



Luther on the Study of Luther

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“To undertake the study of [Luther’s] writings is to set sail upon an ocean,” is the view of one of the world’s leading Luther scholars today.¹ The validity of this view becomes apparent as soon as we consider the mere volume of Luther’s writings. At the present time the standard, critical edition of Luther’s works runs to more than one hundred volumes of approximately seven hundred pages each.² Additional volumes incorporating revisions made necessary by continuing critical scholarship and the preparation of an index continue to appear. While the languages in which Luther’s works appear in these volumes are German, Latin, and macaronic (a mixture of German and Latin), books and articles about Luther in nearly all languages of the West have appeared in and since the sixteenth century. Consequently, it is difficult to think of anyone individual in the history of the Christian West from whose pen we have so many writings and about whom so much has been written. Thus the study of Luther presents us with a herculean task and makes it exceedingly difficult to suggest ways of studying him that are not one-sided.

One way of studying Luther is to take our cue from him. While his remarks concerning a study of his works are scattered throughout his writings, there are several pieces he wrote toward the end of his life with which such a

¹Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (London: Collins, 1970) 46.

²Known as the *Weimarer Ausgabe* (hereinafter cited as *WA*), this critical edition of Luther’s works is comprised of four major divisions: (a) *Werke* (writings), (b) *Briefwechsel* (letters or correspondence), (c) *Tischreden* (table talk) and (d) *Deutsche Bibel* (German Bible).

A key locating writings of Luther in German, Latin, English, and French is available in Kurt Aland’s *Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium* (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1970). An aid to finding translations of works in the *Weimarer Ausgabe* into English in the American Edition of *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76; hereinafter referred to as *LW*) is available in Walter R. Saupe and Louis Voigt, *A Weimar-American Index of Luther’s Works* (Springfield, Ohio, 1974).

A Checklist of Luther’s Writings in English by George S. Robbert, which appears in the paperback edition of Philip S. Watson’s *Let God Be God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 204-213, is a location guide of translations of Luther’s writings into English in the various volumes of the *WA* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

study can safely begin. One of these is the “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings, 1539”;³ the other is the “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings, 1545.”⁴

It comes as something of a surprise to find that an author and writer as prolific and brilliant as Luther had such a low estimate of his works. In the very first sentence of his preface to his German writings Luther says, “I would have been quite content to see my books, one and

all, remain in obscurity and go by the board.”⁵ Reflected in this statement is not, as we might suspect, the disillusionment of an old man (he was fifty-six years old at the time). Already in 1522 when Luther was the most widely read religious author in Germany he expressed the wish that his combined output of writings might be forgotten in spite of the booksellers who profited from selling his books⁶ (in the absence of international copyright laws Luther received no royalties). And when a catalog of all of his writings was to be published in 1528 he again said that as far as he was concerned he would gladly see all of his books perish.⁷ In his preface to his Latin writings in 1545 he expressed himself even more forthrightly with respect to the value of his books, saying, “I wished that all my books were buried in perpetual oblivion.”⁸

However, so as not to disappoint those who like to think Luther was not always consistent, one should point out that in a series of sermons in 1529 Luther qualified his earlier negative judgments somewhat by saying he would be glad to have all of his works perish except his refutation of Erasmus and his Small Catechism.⁹

Luther leaves us in no doubt as to the reason for the low estimate of his own works. In a variety of formulations and settings Luther speaks of wanting his books to perish lest they, like previous works, detract from studying the Holy Scriptures. Because all sorts of writings by church fathers, councils, and teachers have been collected and stored in libraries, “the divine Word is lost,” and the “Bible lies forgotten in the dust under the bench.”¹⁰ Already in 1528 Luther said he had sought to accomplish nothing else with his writing than to bring Holy Scripture and divine truth to light. He thought he had succeeded in this endeavor to such a degree that divine truth “praise God, shines forth so brightly and powerfully everywhere” that one could now get along without his writings and those of others who shared his views.¹¹

John the Baptizer is Luther’s model. Through his writings Luther wants to “point toward the Scriptures, as John the Baptist did toward Christ, saying, ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’” [John 3:30].¹²

Thus the purpose of the study of Luther’s writings is to point to the study of the Holy Scriptures and to Christ. This purpose is underscored more explicitly

³WA 50.657-661; LW 34.283-288.

