consulted; some of them were used with revisions. Before the work was begun, we read with great interest what Luther himself, noted for his adeptness in translating, had to say. On November 29, 1520, the Doctor wrote to his intimate friend Spalatin: "No translation whatever, except a free one, is able to reproduce figures of speech and the incisiveness of a sententious and argumentative style — to say nothing of the labor required to catch the spirit of an author. . . . I notice that you are a bit too tightly bound and fear to change a single sentence, as is necessary" (W-Br 2, 220).

We see, then, that Luther himself cautioned against a translation that is slavishly literal. But it is as necessary to avoid the other extreme, paraphrasing instead of translating. True enough, the thought of the original is of prime importance. At times, however, it is difficult to present the author's thought in language patterned after the form of the original. As a result, the same thought, dressed in another language, may easily seem strange and a bit foreign. The classical comment, a sort of left-handed compliment, on a translation that was more of a paraphrase, is the remark of R. Bentley to Alexander Pope on his rendering of the *Iliad*: "A very pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer." We have striven to avoid exposing ourselves to the same criticism by adhering to the wording of the original as closely as possible without offending against English idiom.

It would be interesting to know what sort of style Luther himself would have developed if he had written in English. He once remarked that he tried to translate Moses in such a way that no one would suspect Israel's great leader of having been a Hebrew. How well he succeeded can be seen from his German

Bible — a translator's masterpiece. Yet there are those who hold that for all its beauty the Reformer's rendering of the Psalms is at times too paraphrastic. In his preface to the publication of the translated Psalms in 1533 he writes: "No doubt men will also try to exercise their keen criticism in another direction. We have frankly expressed ourselves satisfied with having observed the rules at times strictly to retain the wording (of the original), at times merely to give the sense. On this point in particular men will criticize us sharply and contend that we have not applied this rule correctly nor at the right time" (W 38, 17). From the Wartburg he wrote to his friend Von Amsdorf on January 13, 1522: "I now appreciate what it means to translate and why no one who has acknowledged the work to be his own has hitherto undertaken the task" (W-Br 2, 423).

3. "I Am Doing It as Well as I Can"

No one can be more conscious of not always having succeeded in doing full justice to the original than the writer of these lines. The more one enters into the spirit of Luther and his idioms, the more untranslatable they become. In their transition to another language something is lost, at times something undefinable, intangible, something you can feel but can find in no grammar and in no dictionary. Yet, fortunately, only "something." The genius of Luther is so pronounced that even a moderately faithful translation captures more than a little of it. We trust that by and large the reader will find our selections to be translated in such a way.

We wish to apply to our efforts what Luther said of his activities: "I am well aware of the fact that others might have handled the situation better than I did, but since they are holding their peace, *I am doing it as well as I can*. It is certainly better to have spoken on the sub-

ject, however inadequately, than to have remained silent altogether" (W 15, 49). Again, he said of his translation of the Bible: "I did the work only as a service to people who are unable to do it better. No one is forbidden to produce a better translation" (W 30 II, 633). And, finally, we would make our own the confession which the Doctor once made to friends around his table: "I have found translating to be such a laborious task! No one would have moved me by money or favors to translate a book if I had not done it for the sake of my Lord Christ" (W-T 2, No. 2623 a — August 1532).

D. PROFIT

1. "For the Sake of My Lord Christ"

"For the sake of my Lord Christ" is a fitting motto for the life and labors of Martin Luther. How the man learned to love Christ! How he glorified Him in his writings! He knew of no other God, wanted no other God, needed no other God. Indeed, "there is no other God, He holds the field forever," holds it forever also in the writings and in the theology of Luther. The Reformer's defense of the essential deity of the Savior is the grandest thing ever written on the subject. Dr. C. F. W. Walther, one of the founding fathers of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod in America, used to assure his classes at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, that no uninspired writer makes one as certain of having a gracious God as does Martin Luther. We fully agree.

Nor is that all. Despite an extensive reading program we have through the years found few writers indeed who have looked so deeply into the soul of man, have listened so intently to the beating of man's heart, and have studied so profoundly man's often puzzling nature. Even a rapid reading of Luther's writings will convince one that here is a man who really knew human nature in all its phases and ages from the cradle to the grave. Yet, for all that, the grandest thing in his

person and in his publications will forever remain his exaltation of Christ as the incarnation of the God of redeeming love.

