



Luther as Resource for Parish Ministry

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I. THE BROADEST POSSIBLE CONTEXT

A short time spent in reading the volumes of Luther's correspondence gives compelling insight into the diversity and breadth of the man's concerns. His attention to personal tragedies, to the celebrations of his friends and family, and to all the theological questions of the day brings forth a kaleidoscope of quotations from the Bible and generous personal counsel. He has an answer for everything. He is concerned about everyone. Luther demonstrates the potential for ministry in the personal letter.

As a Bible teacher, Martin Luther felt no constraints to limit himself to religious affairs. In his writings and sermons the Holy Scriptures were immediately relevant to all of the community's life. His gift of being able to hear the voice of God in, with, and under the voices of Moses, David, Isaiah, Matthew, and Paul gave Luther the authority to relay that ultimate voice as it addressed the people and problems of his day. In the *Treatise on Good Works* of 1520 he established the theoretical base of this concern for the entire community and his confident approach to implementing that concern:

When a husband and wife really love one another, have pleasure in each other, and thoroughly believe in their love, who teaches them how they are to behave to one another, what they are to or not to do, say or not to say, what they are to think? Confidence alone teaches them all this and even more than is necessary.¹

Of this writing James Atkinson comments in his introduction to it, "With this single treatise Luther obliterates the distinction between the religious and the secular, and altered the whole system of Christian ethics."² He unified society as he saw it from the pulpit's vantage point. Emboldened by his own personal confidence of faith, Luther in his sermons and treatises, tracts and books addressed all of society and held it accountable to God.

In the year 1520 Luther produced four great treatises: *On Good Works*, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, *A Prelude to the Babylonian Captivity of the*

¹Martin Luther, "Treatise on Good Works," *Luther's Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 44.26f.; hereafter cited as *LW*.

²*Ibid.*, 20.

Church, and *A Treatise on Christian Liberty*. The treatise on *Good Works* was finished in March, the *Open Letter* around the middle of August, the *Babylonian Captivity* in October, and *Christian*

Liberty in the middle of November. He did all this in addition to his teaching, preaching, and administrative duties. Schwiebert notes that from October 30, 1519, to April 2, 1521, Poliander transcribed 116 sermons that Luther had preached.³ It was a time of high theological productivity in his life and a season of concern for the breadth of his entire community context. Just as Luther broke down the walls that separated the religious from the secular, and the laity from the priesthood, he also broke down any walls that separated the pulpit from the arena of public concern. “A Christian,” wrote Luther, “is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none. A Christian...is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁴ Therefore the duty of any parish pastor who follows in Luther’s succession is to fix sights on the broadest possible context for preaching and teaching. Indeed, the preacher together with all Christian hearers and doers are lords as well as servants in the greater community.

II. EDUCATION AND THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

This context included for Luther himself broad societal concerns and issues; it also included society’s cultural needs and potential. In the first half of the sixteenth century, central Europe was ready for a new appropriation of its national languages; Germany would be among the first to do this. The academy’s preoccupation with Latin stalemated the normal development of the common languages. The dominant role of the Roman church in public life and its commitment to Latin retarded the growth and flowering of national literatures. Martin Luther himself was both master and servant to medieval Latin. Many of his significant works were originally written in Latin; for example, the first edition of his works was published in Latin in 1545. Those who don’t read Latin or German and read Luther only in English can enjoy this one small snicker: they who make loud noises about reading Luther in German are also often reading translations, and frequently don’t realize it.

The popularity of Luther’s tracts, sermons, and catechisms gave him the opportunity to make his German dialect a national language. Especially his translation of the Bible into the German of the Saxon court made Luther’s German the voice of the people. But it didn’t just happen because of historical accident; he wasn’t just the right person at the right place, at the right time. Martin Luther chose to serve the community in this area of cultural need and potential by a thoroughgoing excellence in both the mastery of his native German and the classical languages. In this he thumps his drum, “I can interpret the Psalms and prophets; they can’t. I can translate; they can’t. I can read Holy Scripture; they can’t.”⁵ However, he doesn’t leave it at that. He cares enough about the community at large to be concerned about the role that language and literature play

³E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950) 438-39.

⁴Martin Luther, *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947) 251.

⁵Martin Luther, *Die Gantze Heilige Schrifft Deudsch, Anhang* (Darnstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973) 244.

in determining the quality of life and to plead for language study and for the schools and teachers that make it possible. Luther is first the servant of Christ and through the Lordship of Christ he serves the whole community. “The Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all...a perfectly dutiful servant of all.”