⁴WA 54.179-187; LW 34.327-338.

⁵WA 50.657; LW 34.283.

⁶WA 102.329. TWA 38.133.

⁸WA 54.179; LW 34.32

⁷WA 30/1.249.

¹⁰WA 50.657; LW 34.283.

¹¹WA 38.134.

¹²WA 50.657; LW 34.284.

in the expanded titles of the preface to the collected writings of Luther in printings separate from the first volume of his German works. This title reads “A Christian Evaluation of Martin Luther Concerning His Own Books Together with an Instruction Concerning What Is Required When One Is Engaged in a Proper Study of the Holy Scriptures and Thereafter Wants to Write Good Books.”¹³

Closely related to this purpose is Luther’s emphasis on going to the source. He viewed the purpose of writing as pointing to the Holy Scriptures so that “each person may drink of the fresh

spring himself, as all those fathers who wanted to accomplish something good had to.”¹⁴ In the same year in which Luther included this statement on the necessity of going to the source itself he elaborated a little more fully on the imagery of drinking from the fresh spring in his treatise “On the Councils and the Church.” Having pointed out how the popes and bishops in his time had ignored the frequent calls for a reformation of the church on the part of church fathers and councils, and after reciting how intensely he himself had studied the writings of the fathers and decrees of the councils, he cites a parable he attributes to St. Bernard. Having referred to St. Bernard’s practice of conceiving his ideas from Scripture and reflecting on them under the tree, and how Bernard has a high regard for the holy fathers yet without accepting their sayings always at face value, Luther illustrates Bernard’s practice with Bernard’s own parable. Bernard “would rather drink from the spring itself than from the brook, as do all men, who once they have a chance to drink from the spring forget about the brook, unless they use the brook to lead them to the spring.” Thereupon Luther applies this parable to the study of Scripture saying, “Thus Scripture, too, must remain master and judge, for when we follow the brooks too far, they lead away from the spring, and lose their taste and nourishment, until they lose themselves in the salty sea, as happened under the papacy.”¹⁵

Luther’s reference to this parable of St. Bernard should be seen in the context of the Renaissance. One of the major goals and accomplishments of this “renewal of learning” in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was the return to the sources (*ad fontes*). Thus, when evaluating Luther’s stress on going to the primary sources, this emphasis should not only be applied to the study of Scripture but to the whole field of learning, in particular also, to the study of Luther himself. It therefore goes without saying that it is preferable to study Luther’s writings in their original German or Latin rather than in translation.

Intimately related to Luther’s emphasis on primary sources in the study of theology is the high regard in which he holds history. As long as other books do not hinder persons from the study of Scripture, Luther favors their use “to ponder the historical facts of the time,”¹⁶ as he puts it in his preface to his collected German writings. Though he does not say so explicitly, Luther gives an example of the value he finds in the study of history in his preface to his German writings. Referring to Augustine (354-430) “as almost the only one who deter-

¹³WA 50.655.

¹⁴WA 50.657; LW 34.284.

¹⁵WA 50.520; LW 41.20.

¹⁶WA 50.658; LW 34.285.

mined to be subject to the Holy Scriptures alone,”¹⁷ Luther recalls the conflict occasioned between Augustine and Jerome (342-420) over this very principle of subjecting everything to Scripture.

In his preface to his Latin writings Luther refers to the role Augustine’s tract on *The Spirit and the Letter* played in confirming his interpretation of the meaning of the phrase, “the righteousness of God,” in connection with Luther’s evangelical rediscovery or recovery of that term.¹⁸ More will be said about the significance of this discovery for the study of Luther’s writings presently. Here we simply want to point to the place Luther gives to history in his own theological development and, by implication, the use history has in the study of Luther.

The opening paragraph in the preface to the Latin writings gives us a clue by indirection, as it were, to the study of Luther's works. Once again Luther expresses his resistance to the publication of his books as "confused lucubrations." They are "crude and disordered chaos." They lack order because they were written as the events "which transpired made it necessary." And as Luther looks back over the shoulder of his own history he admits that it is not even easy for him to arrange his writings in their proper order. By these observations Luther clearly suggests the need for a contextual reading and assessment of his writings. As any rapid mental survey of Luther's writings suggest, the situation in which Luther found himself played a prominent role in the design and content of what he wrote. The situation and need could be anything from the old or the new curriculum in Wittenberg University's Faculty of Theology to the Peasant Uprising in 1525, the controversy with the papacy, the Anabaptists, or his impending death.