This intense love of the Reformer is infectious. Luther has a way of making you feel the nearness of God and filling you with the love of Christ. But this love is far from being a dreamy emotionalism that evaporates in rapturous phrases. It is decidedly virile; there is nothing morbidly maudlin or mystical about it. It makes me want to be something and do something "*for the sake of my Lord Christ.*" True enough, at times a study of Luther's writings will also fill one with a feeling and a conviction of personal blessedness and heavenly peace. This precious enrichment will come like a breath of fresh air in the heat of day. There are experiences in a man's life that are so sacred to him that he hesitates to speak of them — moments of nearness to his God that he cannot describe even if he would. Those who have stood on the heights of some Pisgah and caught a glimpse of the Promised Land and of the rest that awaits the people of God will know what is meant.

2. "He Being Dead Yet Speaketh"

"He being dead yet speaketh." Down through the centuries men have experienced how impressively Luther speaks. Thus Dr. Ernst Zimmermann, who began his work on the anthology *Geist aus Luthers Schriften* more or less as a literary venture, years later wrote in the preface to the set: "As we progressed, we found his [Luther's] spirit reflected ever more gloriously in his works, and finally its grandness (*Grossartigkeit*) filled me with an admiration and a reverence such as not the most eloquent portrayal of the character of the great Reformer had been able to instill in me" (I, iv).

No wonder Luther's writings were as eagerly awaited and as avidly read as the most popular novels are in our day. Nor

only by theologians. Then, as later and always, Luther's appeal was as general as the divine truths which he so forcefully proclaimed. The German philosopher and literary light Johann von Herder testified to the benefits to be obtained from reading Luther's works. "When you need instruction," said Herder, "or long to have difficulties resolved, go to this living man of faith himself, this legitimate son of Paul. In his writing is so much sound sense, with such strength of spirit and fervor of an honest heart, that often, when worn out with frigid refinings and speculations of a more recent date, I have found that I was revived by him alone. . . . May the great Head of the Church revive . . . the spirit of the reformers so that the mantle of Luther may fall upon his professed followers and admirers, that all who pretend to teach may be taught of God, men of faith, learning, research, and above all, of ardent and unfeigned piety." (In Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation*, p. 82.) A world-renowned contemporary of Von Herder felt the same way. He had two sets of Luther's works in his possession, and they were well worn. The man was the immortal musical genius Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach has been called "the Luther of music." This much is certain: he has translated the beauty and the profundity and the strength of the Reformer into their musical equivalents.

3. "Learn to Know Your Luther"

To conclude this introduction we would speak in the final words of the preface to the (Braunschweig-) Berlin edition of Luther's works, adapting them to all those in the English-speaking world who love the truth as proclaimed by the Reformer. "Thus we have undertaken . . . to place your Luther into your hands so that you may learn to know, prize, and love him, so that you may draw inspiration from his writings, which are imbued with the Holy Spirit, to keep the faith, even as your forefathers kept the faith, when you hear the great hero of the faith speak of those things that made him strong and fearless. *Learn to know your Luther*, not covered with a political halo, not the commanding figure, hewn out of nothing but solid granite, but Luther as he lived and worked, in his greatness and also in his weakness. . . . Allow his word to touch you, as it admonishes you and urges you on, as it strikes you and raises you up, as it shows you the reflection of yourself" (M. Reu, *Thirty-five Years of Luther Research*, p. 35).

Truly, Luther's writings are never outdated; they are as modern as the love of God in Christ, which they glorify. "He being dead yet speaketh."

EWALD M. PLASS

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1956

February 18, the day of Luther's death

GUIDE TO REFERENCES, APPENDIXES, AND INDEXES

The location of selections is given in each of the three editions used and compared: the Weimar, the Erlangen, and the revised Halle. For the sake of rapid reference the volume numbers are given in Arabic numerals.

“E” refers to volumes of the German section of the Erlangen edition. All such references are to the revised second edition. But this revision was not completed; it covers Volumes 1—21 and 26—28.

“E op ex” refers to the Latin exegetical works of Luther in the Erlangen edition.

“E op var arg” to works of various kinds also in Latin.

“SL” refers to the revised Halle or Walch edition published at St. Louis.

“W” refers to the Weimar edition.

“W-Br” to the Weimar edition of Luther’s letters, *Briefe*.

“W-DB” to the volumes in the Weimar edition entitled *Deutsche Bibel*.

