

**THIS IS
LUTHER**

PLATE II



THE RIETSCHER LUTHER

Ernst Rietschel, noted designer of the Luther monument at Worms, gets the credit for this reproduction of the Great Reformer's head. After Rietscher's death in 1861, his pupil Huettig completed the work of his master

THIS IS LUTHER

A Character Study
by
Ewald M. Plass



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Acknowledgments

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TO
MY WIFE

Preface

February 18, 1946, was the 400th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther. The world has not forgotten him. The amazing number of books and articles on the great Reformer has received a sizable accession at the quadricentennial of his death. Perhaps, then, these remarks ought to be a sort of justification and an apology. It may seem presumptuous to offer anything on a subject which has engaged the thoughts and the pens of great scholars for centuries. But the following is not another biography of Luther. It is intended to be a character study. It is to tell what Luther *was* rather than what Luther *did*; or, to express the same thought somewhat differently, it is interested in what Luther did only inasmuch as it serves as a revelation of what he was. There are enough biographies of the Reformer, and no doubt there will be more, but studies of his gigantic and versatile character are practically nonexistent in the English language.

The sketch here offered does not profess to have plumbed the depth of Luther's character. Its modest aim is merely to offer a few illustrations of the many-sidedness and the richness of one of the most remarkable men that ever lived. But if these lines stimulate others to take up their pens and give us a life-size portrait of Luther, such as the younger Holbein might have given us with his brush, they will have served one of their purposes. Then, too, we hope the reader will come to feel some of that admiration and reverence for Luther with which the writer of these lines has increasingly been filled during many years of reading his mighty writings. The undersigned would like humbly to lay the wreath of this little study on the tomb of this great man of God. The flowers in the wreath, at least the beautiful ones, grew in Luther's garden; they are quotations gathered from his own writings.

E. PLASS

Milwaukee, Wis., 1947

On Luther's birthday, November 10

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Chronological Outline of the Age of Luther

(Projecting dates refer to Luther's life)

1483 Nov. 10, born at Eisleben.

1484–1497 at Mansfeld. Father a miner.

1485 Aug. 25, Treaty of Leipzig divides Saxony into two parts, Electoral, or Ernestine, and Ducal, or Albertine.

1485–1500 Duke Albert of Saxony.

1487–1525 Elector Frederick the Wise.

1492–1503 Pope Alexander VI.

1493–1519 Emperor Maximilian.

1497–1498 at Magdeburg school under Brothers of the Common Life.

1498–1501 at Eisenach school; Frau Cotta.

1500—1539 April 17, Duke George the Bearded.

1501 matriculates at University of Erfurt about May.

1502 B. A.

1503–1513 Pope Julius II.

1504–1567 Philip, Landgrave of Hesse.

1505 M. A.; enters Augustinian monastery, July.

1507 ordained priest; first Mass May 2.

1508 called to University of Wittenberg to teach Aristotle's *Ethics*.

1509 March, degree Baccalaureus ad Biblia.

1509 autumn, called to teach Lombard's *Sentences* at Erfurt.

1509—1547 Henry VIII king of England.

1510 October—February, 1511, journey to Rome; December spent there.

1511 summer, returns to Wittenberg; lectures on Bible.

1512 October, Doctor of Theology.

1513—1521 December, Pope Leo X.

1515 May, elected district vicar of Augustinian order.

1515—1547 Francis I king of France.