But a contextual reading is not enough. There is also a need for decontextualizing. That is to say, it is necessary to be aware not only of the distance in time but also of the profound difference in outlook between Luther's sixteenth century Europe and our twentieth century world. For example, in his outlook on life and in his interpretation of Scripture, Luther still accepted a three-story world, a Pythagorean rather than a Copernican cosmology, a geocentric rather than a heliocentric universe. Thus, decontextualization calls for what Paul Ricoeur describes as *distantiation*, i. e., to consider tradition "as an object at a distance."¹⁹

To develop a critically creative reading of Luther's writings it is necessary to move from a contextual approach through the process of decontextualizing to what I want to call a recontextualizing. Engaging in recontextualizing requires catechizing ourselves in relation to our time, our world, our needs, our situation. Such catechization may consist in asking ourselves a series of questions. For example, some of these questions might be: How do I transpose the ideas of Luther's *Small Catechism* into a modern key? What does Luther's notion of "the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren" as a means of grace have

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸WA 54.180 (LW 34.337). For a reference to the problem of when Luther actually read Augustine's tract and its influence on his rediscovery of the gospel, see Heinrich Boehmer's *Road to Reformation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1946) 138-139.

¹⁹Paul Ricoeur, "History and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976) 693.

to say to our understanding of dialog as a way of interpersonal encounter? How do we relate Luther's emphasis on the aural-oral communication of the gospel to the cumulative communication of information through visual, electronic means in our technologically oriented society? Without this method of recontextualizing, the historical study of the content of Luther's writings may remain incomplete.

It is in this context of historical study in the light of the witness of the Scriptures to Jesus Christ that Luther's great autobiographical reference to his discovery of the meaning of the righteousness of God needs to be considered.²⁰ While Luther's description of his discovery of the meaning of the righteousness of God in his preface to his Latin writings presents problems as to when or over what period of time this discovery occurred, one thing is certain: an existential appropriation of the evangelical insight Luther gained through this great discovery or recovery is

essential to a study of his writings. How essential Luther considered it for theological study is apparent from the opening sentence of his preface to “The Disputation Concerning Justification, 1536.” Here he says to his listeners, “As you have often heard, most excellent brothers, because that one article concerning justification even by itself creates true theologians, therefore—it is indispensable in the church and just as we must often recall it, so we must frequently work on it.”²¹

Why does the article of justification by itself create true theologians? A reading of what Luther says by way of elaborating on this first sentence in the paragraph can give us a partial answer. The doctrine of justification is a constant reminder of the eschatological reality of our faith. As Luther points out at the end of his preface to the Disputation, “For although there is no perfection in us as yet, still we are in the meantime sons of God so that God may perfect his gift in us.” Thus the article on justification places a heavy accent on the “now/not yet” of the life of faith.

The article on justification by faith creates true theologians because it can act as a dike against self-righteousness, smugness, self-complacency, and theological arrogance. Unhappily this article has not always had this ethical effect in the history of Lutheranism. The avalanche of preoccupation with adiaphora repeatedly threatens to engulf the article which can make us true theologians. Luther clearly had the article of justification as a dike against that sort of development in mind when he told his hearers, “Although we say we know, when we occupy ourselves with justification nevertheless, it is not so, as some people think, that when they have heard the Word once or twice, they believe they have consequently become theologians.” And then he goes on to express his anxiety about the doctrine of justification becoming “nauseating to contemptuous souls.”²²

The negative function of the doctrine of justification as a dike underscores its constructive function to create and sustain a life of faith that is unconditionally grounded in the grace by which God accepts the unacceptable on account of Christ alone.

²⁰WA 54.185; LW 34.336-337.

²¹WA 391.87; LW 34.157.

²²Ibid.

Thus, by definition the study of Luther’s writings presupposes an existential appropriation of justification and at the same time has such appropriation as its goal. In our reading, writing, believing, living, thinking, and deciding justification functions as a searchlight for the truth which we now see “through a glass darkly.” Consequently, the role Luther assigns to justification in the making of a true theologian is related to his theology of the cross.