“W-T” to the table talk, *Tischreden*, in the Weimar edition.

Appendix A contains brief biographical sketches of men who frequently appear in the writings of the Reformer.

Appendix B offers a (mainly) chronological arrangement of the most noteworthy writings of Luther, with brief comments on them.

Appendix C is a chronological table of the age of the Reformation.

Appendix D is a selected and annotated bibliography.

Index A directs to selections that contain material on subjects other than the one under which they are to be found in the body of the work.

Index B lists the passages explained.

In both indexes references are not to pages but to selection numbers (e. g., 3000 or 3000 fn.).

**WHAT
LUTHER
SAYS**

An Anthology

A

ABSOLUTION

See also *Confessing Sin; Forgiveness, Divine; Means of Grace*

A GRACIOUS GOD — the certainty of having *Him* — was Luther's lifelong desire. Not until he was over thirty years old was he convinced that absolution afforded this certainty. In a sermon preached on April 11, 1531, and readied for print in the following year from the notes of George Roerer¹ and Anton Lauterbach, he defined the term. The text was Luke 24:36-47.

1 Term Defined Absolution is nothing else than the preaching and proclaiming of the forgiveness of sins, which Christ here commands us both to preach and to hear. But because it is necessary to preserve such preaching in the church, absolution, too, should be retained. For there is only this difference between the two: While through preaching the Gospel we publish this forgiveness everywhere and tell it to all in general, in absolution we tell it specifically to one or more desiring it. (W 21, 262 f — E 11, 321 f — SL 11, 721) —

BUT GOD has something to say also to those who desire no forgiveness, to the impenitent. The proclamation of this message is the use of the binding key. About the use of both the loosing and the binding keys, Luther wrote at some length in 1530 and then soon published the work in a revised edition.

2 The Two Keys By virtue of Christ's command we, then, have the following two keys. The key that binds is the

¹ Sketches of men active in the Reformation in Appendix A.

authority or the office (*Ampt*) to punish the unrepentant sinner with a public sentence to eternal death by a separation from Christendom. And when this judgment is passed, it is precisely as valid as though Christ Himself had passed it; and if the man does not change, he is certainly eternally damned. The key that looses is the authority or the office to pronounce the confessed and penitent sinner free from sins and to promise him eternal life again; and this, too, is as valid as though Christ Himself were judging. And if the man believes this and does not change, he is certainly eternally saved. The key that binds does the work of the Law and is profitable and good for the sinner in that it serves him by revealing his sin to him, by exhorting him to fear God, by terrifying him and bringing him to repentance and not to perdition. The key that looses does the work of the Gospel, invites to grace and mercy, comforts, and promises life and salvation through the forgiveness of sin. In a word, these keys are the *executores*, the executives and the administrators of the Gospel, which simply preaches (*schlecht dahin predigt*) these two doctrines, repentance and the forgiveness of sin (Luke 24:47). (W 30 II, 503 — E 31, 178 — SL 19, 952) —

SUCH PREACHING is like a man who is throwing coins into a crowd; whoever grasps a coin has one. But if a man were to send a servant to press a coin into the hand of a timid soul, we would have an illustration of private absolution. The human heart seems to find it easier to believe that the

world is redeemed than to believe that this universal redemption applies to it personally. To this Luther often called attention.

3 Private Absolution Individualizes
By the power of the keys secret sins are to be forgiven. . . . The Gospel is a public absolution; in the presence of the minister private absolution is given. (W-T 3, No. 3666)

THE SAME individualizing takes place in the Sacraments. In the sermon from which our first selection was taken Luther calls attention to this fact. The discourse is one of several which the Reformer preached in order to instruct people in the proper preparation for partaking of Holy Communion.²

4 The Sacraments Also Absolve the Individual To preach forgiveness of sins means nothing else than to absolve and to loose from sins. This is done also in Baptism and in the Sacrament of the Altar, for these were likewise ordained to exhibit the forgiveness of sin to us and to assure us of it. Therefore being baptized or receiving the Sacrament of the Altar is also an absolution. Here forgiveness is promised and awarded each person in particular in the name and at the command of Christ. You should hear this absolution when and as often as you are in need of it and should accept and believe it as if you were hearing it from Christ Himself. For since it is not our absolution, but Christ's command and Word, it is just as good and effective as if you were hearing it out of His own mouth. (W 21, 263 — E 11, 323 — SL 11, 722)

ABSOLUTION, then, is based on the Word and promise of Christ, says Luther. To pronounce it is not the private privilege of an individual only, be he Peter or his supposed successor, the pope. In his ser-

² See E 11, 197 and F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III, 189f.

mons on Matthew 18—24, preached 1537 to 1540, Luther points out this truth in connection with Matt. 18:18.