Martin Luther's concern for the church's mission is neither parochial nor sectarian. In his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* (1520) he pleads for the reform of the universities for the sake of the nation's future. His arguments against indulgences and ecclesiastical annuities in this letter are written out of concern for their theological legitimacy, but also out of concern for the economic well-being to the greater community as that affects its ability to provide education for all people. According to Luther, the pastor and the teacher of theology are accountable for both the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world and for the work of God according to all three articles of the creed: creation, redemption, and sanctification. "Let us have doctors and masters, pupils and students who are the seed and wellspring of the church....God preserves the church by means of schools, the schools preserve the church."⁶

The catechisms can also be cited as further evidence for the breadth of Luther's concern for the human community. Reform determined what should be taught and preached in the pulpit; he staked his life on the right preaching and teaching of the gospel and on a restoration of sacramental life. To enable that, he fashioned educational tools for the parish clergy so that they might be instrumental in improving the quality of the community's cultural life for the sake of communicating the gospel. But he not only wanted to eradicate ignorance of the gospel; he wanted to eradicate ignorance. Luther writes to all faithful and godly pastors and preachers:

You should also take pains to urge governing authorities and parents to rule wisely and educate their children. They must be shown that they are obliged to do so, and that they are guilty of damnable sin if they do not do so, for by such neglect they undermine and lay waste both the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world and are the worst enemies of God and man.⁷

III. CONTINUING EDUCATION

The man took his own counsel seriously. He remained a student his whole life long. Surely he didn't invent continuing education, but he was an enthusiastic practitioner of it. Isn't that predictable, though, of a language student and of someone who has labored at translating throughout his professional life? Enough is never enough in the study of language. New achievements open vistas of greater heights to scale. The study of Hebrew leads to the study of Aramaic, and Aramaic leads to Arabic and Ugaritic. The insistence on language study as preparation for and the practice of theological study riot only gives insight into the mysteries of sacred Scriptures, but also, if taken seriously,

⁶Martin Luther, "Colloquia oder Tischreden," *Sämmtliche Schriften*, ed. J. G. Walch (St. Louis: Concordia, 1887) 22.1537.

⁷Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," *Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 340. See also "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School, 1530," *LW* 46.213-258.

language study provides preparation for a life-long pursuit of understanding. There is no more effective matrix for scholarship in pastoral ministry than the study of Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and one's own native tongue. Luther said it:

It's my intention toward you that you not despise the study of language but that you would encourage your preachers and intelligent young men (*geschickte Knaben*) to learn Latin, Greek and Hebrew. I know in certainty that that person

who shall preach and interpret the Scripture and is not schooled in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and must rely entirely on his mother tongue, will frequently miss the mark.⁸

H. G. Haile tells of the afternoon translation sessions in the black cloister.⁹ Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and Matthew Aurogallus—all professors at the University of Wittenberg—would gather to do and redo Luther’s original translations of the Hebrew Bible into German. Their zeal for the pithy phrase and the fitting expression kept them meeting and revising year in and year out. Luther did not tire of publishing new versions of his original translations of the Bible. He held himself accountable to the community for the best possible rendition into German of the original Hebrew and Greek. This meant that the job was never finished but constantly needed to be redone. It’s a parable of the preacher’s task who is accountable to the community for the best possible telling and retelling, interpreting and reinterpreting the ancient Word. Note, however, that the preacher’s community will not always appreciate the work. Luther offers six qualities that the community seeks in a preacher:

1. that he have a good speaking voice, 2. that he be learned, 3. that he be eloquent,
4. that he have a handsome exterior, 5. that he take no money but give money to preach, 6. that he say what they like to hear.¹⁰

IV. GIVE IT ALL YOU’VE GOT

As a resource for parish ministry Martin Luther moves the limitations of responsibility beyond parish borders, beyond denominational loyalties, and beyond the concerns of my church, my synod, my seminary, my people, my pulpit, my program, my future, my family. He lived and worked in the context of the broadest community with total abandon. He didn’t count the cost. The woes and joys of Katherina Luther’s life with him gives ample evidence of how others also bore the cost of his reckless determination. The conundrums which the pastor’s spouse often faces are seminal to Katie’s predicaments, especially her troubled situation after Martin’s death. Surely Luther’s situation in life helps those in parish ministry accept their limitations, but it also counsels against too much caution and the need for too much security. Security and caution in parish ministers function like muzzle and mute.

