

Luther at Home AND IN THE Community



BY
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LUTHER AT HOME AND IN THE COMMUNITY

The 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth, now just a few days away, has given us all a renewed opportunity to take the measure of the man, the greatest churchman and the most influential Christian leader and teacher since the Apostle Paul. We have, as a matter of course, recalled the great doctrines of the Reformation: justification, Law and Gospel, the means of grace, the real presence in the sacrament, the doctrine of the church, and many other features of the great reformer's biblical synthesis of Christian doctrine.

Commemorative postage stamps and other forms of recognition of Luther's massive impact on western civilization have reinforced our high regard for this remarkable German, the most prolific writer his people has ever produced. Luther saw God as the author and the instrumentality of a gracious plan of salvation, but also, as a contemporary historian has said, as a God "always at hand, wonderfully close, using all the changing panorama of His creation as the instrument of His kindness, in a profound and often beautifully expressed theology of the natural order and creation. He sees God at work behind all human history, sustaining all things by His will so that even the evil could not work their tragic infamies save by the will of God."¹ A very recent study has seen Luther's essay, "Concerning the Liberty of a Christian" as the key to Luther's theological breadth.

Here he [Luther] struck the fundamental distinction between the inner man, by faith an utterly free child of God, and the external man who is totally subject to the powers of this world during his brief sojourn here. Widely circulated in Europe this work became especially well known in English translations. In America, its teaching finally resulted in the powerful doctrine of the separation of church and state.²

The glorious fact is that Luther's theology was broad enough to include every spiritual and social concern of humanity. Declaring first the love of God manifested in the redemption and the justification of sinners, Luther went on at once to describe the effect of the Gospel in the daily lives of the redeemed. In the process he was to give counsel on an astonishingly wide range of problems inhering in the human condition. In his common sense counsel in such purely temporal matters as government, economics, education, and other social sciences he made himself worthy of the honor and respect universally shown to him in this 500th anniversary of the year of his birth.

Is there some tangible explanation that we can offer for the remarkable range of his wisdom? I think there is. His lifelong preoccupation was the study of the Bible. He had turned to it at first to find assurance of his own eternal salvation. His studies continued as he prepared the classroom lectures demanded by his office as lecturer on the Bible at the University of Wittenberg. His studies of the Bible continued at a frenzied pace as he confronted the doctrinal errors of the medieval world and then was compelled to study yet more earnestly to defend the initial biblical interpretations he had previously offered. Ultimately he could say that the Bible was a great tree and that he had shaken every branch of that tree to harvest its heavenly fruit.

In the course of his studies he found and arranged the teachings of the Bible in a theological synthesis or system. But he went beyond this. He acquired a faith based on a knowledge and understanding of the Word of God in Holy Scripture. More still, I think we can say that his study and reading of the Bible had enabled him to absorb the wisdom of God to a degree and in a fullness that has not been equaled since the days of the apostles themselves. No

wonder, then, that Martin Luther was able to proclaim the Gospel with such power, and offer wise and sympathetic counsel to human kind in its perplexities and anguish.

Please note some evidences of his knowledge of Scripture and his grasp of the wisdom of God. Consider first Luther's translation of the Bible. A comprehensive knowledge of the entire book was the prime requisite for the task if inconsistencies and contradictions were to be avoided. The perfecting of this work was so important to Luther that even with all his many literary and professional undertakings there was no time in his career when he was not preoccupied with his crowning accomplishment of his life. H.G. Haile's tribute to Luther's enduring achievement in translation is noteworthy:

The Luther Bible became the major classic of the German language. Its example led directly to the Tyndale Bible and thence to the magnificent English Bible tradition immediately after Tyndale's murder. As the Bible became popular reading throughout northern Europe, a new age of literacy, even poetry, began to disperse the dank fogs of barbarism. Thus Luther's Bible became not just a legacy, but an important stage in the still gradually awakening consciousness of man.³

Note further *Luther's Small Catechism*. No one could have summarized and organized the principal teachings of Holy Scripture without Luther's comprehensive knowledge of the entire content of that holy book. His methodology of instruction coupled with an utter sincerity and simplicity of phraseology has made it the most important textbook of all time. This little book, based entirely on Scripture, proclaimed the Gospel in the means of grace, established the Law-Gospel nexus in a form that gave priority to the Gospel and defined the Law both in its negative and its positive aspects. The Small Catechism gave form and substance to the body of doctrine that has informed Lutheran orthodoxy ever since.

We may note, in the third instance, Luther's use of Holy Scripture in his theologizing. Consider his first series of lectures on the Psalms. In the thousand pages of these lectures as they appear in the American edition of his works there are 1,384 references to the Psalms, 1,117 to other Old Testament books including all but Ruth, Nehemias, and Zephaniah, and 45 references to the Apocrypha. In addition there are 1,346 references to New Testament books with citations to every one of them except Philemon and Jude. In discussing the Psalms Luther also made 31 references to classical authors and 290 to 26 authors representing the literature of the church.