5 Keys Are Not Given to Peter Alone
But the pope says: Yes, I have come into St. Peter's place and only to St. Peter the keys have been given.—Listen, pope, St. Paul was not present when this command was given, for he did not see Christ in the flesh. Nevertheless he, too, had the power of the keys; and St. Paul did more for the Gospel, also preached more and planted more churches than the other apostles. All this is well known to the pope. He knows that the new Apostle St. Paul does not take the power of the keys from St. Peter, although he is the Apostle of the Gentiles. He glories and writes that he has his apostolate from no man, but immediately from Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:1); and yet he is the chief apostle, for he did more good than all the others. It certainly follows from this that the keys do not belong to Peter alone but that the other apostles have the same power and authority to forgive sin that St. Peter has. This is well known to the pope. How, then, can he boast that he alone possesses the keys? (W 47, 291 — E 44, 97 — SL 7, 934)

THE FACT of the matter is that even the apostles do not possess this power as a personal privilege. The keys, says Luther, have been given to Peter and the other apostles not as members of an exclusive caste or order but as Christians and confessors of Christ. Preaching a sermon in observance of the day dedicated to the memory of Peter and Paul (June 29), Luther said the following in his exposition of the noted words of the text "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19).

6 Keys, Possession of the Church, Merely Used for Her by Ministers No one is appointed as possessor of the keys except the churches, that is, those who stand on the Rock. The Christian Church alone has the keys, no one besides, al-

though bishop and pope may use them as those to whom they have been entrusted by the congregation (*Gemein*). A pastor exercises the office of the keys, baptizes, preaches, administers the Sacrament, and performs other offices by which he serves the congregation, not of his own accord but on behalf of the congregation. For he is a servant of the entire congregation to which the key is given though he be a rascal. For if he is acting instead of the congregation, then the church is acting. If the church is acting, then God is acting; for one must have a servant. If the entire congregation wanted to rush up to baptize, they might perchance drown the child; for about a thousand hands would grab for it. That would be no good at all. Therefore one must have a servant, who tends to this matter in place of the congregation. (W 17 II, 452 — E 15, 433 f — SL 11, 2304)

THAT THE POWER of the keys belongs to the church, to all upon whom the Spirit of God has breathed, that is, to all Christians, is proved, said Luther, by the Gospel for the First Sunday after Easter, John 20: 19-31. He stated as much in an exposition in 1526.

7 All Christians Do Possess Keys, But Only Ministers Use Them Publicly
Here the power of absolution is given to all Christians, although some, like the pope, bishops, priests, and monks, have appropriated it to themselves alone. They say publicly and shamelessly that this power is given to them alone and not to the laymen as well. But Christ is speaking here neither of priests nor monks. On the contrary, He says: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." This power is given to him who has the Holy Ghost, that is, to him who is a Christian. But who is a Christian? He who believes. He who believes has the Holy Ghost. Therefore every Christian has the power . . . to retain or to remit sins.

Now perhaps I shall hear the question: I may, then, hear confession, baptize, preach, administer the Sacrament of the Altar? No, St. Paul says: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). If everybody wanted to hear confession, to baptize, to administer the Sacrament, how unseemly that would be! Again, if everybody desired to preach, who would listen? If we were all to preach at the same time, what a confused chattering that would be, such as you now hear among the frogs!

Therefore it should be thus: the congregation chooses a suitable person, who administers the Sacrament, preaches, hears confession, and baptizes. To be sure, all of us possess this power; but no one except him who is chosen by the congregation to do so should presume to practice it publicly. In private I certainly may use this power. If, for instance, my neighbor comes and says: My friend, I am burdened in conscience; speak a word of absolution to me, then I am at liberty to do so. But in *private*, I say, this must be done. If I wanted to sit in the church, another man too, and we all wanted to hear confession, what rhyme or reason would there be in such conduct? Take an illustration. When a nobleman has many heirs, one is chosen, with the consent of all the others, who alone has the rule on behalf of the others. For what would happen if everybody wanted to rule over a country and its people? (W 10 I, 2, 239 f — E 11, 347 f — SL 11, 745 f)

BUT WHAT if a man does not believe the absolution that is pronounced? The relation between such an unbeliever and absolution is simply this: He is released, but he is not loosed; he is freed, but he is not free. He is like a prisoner whose cell is thrown open and who is declared a free man but nonetheless stays in his cell. Yet in a case such as this the loosing key would not be a *Fehlschlüssel*, as Luther calls it, a wrong key; for it would be certifying, a fact that exists irrespective of man's atti-

tude toward it. Faith does not make God's promises true and valid but merely accepts them as such.