⁸Martin Luther, quoted by Conrad Porta, *Pastorale Lutheri* (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1842) 54, from the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s Works, 2.220.

⁹H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980) 59ff.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 45.

V. DO IT FROM THE HEART

Pulpit and altar comprised the heart of Luther’s community. He inherited that from those who preceded him. It was his situation in life. He didn’t bring that about; it was the way of life in sixteenth century Europe. Luther did see beyond it, and in his sermons and lectures, his tracts and disputations he always seemed to have before him the greater audience of the total community. In Luther’s day this was that unique political and cultural institution called the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. But even beyond that, his audience also included France, Henry VIII, the

Greeks, and the Turks. He saw the empire in all its diversity, from the Hussite Bohemians to Italy's Waldensians. And he instinctively recognized that the heart of this great community was pulpit and altar.

Pulpit and altar served Luther as the vantage point from which he addressed this community, which is why his vision's breadth did not blunt the edge of his preaching and teaching. He achieved a delicate balance between the greater audience in his community and the individual student in his lecture hall, the parishioner before his pulpit and at his altar, and the Christian in the presence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: *coram Deo*. Martin Luther targeted the Empire and beyond the Empire, but his arrows didn't miss the individual human beings who peopled the Empire, the lecture hall, and St. Mary's Church. The pages and pages he wrote in the explication, interpretation, and application of the Word were grounded in his ministry at pulpit and altar. Ministry for Martin Luther was never abstract. His ministry bore the concreteness of his weekly sermons and services at St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg and his classroom at the university.

My early preoccupation with the definition and defense of the Bible's authority led me to a superficial and abstract understanding of the Word of God in Luther's theology. I isolated the pulpit from the altar and the Bible from the pulpit. For Luther the Scriptures have no naked existence that needs defending. They are clothed with the Spirit's power and presence as through Word and sacrament the Spirit ministers to the community at pulpit and altar. For him they are always being applied, appropriated, and apprehended in ministry. There is neither verse nor chapter that does not have immediate relevance to real people and actual human situations. His comments on Psalm 118 (*LW* 14) illustrate this; dedicated to Pistorius of Nuremberg they are a commentary that has the power of the preacher's heart to move and motivate.

VI. THIS HEART HAS SPACE FOR ALTAR AS WELL AS PULPIT

Jaroslav Pelikan's study of Luther as expositor of the Bible concentrates on his extended study of the words of institution for Holy Communion as a primary example of Luther's exegetical work.¹¹ It gives a clue to Luther's devotion to the sacramental presence of Christ. He is a man of the pulpit, and he is a man of the altar.

The professor of biblical theology at the University of Wittenberg, erst-

¹¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, *LW* Companion Volume, 137-260. To further investigate Luther's theology of the Eucharist see *LW*, volumes 35-38.

while Augustinian friar, and pastor of St. Mary's Church, never wanders far from the altar. As the pulpit gives his vision its breadth and length, the altar gives his vision focus. It is altar as well as pulpit that stands at the heart of this community. The altar is the stage for worship. At the altar the living Word is clothed with creation's realities: bread and wine. The people of God will not only hear it, they will also eat it and drink it. Luther never wanders far from the altar.

This is a primary resource for parish ministry which Martin Luther offers us: the altar. The altar stands at the center of the ecumenical community of the church as well as does the pulpit. For Luther the resurrected Christ is bodily present at the altar. Christ is as close to the believer as the believer is to the Word and the bread and wine.

The ubiquity of Jesus' sacramental body incarnates the church's unity and incorporates

the church's members into the lordship of their head. Jesus Christ is the universal Word who gives the flesh and blood born of Mary's womb to individual human beings; this he does by means of the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, Paul, and by means of our words as we speak theirs.¹² Christ is the Word, who by means of the words, clothes himself in bread and wine. For Luther the word is not naked; graciously, God has clothed the Word in printed paper, in talk, and in bread and wine so that it can possess us in the totality of our lives. Pelikan writes, "Since the Lord's Supper thus granted a share in the total redemptive work of Christ crucified and risen, it was a means by which that total redemptive work of Christ was applied to the total life of man."¹³

When reading Luther, every time "mass," "sacrament of the altar," or "Lord's Supper" appears, one should append "*every Sunday, every service is Holy Communion.*" That's all he ever knew. His writings are many and diverse; I am well acquainted with only a small segment of the man's life and work; nothing I have ever read veers in any consequential way from this presupposition for parish ministry: *every Sunday, every service is Holy Communion.* It's fundamental to his understanding of the church. Our advance to that setting for parish ministry and for the day-to-day teaching and preaching of the Word will put us at the heart of the ecumenical community of the church. The altar makes for a really Christ-centered ministry. Compared with the vigor of Martin Luther's exposition of the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, any effort to punt when it comes to *every Sunday, every service is Holy Communion* seems puny.