In his Commentary on Romans Luther made 1,306 references to all of the New Testament books except II and III John. There are 741 Old Testament references and 400 citations from classical literature, the church fathers, and contemporary theological works. We find the same dependence on Scripture in Luther's later works. We may take as an example volume 36 of the American edition of Luther's works which includes six essays on the Sacrament of the Altar. Here we find 160 references to two thirds of the Old Testament books, and about 500 references to all the New Testament books except Philemon and II John.

Nothing less than the medieval Latin phrase, *stupor mundi*, "wonder of the world," will do to describe Luther's comprehension of Holy Scripture. Many of his contemporaries ridiculed him for his constant appeal to the authority of the Bible, God's Holy Word. It was both his refuge as a sinner and his guide in the daily relationships of life at home and in the world community in which he lived.

LUTHER AT HOME

With apologies for a modern colloquialism we may say that Martin Luther's home was a real zoo. When Prince George of Anhalt planned a visit to the Reformer's home, one of the friends of the prince counselled against it. He said:

The home of Luther is occupied by a motley crowd of boys, students, girls, widows, old women, and youngsters. For this reason there is much disturbance in the place, and many regret it for the sake of the good man, the honorable father. If but the spirit of Doctor Luther lived in all of these, his home would offer you an agreeable, friendly quarter for a few days so that your grace would be able to enjoy the hospitality of that man. But as the situation now stands and as circumstances exist in the household of Luther, I would not advise that your grace stop here.⁴

The residence of Luther and his family was the Black Cloister, the former house of the Augustinian chapter at Wittenberg. The electors of Saxony had given the building and its premises to Luther as a wedding gift. Luther had lived in his cell in the same monastery, from his first arrival in Wittenberg. When he was married it was just a matter of moving upstairs to his new quarters. In the past few years it had been "a great empty dormitory used as a kind of half-way house for refugees from religious orders."⁵ The electors were lavish in preparing the building for its new occupants. A remodeling process, which is said to have included the use of two tons of plaster and the expenditure of 100 gulden for home necessities converted the old cloister into a comfortable and spacious home.⁶

The gate leading to the cloister opened to a broad courtyard.

On the other side of the yard stretched stalls for a half dozen cows and their calves, a goat or two and a lot of pig sties and chicken sheds. The Luthers had a swineherd who drove the animals out beyond the city gates of a morning, but the yard retained its chickens, peahens, and other fowl which kept it picked clean of grass. Wagon ruts led across the court to a corner on the right of the main building, for there was much coming and going at Kate's brewery there. The Augustine order had possessed a city franchise to produce its own beer, and that was passed over to her when the Saxon electors gave Luther the building. Brewing was but one of the ways she made her enterprise sufficient.⁷

Rooms on the second floor of the cloister made ready for the family included a reception room, family room, study, two bedrooms, and the tower room. As the family grew, additional space was provided on the third floor. In addition to these family rooms the second floor also had two lecture halls, one large enough to crowd 400 students. The kitchen and storage space was on the first floor of the building. As the needs of the family increased, Luther and Kate bought a farm from her brother, an adjoining residence property, and three sizable garden plots including a hop garden to provide for Kate's *brauhaus*. Using Luther's two wills as a guide Schwiebert has estimated Luther's financial assets, including six parcels of real estate, his livestock [five cows, nine large calves, a goat with two kids, eight pigs, two sows, and three little pigs] and his personal property [books, jewelry, silver plate and gold coins] at a total value (as of currency values in 1950) at about \$134,000.⁸

Katherine needed every resource represented by those assets to provide for the “motley crowd” that swarmed about the cloister clamoring for the daily necessities of life. She had six children. Two daughters died in childhood. Three sons and a daughter grew to maturity. In addition the Luther family included eight orphaned nephews and nieces, a grand niece, a lady teacher, six tutors, Wolf Sieberger, the gardener and Luther’s personal servant, and last, but not least, Aunt Lena. She had fled her convent with Katherine and remained to care for the Luther children until she died. Several of Martin’s letters to his children closed with the admonition, “Be nice to Aunt Lena.”

Added to these permanent residents of the Black Cloister were varying numbers of displaced monks and nuns seeking employment or marriage and an ever present group of a dozen or more students who shared the bounty of Katherine’s table for the opportunity to discuss every imaginable topic with their admired and beloved teacher and mentor. Foreign visitors, like Robert Barnes from England, who took lessons in German from Katherine, were hospitably received. When John Agricola moved from Eisleben to Wittenberg to assume new duties at the university, he and his wife and eight children stayed at the Black Cloister for an extended time while housing was arranged for them. Besides all these, an endless stream of visitors came to see the great man and to enjoy the hospitality of the lady of the house. Kings and princes, lords and ladies, the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, many of them disabled, unemployed, and disconsolate—all of them came away enriched and enlivened by the various experiences of Christian family life in the precincts of a defunct monastery.