“Theology of the cross” is a term Luther invented to describe the reality of faith as he perceived it in the light of Scripture and history. Aspects of this theology of the cross are implied in Luther’s preface to his German writings. And they are introduced in relation to the study of theology when Luther says, “I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have practice in that.” If a person sticks to the way Luther is about to point out, that person will become so learned that he or she will be able to write books just as good as those of the fathers and the councils.

What is that way? Luther answers with a statement which, unfortunately, through largely

thoughtless usage has become trite, if not a downright platitude. The statement has suffered this fate because it has been treated more often as a piece of proverbial advice than as the radical inversion of perspective inherent in the Christian faith. *Oratio, meditatio, tentatio* is, of course, the answer Luther gives to the question of a correct way of studying theology.²³

The radical inversion of perspective inherent in the Christian faith is announced in a flat out way at the very outset of his advice to the budding theologian. "Firstly, you should know," he says, "that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness."²⁴ This assertion runs contrary to reason and our natural understanding. Were we to follow our natural inclination, then the content of all other books would appear to us to be wisdom, and the content of Holy Scripture would be foolishness. However, when the content of the Scriptures, Jesus Christ, is seen with eyes of faith, their wisdom turns all other books into foolishness.

This reversal of values, this inversion of reality, this transvaluation of values whereby faith turns the world upside down, constitutes a centerpiece in Luther's theology of the cross. In his justly famous "Heidelberg Disputation, 1518" theses 19-21 are especially appropriate to our consideration of taking a cue from Luther for the study of theology. The theses read as follows :

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things [*posteriora*; cf. Ex. 33:23, And the Lord said, "...you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."] of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [*per ea quae facta sunt*. Rom. 1:20].
20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.²⁵

²³WA 50.659; LW 34.285.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵WA 1.361-362; LW 31.52-53.

While these theses and their elaboration in the context of the whole Disputation raise many issues which need to be taken into account when considering Luther's theology as a whole, the point to be made here is that the radical inversion of perspective inherent in the Christian faith receives its sharpest formulation in these theses. Principally employing 1 Corinthians 1:21 and 25; Isaiah 45:15 and John 14:8 and 9, Luther makes several assertions which are at the heart of his theology of the cross. The first of these is directed against the scholastics whose theology sought to understand God in terms of his invisible attributes of virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, etc. Recognition or acknowledgment of these attributes does not make a person a theologian. On the contrary, God needs to be recognized in the visible things here below like his human nature, weakness, and foolishness. In fact, God wants to be recognized in suffering. He hides in suffering. So God is not recognized in his glory and majesty unless we recognize him in the humility and shame of the cross.

Of course Luther's theology of the cross has to do with the atonement and with a

Christian discipleship which consists in taking one's cross and following Jesus. But much more is involved in this theology of the cross. In Luther the theology of the cross denotes a whole way of life and seeing reality in the world in a radically new way. For him the theology of the cross is a methodology of doing theology. "The truth is," according to Douglas Hall, "*theologia crucis* in Luther refers to a spirit and a method, a way of conceiving of *the whole* content of the faith and the task of theology."²⁶

The most effective antidote to trivialization of Luther's dictum, *Oratio, meditatio, tentatio faciunt theologum* consists in maintaining the connection between his theology of the cross and *tentatio, Anfechtung*, the assaults of Satan, sin, and world. As Paul Althaus has pointed out, "Luther's understanding of *Anfechtung* as an essential characteristic of Christian existence is part of his theology of the cross." *Anfechtung* is part and parcel of Christian existence because "to believe means to live in constant contradiction to empirical reality and to entrust oneself to that which is hidden."²⁷

These comments on Luther's theology of the cross, though necessarily brief and only suggestive, underscore the assertion Luther makes in thesis 20: "He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."²⁸

Thus, some priorities for the study of Luther are clear. The study of Luther requires giving attention to the study of the Holy Scriptures. Implied in that study is the necessity to stress the use of primary sources not only in Luther but in the whole theological enterprise and to do so in a historical context. The study of Luther in that vein will have as its goal the making of theologians through the existential involvement which the stance of being declared and made righteous through Christ alone presupposes. The task of these theologians will remain critically creative as the methodology of the theology of the cross can vouchsafe to them glimpses of God's ways in our fractured and fragmented world.

²⁶Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 118. Italics in the original.

²⁷Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 33.

²⁸WA 1.362; LW 31.52.