VII. HE TOOK TIME FOR RESTORATION

Martin Luther belonged to the community in which he lived with soul and body. He entered into the theological and political fray of those exciting times with no holds barred. His future was heavy with dark expectations of cosmic cataclysm and the coming of Christ to judge the living and the dead. That only seemed to

¹²See especially Hymn 215 *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication LCA, 1978). This is one of Luther's favorite hymns; cf. *Hymnal Companion to LBW* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 295.

¹³J. Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, 186.

throw him all the deeper into the tumult of the present. That coming gloom day didn't rob him of his joy in creation and in the human arts. If "now was the day of salvation," now was also the day of recreation and restoration through music and poetry, and the companionship of friends. He was never so serious about his scholarship and day-to-day affairs that he couldn't laugh at himself and marvel at how he and his friends had turned the world upside down. H. G. Haile writes of an incident in which Professor Luther and Pastor Bugenhagen were riding in a coach on the streets of Wittenberg; they were going to meet Vergerio, a papal emissary. Luther had dressed to fit the occasion, writes Haile:

in a jacket of dark camlet (a heavy oriental fabric of goat hair woven in intricate pattern), the sleeves with a showy ballooning of satin. Over it he slipped a coat of cretonne, richly lined with fox fur....Luther announced: "Behold the German Pope and Cardinal Pomeranus, witnesses and instruments of God."¹⁴

In all the seriousness of alb and stole and chasuble, parish ministers have to be able to laugh at themselves.

Luther didn't excuse himself for standing out in the community. He had a healthy appreciation for his abilities and his accomplishments. But he was constantly plagued by doubts and disappointments that he hadn't done more; he had great expectations of himself. Many parish ministers share that experience today.

VIII. WE ARE ALL PRISONERS OF HISTORY

Luther was a prisoner of history as we are, and as we shall continue to be. He was a man of his times and for his times. Who he was and his unique situation in life limit his relevance for us in modern times. But if we can share in a small way the breadth of his vision and concern, we shall understand our stewardship of his heritage as something we have for others and for all churches, as well as for ourselves. The Christ present and at work in Luther's life and in the churches of his time is also present and at work in our lives and in our churches. Through Christ, history's prisoners know that they are not alone; in Christ they have hope and they look forward to liberation from all restraints and bondage. Christ links us with one another and with Martin Luther. He creates an ecumenicity and community in time and in space. We can perceive this by means of faith, and we can experience it at the altar.

The Christ-relevance of Luther's life and work functions as the means whereby we share in Luther's community, in Luther's life, and in Luther's faith. Through the strength of this common bond, his witness and situation in life are a resource for our parish ministry. There have been, and there are, many different pulpits and altars, but there is only one real presence of Jesus Christ in Word and sacrament.

Martin Luther was a prisoner of history, but he should not be a prisoner of Lutheran churches. In Christ, Luther labored for the whole church and for all people everywhere. There is little that is sectarian or small minded about him.

¹⁴H. G. Haile, *Luther*, 20.

The pope was just as much a member of his congregation as the Heinrich who lived next door. Luther's lapses into vanity, bigotry, and into provincial German ways are not thereby excused; they need to be seen in their context. They clearly demonstrate that he was a real human being who was very much a man of his times and for his times. His witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and his profound understanding of the Bible make him a man for us, and for our times, and for all churches. Luther's grand vision of Christ's relevance to all people and to all conditions of life ally him with contemporary churches who have a new comprehension of the breadth of their accountability to God.

Martin Luther changed his world. Like other greats who preceded him and followed him, Martin Luther died having radically altered church and society. Erik Erikson said of him, "whatever became part of him was eventually destroyed or rejuvenated."¹⁵ He had the touch of fire which can consume and which can temper. My early infatuation with him has led to love; it consumes and it tempers.

¹⁵Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: Norton) 7.