1517 Oct. 31, posts 95 Theses on door of Castle Church, Wittenberg.

1518 Oct. 12–14, interview with Cardinal Cajetan, Augsburg.

- 1519 Jan. 4—5, interview with Miltitz at Altenburg.
 1519—1555 Emperor Charles V (elected June, 1519).
- 1519 July 4—14, debate with John Eck at Leipzig.
- 1520 June 15, Leo X signs bull *Exsurge Domine*, threatening to excommunicate Luther within 60 days.
- 1520 August, publishes *The Address to the Christian Nobility*.
- 1520 October, publishes *On the Babylonian Captivity*.
- 1520 November, publishes *On the Freedom of a Christian Man*.
- 1520 Dec. 10, burns papal bull and Canon Law.
- 1521 April 17—18, at the Diet of Worms. Edict signed May 26.
- 1521 May 4—March 1, 1522, at Wartburg.
 1522—1534, September, Pope Clement VII.
 1523 revolt of knights under Sickingen put down May 7.
 1524 Diet of Nuremberg.
 1524–1525 Peasants' War.
- 1525 June 13, marries Catherine von Bora (born January, 1499, Nimbschen; Cistercian cloister, 1508; leaves cloister April, 1523).
 1525 February, Charles V wins victory over Francis I at Pavia.
 1525–1532, August, Elector John the Steadfast.
 1526 May, Philip of Hesse and John of Saxony form League of Torgau.
 1526 June and July, Diet of Spires.
 1527 May 6, Rome sacked by imperial troops.
 1529 Feb. 26, Diet of Spires opens; Lutheran princes protest April 25.
- 1529 publishes catechisms.
- 1529 Oct. 2, conference at Marburg with Zwingli and others.
- 1530 April 23—Oct. 4 at Feste Coburg during Diet of Augsburg.
 1530 Diet of Augsburg; Augsburg Confession read June 25.
 1531 October, Zwingli falls in battle of Cappel.
 1532 Peace of Nuremberg between Protestants and Catholics.
 1532—1547 Elector John Frederick the Magnanimous; lived as Duke of Saxony till 1554.
- 1534 publishes the whole Bible in German (begun 1521).
 1534 Anabaptist rising in Muenster.
 1534 Ignatius Loyola founds Jesuit order.
 1534 English Act of Supremacy.
 1534–1549 Pope Paul III.
- 1536 signs Wittenberg Concord with leaders of German Zwinglians.
- 1537 Smalkald congress and Articles.
 1539—1541 August, Duke Henry the Pious. Reformation of Ducal (Albertine) Saxony.
 1541 John Calvin (1509—1564) introduces Reformation in Geneva.
 1541—1546 Duke Maurice of Albertine Saxony, made Elector 1546, died 1553.
- 1545 publishes *Against the Papacy at Rome Founded by the Devil*.
 1545–1563 Council of Trent.
- 1546 Feb. 18, dies in Eisleben; buried in All Saints' Church, the castle church, in Wittenberg.

1546–1547 Smalkald War; battle of Muehlberg, April 24; Elector John Frederick captured and Maurice of Albertine Saxony given the electorate and some of his lands.

1547– 1553 Edward VI king of England.

1547—1559 Henry II king of France.

1552 Dec. 20, Catherine Luther dies.

1555 Sept. 25, Religious Peace of Augsburg.

“The Word they still shall let remain”

**THIS IS
LUTHER**

CHAPTER 1

Introductory

*Blessed be the day of Martin Luther's birth!
It should be a festival second only
to that of the nativity of Jesus Christ.
Robert Southey, English poet*

LUTHER'S CHARACTER IS ONE OF THE NOBLEST AND PUREST IN history. This statement is made deliberately. It is no snap judgment, dictated by blind partisan zeal and based merely upon the writings of the Reformer's friends and sympathizers. Over a period of twenty-five years we have carefully read the criticisms of Luther by those who are unsympathetic to him and to just about everything for which he stands. It need hardly be said that such writers have left no stone unturned, no corner unexplored, no incident in Luther's life, however trivial, unexamined. Perhaps no man's life has ever been looked into with such amazing thoroughness. But the life of Luther has stood the test. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the enemies of the Reformer. They have stimulated microscopic research; and their own investigations have proved the generally accepted picture of Luther's character to be the correct one. The old adage "Familiarity breeds contempt" does not apply to Luther. Gustav Freytag justly says: "His picture has the remarkable quality of becoming bigger and more lovable the closer it is approached."¹

It is nothing short of a miracle of God's grace that a man of Luther's energy and intensesness consistently lived on a plane so high that his life must be microscopically examined to discover anything objectionable. Even then it is found that his faults were the failings common to men. "Wo viel Licht, da viel Schatten," the Germans say; that is: Where the light is bright, the shadow is deep. Luther is a remarkable exception to the rule of this proverb. He was highly gifted and a veritable dynamo of energy. Such characters frequently do everything on a grand scale. They are men of extremes. There are great heights but also great depths in their characters, brilliant light but also grim shadows. Luther's character has shadows, but they are astoundingly light. We thank God for that fact.