8 Unbelief Does Not Make Loosing Key in Error

The pope . . . has taught that the key which remits sins (*der Löse-schlüssel*), absolution, may at times err. That doctrine was a genuine Anabaptist move. The pope taught: I absolve you from all your sins if you have sufficiently repented of them; then this absolution is valid; but if you have not sufficiently repented of them, it is invalid. But now who can say that he has felt sufficient repentance and sorrow for his sin? Still I am not to be absolved until and unless I have sufficiently repented and my absolution is preceded by the confession of all my sins and by a sufficient repentance and contrition. I can never know whether I have properly confessed and repented of everything. The pope, then, bases the power of absolution on the repentance, the confession, and the satisfaction of him who receives it. One ought to hang the pope on the public gallows and hang his keys around his neck to boot. For why, in the name of the devil, do you, pope, forgive guilt and punishment if you do not know whether the keys are certain and valid? The reason for this is the money which by this doctrine he has thrashed out of the purses of the people. That is not absolving but casting people into despair and the abyss of hell. . . .

You must be armed against this heresy and know that what God says and does is certain. For instance, when He says: Your sins are forgiven you in the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the power of the keys does not err. . . . Christ knows of no erring key. The absolution is truly certain and everlasting, although you may not believe it, just as the sun truly shines and beams in the heavens and is the true sun, although you may not see it or you may crawl into a cellar where you cannot see it. But

that would be your fault, not the sun's. God nonetheless considers it the true sun, which He has created to be a light to the world. . . . Just so, God knows nothing of the pope's erring key, but absolution is entirely certain. If, then, you do not believe the absolution, it is not its fault but yours. Why do you not accept it? If I distribute gold or silver and you accept it, you have it; if you do not accept it, the gold and silver nonetheless retain their nature and value, although you despise and reject my gift. (W 47, 334 — E 44, 166 f — SL 7, 993 f)

THE LAST EXPRESSION reveals how objective the Reformer considered salvation to be. It lies, as Luther so often put it, *extra nos*, outside us, before it gets into us; that is, Christ has completed our salvation, and faith is merely the hand that accepts it. To this thought, with its many implications, Luther calls attention in his writing *On the Keys* (*Von den Schlüsseln*), referred to above in our remarks on selection two.

9 Damnation and Salvation Exist Irrespective of Faith

Be sure that God has no other way of forgiving sin than through the Word, which He has commanded us men to speak. If you do not look for forgiveness in the Word, you will gape heavenward in vain for grace or, as they say, for "the forgiveness within."

Or do you speak as the sectarian spirits and the sophists do? They say: After all, many hear the binding and the loosing keys used but pay no attention to them and remain unbound and unloosed. Therefore something else must be present, something besides the Word and the keys: the Spirit, the Spirit, the Spirit, must do the work. But do you mean to say that whoever does not believe the key that binds is not bound? He will certainly find out in due time that the binding was not done in vain nor failed of its effect because of his unbelief. Just so he, too, who does not believe that he is free and

that his sins are forgiven will in due time find out how certainly his sins were forgiven him; but he did not want to believe it. (W 30 II, 498 — E 31, 171 f — SL 19, 946) ———

FAITH, then, is necessary, not indeed for the preparation but for the apprehension of forgiveness. Without faith even God cannot save a man. Luther makes this point in an exposition of Matt. 9:1-8, delivered in his home in 1533. His words refer to the comforting word "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee" (v. 2).