THE WORD, NOT LUTHER, THE OBJECT OF FAITH

No one, of course, ought to accept Luther's Gospel because of the nobility of his character or the breadth and profundity of his learning. What Luther preached must stand entirely on its own merits. What Ambrose Blarer, a friend of Luther, said ought to be the confession of all who believe as Luther taught. When, in 1522, Blarer forsook the Benedictine monastery, he justified

his step by publishing a defense. In this apology we find the following statement: “Therefore I will rather lose my body and life and all my fortune than be moved from my position; not on account of Luther, who is personally strange and unknown to me except by his writings—he also is human and therefore subject to mistake and error like other men—but on account of the divine Word which he carries in him so transparent and clear and proclaims and elucidates with such victorious and triumphant success and with such candid and unterrified spirit.”² Blarer had the right approach to the “Luther problem.” It is not a personal problem at all. Had the Reformer looked back upon a past stained with vice and immorality, as did Augustine and many of Luther’s own critics, that deplorable circumstance would in no wise have detracted from the eternal verity of his message. Those who by blackening his character seek to discredit the Gospel he preached are engaged in a venture as futile as it is mean. Even if their strictures were justified, they would leave the point at issue entirely untouched. Just parenthetically be it remarked that *this* method of discrediting Lutheran doctrine comes with a peculiarly bad grace in particular from those who recognize such monsters of iniquity as John XXIII, Sixtus IV, and Alexander VI as their religious leaders. But we shall let that pass. Prejudice and inconsistency—to use no stronger term—are close relatives. To return to the main thought: The Gospel of a gratuitous salvation ought to be accepted not because Luther preached it, but because God revealed it. It is *God’s* Gospel, not *Luther’s*. “It did not grow in my garden,” truly said the Reformer. Julius Hare, chaplain of Queen Victoria, correctly and pithily remarked: “The Reformation does not rest on the character of Luther, but on the Word of God.”³

LUTHER’S WORK MORE IMPORTANT THAN HIS PERSON

And yet, the proclamation of that Gospel in apostolic purity has endeared Luther to millions as has nothing else that he was or did. Great as his character is, the Gospel he preached is infinitely greater. It is the shame and the tragedy of modern Protestantism that this truth is no longer recognized. In 1910, Preserved Smith published a *Life and Letters of Martin Luther*. We believe this to be one of the best English biographies of Luther. Particularly the judicious introduction of some of Luther’s letters makes the Reformer live in this biography—though it is almost impossible to write an uninteresting life of so colorful and dynamic a character. But while Smith appreciates the heroic in Luther and testifies to the charm of his personality, he is quite unsympathetic to the Reformer’s doctrinal position and principles. Smith closes his preface to the second edition of 1914 with the words: “After all, Luther’s strongest appeal to us is his personality. His true originality is his character, his greatest work his life, his most remarkable achievement himself.”⁴ We believe Preserved Smith has entirely misunderstood Luther’s greatest contribution to history. His “most remarkable achievement” is not “himself.” It is the purification of Christendom; it is the restoration of the Pauline, the Scriptural, doctrine of justification by faith. As we shall see, Luther himself considered that achievement his claim upon the memory of mankind. With characteristic modesty he considered it his only claim.

MUCH SOURCE MATERIAL AVAILABLE

So much is certain: if Luther is misunderstood, the fault must lie with the interpreter. Both primary and secondary sources offer an almost incredible wealth of material to the student of Luther. “A glance at the catalog of almost any great library—that of the British Museum for instance—will show that more has been written about Luther than about any man, save one,

who ever lived”;⁵ and that “One” was more than a man. He was the Son of Man and the Son of God. There are over 200 complete biographies of Luther. Many are available in every major language of the world. But it is not our intention to draw heavily upon such secondary sources. We shall concern ourselves primarily with source material. There is an amazing wealth of this, from Luther’s *Sieben Busspsalmen* (Seven Penitential Psalms), his first production, in 1517, to his last letter to his wife, dated February 14, 1546. Few writers have been more prolific. In all Luther published over 350 works. These include a number of translations and many pamphlets. As a writer Luther has at times been accused of prolixity, but it must be borne in mind that many of his ideas introduced his contemporaries to a new world of thought. This made necessary a repetition which today impresses many as verbosity. His expressions and ideas are almost inexhaustible. Not inappropriately his words have been called “halfbattles.” The still incomplete Weimar edition of his works now contains approximately 100 volumes, each averaging 700 pages in quarto format. Such literary productivity is not entirely unapproached. St. Augustine is credited with 232 works and the “literary behemoth” of colonial America, Cotton Mather, with 382. But these writers never attained the popularity of Luther. As early as 1520 the Reformer writes: “I have printed so much there is danger that I shall weary the buying public at length.”⁶ But in the same year a friend of Erasmus wrote to Zwingli from Paris: “No one’s books are bought more eagerly. A certain bookseller told me that at the last Frankfort fair he had sold fourteen hundred copies of Luther’s works, which had never before happened with any other author.”⁷

LUTHER’S “TABLE TALK” LARGELY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

The average non-Lutheran is perhaps most familiar with Luther’s *Table Talk*. It offers much material and sheds much light on the Reformer’s views concerning everything imaginable. From the Holy Trinity to tree grafting, from the resurrection to recipes, from the trivialities of daily life to the weightiest concerns of our eternal destiny—almost the entire field of human life and knowledge is covered by these off-the-record remarks of Doctor Luther. In the Weimar edition of his works no fewer than 6 volumes are devoted to these colorful titbits of the oracle of his day. I think it is Froude who somewhere calls the *Table Talk* of Luther “one of the most brilliant books in the world” and says it is as full of food for thought as the plays of Shakespeare. Probably few who have read the inimitable *Table Talk* will consider this assertion an exaggeration. The temptation to linger over the *Table Talk* is great. There is such a delightful bonhomie about it. It reveals the great Luther to us in a setting and an atmosphere of relaxation. And we find him to be thoroughly interesting as a man. There is a conversational dishabille about this *Table Talk* which makes it unique. In fact, the timid, social precisian Melanchthon at times cautioned some of Luther’s friends against perpetuating *all* the remarks of the genial, candid Doctor. He thought they were too intimate and frank. Melanchthon held that a man ought never entirely shed a certain professional dignity lest he lose caste with his inferiors. Luther was never concerned about impressing people in that way. “No man ever lived whose whole heart and soul and life have been laid bare as his have been to the eyes of mankind. Open as the sky, bold and fearless as the storm, he gave utterance to all his feelings, all his thoughts: he knew nothing of reserve: and the impression he produced on his hearers and friends was such, that they were anxious to treasure up every word that dropped from his pen or from his lips.”⁸

HOW IT WAS PRESERVED

In our characterization of the Reformer we shall at times make use of the *Table Talk*. But it is to be quoted with care. It is important to remember as a matter of fact that Luther did not write this collection himself. Its assembling, arrangement according to subject matter, and its ultimate publication are to be credited to a small group of Lutheran Boswells. In the late 1520's they gathered around the supper table in the Black Monastery, Luther's home. Some were Luther's famuli, others tutors of his children, still others boarders in the Luther household. One of these boarders, Conrad Cordatus, first conceived the idea of recording these remarks of Luther. Soon others followed his example. Among them were Lauterbach, Roerer, Veit Dietrich, Johann Schlaginhaufen, and Hieronymus Weller, little Hans Luther's tutor. The circle grew and by the 1540's included Johann Aurifaber and Johann Mathesius, subsequently one of Luther's first biographers. At first there was no thought of publication. But in 1566 Johann Aurifaber gave to the press what for years had been one of his most prized treasures. In preparing the *Talk* for publication he naturally drew upon his memory to expand the notes hurriedly taken down at the Doctor's table. The resultant book was an immediate success. Thereupon arose a demand for the personalia found in the notebooks of the other "Boswells." When these were compared, it was of course found that there were discrepancies due to mishearing or misunderstanding. Since that time the effort to establish the original version of these Luther remarks has been the Herculean task of scholars. But though they must, therefore, be used with care, this famous *Table Talk* of Luther gives us many an intimate glimpse, many a close-up of the man. At times it permits us to look as deeply into the soul of Luther as his letters do.

LUTHER'S LETTERS ESPECIALLY VALUABLE SOURCE MATERIAL

Luther's letters—what a gold mine for the man in search of source material for a picture of the real Luther! We shall see that the Reformer had all the attributes of an interesting correspondent. He possessed a fine command of language, had a keen sense of humor, and a very wide range of interests. In consequence we shall draw largely on the letters. We shall let Luther speak of himself and for himself as much as possible. And we can well afford to assume little more than the role of a master of ceremonies; for if ever a man laid bare his heart and his soul in his letters, that man was Martin Luther. Few men we know of could better afford to do so, for few have had less to hide from the eyes of their fellow men; few have lived closer to God. Writing to the philosopher Maeurer, Luther says: "It makes no difference if my letters to you are delivered to someone else. I do not fear to have them public property, for I write under God's sight."⁹

CANDOR OF LUTHER'S LETTERS

There are persons whose letters read like essays. There is an atmosphere of detachment about them which makes them almost impersonal. They are stiff and formal. This cannot be said of the letters of Luther. The Reformer possessed a vivid imagination. We recall the remark of a now deceased professor of homiletics: "Look at your audience while writing your sermon." Luther did that while writing his letters. He imagined the addressee present. His letters have all the spontaneity, informality, and warmth of a personal conversation. There is nothing studied about them, nothing Chesterfieldian. Luther never strikes a pose. The Luther of his letters is "Luther, wie er leibt und lebt." Herder said of him: "He gives a picture of himself in every line."¹⁰