10 Faith Necessary for Personal Apprehension of Forgiveness To this day this is the way to obtain the forgiveness of sins. A servant of the church or some other Christian tells you: God is not angry with you; only see to it that you are not angry with Him. For the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ, He has forgiven you all your sins. When you hear this promise, you should believe it with all your might and should rather let yourself be torn apart than doubt it. For if you doubt, the absolution will not help you at all, although God with all His angels were to pronounce the absolution over you personally. For where faith is lacking, our Lord God is called (*schilt man*) a liar, as though what He is promising us were not true and He had no intention of keeping and redeeming the promise. May the good God graciously guard us against such unbelief and sin. (W 52, 497 — E 3, 114 f — SL 13a, 914) ———

AT THE SAME TIME, of course, the comfort of absolution should be withheld from the manifestly impenitent. With a directness and an emphasis for which he was noted, Luther says this in a little writing to preachers in which he calls on them to testify against usury. It was in 1540. Since a drought had made grain scarce, some were dealing in it with a view to forcing the price still higher. Luther held this to be against both the imperial and the divine right. No pastor should make himself the sharer of the guilt of such usurious monop-

olists. In a writing which he addressed to ministers in that year he told them how to speak to such presuming impenitents.

11 Culpable to Assure Impenitent of Forgiveness Repent and do what is right. If not, you can just as well go to the devil by yourself, without me and my absolution, as go to the devil with my absolution and, besides, drag me along by your guilt without my own guilt. Nay, fellow, I say: You may go; I shall stay here. I am not pastor to go to the devil with everybody but to bring everybody with me to God. (W 51, 371 — E 23, 306 — SL 10, 882) ———

HOWEVER, this does not mean that forgiveness rests on the sorrow of the sinner. This error, too, is guarded against in the writing *On the Keys*. (See introductory remarks to No. 9.)

12 Not That Forgiveness Rests on Repentance Remember that the keys or the forgiveness of sins do not depend on our penitence or worthiness . . . for this view is entirely Pelagian, Turkish, heathenish, Jewish, Anabaptistical, enthusiastic (*schwärmerisch*), and Antichristian; on the other hand, remember that our penitence, work, heart, and whatever we are, should rely on the keys and should depend on them with entire confidence, as on God's Word. And as you love the salvation of your body and soul, do not doubt in the least that what the keys tell and give you is as certain as though God Himself were speaking, as He truly is speaking; for it is His command and Word and not the command or the word of a man. But if you doubt, you are accusing God of lying, are inverting His order, and basing His keys on your penitence and worthiness. It is true, you should be sorry for your sins; but to hold that this insures the certainty of the forgiveness of sins and confirms the work of the keys is to forsake the faith and to deny Christ. He does not intend to forgive you your sin for your sake but

for His own sake, out of pure grace, through the keys. (W 30 II, 496 f — E 31, 168 f — SL 19, 943 f)

THEREFORE, says Luther, the matter of prime concern is to be faith. From the very beginning of the Reformation he recognized the indispensable necessity of a personal confidence for the apprehension of salvation. When, in the year after he had posted his *95 Theses*, he defended his position against misinterpretations in his *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute*, he stressed this by a further explanation of thesis thirty-eight.

13 In Absolution Rather Ask for Faith In absolving it is not as necessary to say: Are you sorry? as it is to say: Do you believe it possible for me to absolve you? Thus Christ says to the blind: "Believe ye that I am able to do this?" (Matt. 9:28) and "All things are possible to him that believeth" (Mark 9:23). This faith is certainly most clearly in evidence in the case of those who, agitated by a trembling conscience, rather feel their unbelief. (W 1, 596 — E op var arg 2, 243 — SL 18, 216)

AT THE SAME TIME, says the Reformer in his exhaustive interpretation of the seventh thesis in the same publication, the absolved should look to the Word rather than to anything within himself, because only the Word is the proper basis for faith, though sorrow for sin is an indispensable conditioning for it.

14 Absolved to Look to Word Rather Than His Feeling The absolved should make every effort to keep himself from doubting that his sins are remitted by God, and he should be quiet at heart. . . . But he who seeks peace in a different way — for instance, through an inner experience — certainly seems to tempt God and seek peace in substantial things (*in re*), not in faith. For you will have peace only to the extent to which you believe the word of Him who promises: "Whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth

shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). (W 1, 540 f — E op var arg 2, 153 f — SL 18, 120 f)

AND IN HIS EXPOSITION of the same thesis Luther also makes the point that since faith is based on Christ and His Word, the spiritual and moral character of the person pronouncing the absolution is really of no importance so far as the validity of the forgiveness is concerned.

15 Character of Absolver Does Not Affect Validity of Absolution Peter does not loose before Christ does but merely declares and shows the loosing of Christ. He who confidently believes truly has obtained peace and forgiveness before God. . . . Nor must one here think: What if the priest were in error? For not on the priest but on the Word of Christ rests the forgiveness. Therefore, though the priest may be doing it (absolving) in order to obtain profit or honor, only see to it that you honestly desire forgiveness and believe Christ, who is making the promise. Nay, even if he were to absolve in frivolousness, you nonetheless obtain peace by your faith. . . . Your faith receives the full blessing. So great a matter is the Word of Christ and faith in it. (W 1, 542 f — E op var arg 2, 156; 158 — SL 18, 123; 125 f)

THIS IS THE REASON why he who pronounces the absolution should be careful, says Luther in a sermon preached on the Gospel of the Sunday after Easter, in 1540, to direct men to no human being but to Christ and to Him alone. The text is John 20:19-31.

16 Absolver Should Direct Men to Christ Alone If absolution is to be right and effective, it must flow from the command of Christ and must say this: I absolve you from your sins, not in my name or in the name of some saint or for the sake of any human merit but in the name of Christ and by virtue of His command. He has commanded me to tell you that your sins are forgiven.

Therefore not I but He Himself (through my mouth) forgives you your sin. And you are in duty bound to accept this absolution and firmly to believe it not as the word of man but as if you had heard it out of the very mouth of the Lord Christ Himself. Therefore although the power to forgive sin belongs to God alone, we should at the same time know that He exercises and administers this power through the external office to which Christ calls His apostles and commands them to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in His name to all who desire it. (W 21, 296 — E 11, 362 — SL 11, 759)

THIS DIRECTING of the eyes of the penitent to Christ and His Word alone is of the utmost practical importance. The human heart is so constituted that it needs all the divine assurance it can get. In fact, even in the face of it the memory of past sins will rise at times like a haunting ghost. In his exposition of Genesis, delivered at the end of his life (1535—45), Luther bade especially the youth to whom he was lecturing to bear this in mind. He does so in connection with his explanation of chapter 37:18-20, which speaks of the plotting of Joseph's brothers to dispose of him.

17 Even So Regret Will Continue to Be Felt When the pastor of the church or some other servant of the Word comes to the aid of a distressed person and comforts his conscience, still, no matter how greatly he has comforted it, a sigh returns involuntarily and despite all feeling of consolation. I know what happens to me when I recall how I have lived in the past. For although I know that my sins are forgiven me, yet this *pukah*, this stumbling block, continues to return: I cannot live without a sob, without shame and blushing. I exclaim: Shame on you! What have you done! I know, I am not guilty of violating another's wife, of murder or similar enormous sins. There the little dog of regret cannot bite me; but it does bite me because of other

sins, even though my conscience has been hushed and the scar has healed. (W 44, 277 — E op ex 9, 116 — SL 2, 1107)

WE ARE, therefore, not surprised to hear that Luther, with his deep knowledge of sin and his sensitive conscience, thought highly of absolution, especially private absolution. Lauterbach reports that in February of 1539 he said it had meant much to him from the very beginning of his career.

18 Luther Experienced Comfort from Private Absolution Great is the benefit derived from the use of the keys and private absolution. By it the conscience can be quieted. Therefore I do not want it rejected. Under the papacy I was always a very sad monk, in the greatest spiritual labors. Finally I took comfort from this single word of a brother: "He (God) Himself commands us to hope. Our salvation lies in faith in God. Why, then, should we not trust God, who commands and enjoins upon us to hope?" By this word he revived me. (W-T 4, No. 4362 — A. Lauterbach, Feb. 22 to 26, 1539)

IN THE CLOSING MONTHS of 1532 Luther wrote to the people of Frankfort on the Main, cautioning them against the doctrines of Zwingli and his followers. In comparison with the conservative Luther they were radical reformers, desiring to expel much from the churches that was of great value to Luther. Announcement for Holy Communion, with its opportunity for personal exploration, the confession of sins, and the pronouncement of absolution were among these matters. But discarding these would impoverish, if not endanger, spiritual life, thought the Reformer.

19 Luther Would Retain Private Confession Because of the Absolution Following It For the sake of this part (absolution) most of all do I use confession, and I will not and cannot do without it, for it has often given me great comfort and still does so daily when I am sad and downcast. (W 30 III, 569 — E 26, 387 — SL 17, 2021)