Martin Luther often spoke of marriage, and its concrete realization, the family, as being the cornerstone of human life. To it he added the church and the state as divine institutions seconding and supplementing the family as the fundamental structures of human life. His studies of Scripture had given him a broad overview of the ideal relationships of husband and wife as they are realized by the children of God living and functioning in accordance with the precepts of the wisdom of God. Just as the sexes complement one another in structure and function, so husband and wife complement each other in their roles of rearing and maintaining their families. Martin and Katherine had differing roles in life; they were equally responsible for discharging their roles as parents. Romantic love was little in evidence between them. Christian love was paramount in their relations to one another, to their children, and to all who came into the orbit of their lives in the Black Cloister. Both worked without stint in their chosen and happy roles. Complaints fell rarely from their lips. A good natured banter and a homespun kidding characterized much of their conversation. They were happy Christians and the joy of the Gospel showed in the lives they led.

In 1535 Luther wrote a Christmas song, “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come,” for his children. We are still singing the fifteen wonderful verses of that purest expression of the Gospel. It was typical of many other songs that vitalized and beautified the family devotions in the Black Cloister. Visitors and guests joined in as Luther’s lute accompanied the singing, often in melodious harmonizations. In an effort to understand the quality of Luther’s writing a recent biographer has said:

I have the impression that the literary mother lode surfaces most plainly in his songs. Here is the spontaneous, the intimate Luther. He himself argued that the most important quality in writing, the quality he found most woefully lacking in the scholarship of his predecessors and contemporaries, was sincerity. Thus the song may offer a touchstone for applying to his other compositions, too.⁹

Despite the many serious issues that Luther faced, and even with the mountainous labors of his life, he remained the happy and loving husband and father, singing with his children in an exuberance that let the problems of life rest, out of sight and out of mind, in the hearty joy of the poetic harmonies of his songs. “‘Let joy be confined’ might have been the theme of life in the Black Cloister. It was both his own base of operations and the model for the Lutheran household for years to come.”¹⁰

LUTHER IN THE COMMUNITY

We have commented on Luther’s comprehensive knowledge and understanding of Scripture. We may add that the depth of his far-reaching grasp of the wisdom of God gave him a vivid and deep-seated grasp of the alternatives of human existence. He recognized no escape or evasion of the alternatives of heaven or hell, salvation or damnation, Christ or Satan, faith or unbelief, godliness or paganism.

Satan was an ever present reality to him, a foe always at hand, a threat never to be minimized or ignored. We may dismiss Luther’s preoccupation with the presence of Satan at every turn of his life. He pleaded for lenience toward a man who, under extenuating circumstances, had killed his own son-in-law. Luther’s plea was: “The devil made him do it!” It was as valid a plea as the modern legal defense based on insanity.

Luther’s vivid awareness of the alternatives of life inevitably gave his utterances a sense of invincible urgency. His public utterances were no mere academic exercise which his auditors could take or leave at their pleasure. Luther was dead serious about the promise of salvation and the threat of damnation. It was urgent that everyone know what those alternatives were. It was vital that he be understood and that he be convincing. No one ever achieved the aims of Christian ministry more ably than the rough-hewn Luther.

His Bible translation, the Catechism, the sermons, the lectures – all spoke the language of the people. All were on the level of understanding of those who listened to him. His words and speech reflected Luther’s concern for both the bodily and spiritual, the temporal and eternal welfare of the people. Luther, the learned theologian, was at the same time a friend to the common man, the lad, the maid, and the child, the greatest hero common people ever had. No human need was beneath the dignity of his notice.

Luther’s very practical wisdom, a common sense application of the knowledge he had derived from the Bible, was applied far beyond the parochial bounds of the village of Wittenberg. His role as teacher at the university gave him an international community extending far beyond the borders of his native Saxony. His main secular legacy to western civilization stands out in two important areas, the principle and practice of education, and the philosophy and administration of government. In neither case did he submit wholesale proposals for changing existing structures in education or government in any revolutionary senses. His proposals were sensible measures to make them both better. He seldom recognized the long-range implications of his proposals. He could not have imagined how widely and extensively they would be followed by later generations.

Yet, what he said about public compulsory education, education for girls as well as boys, and his suggestions for improved curricular offerings have had a revolutionary effect in the modern world.

Luther found no fault with the elective principle as it applied to the choice of the Holy Roman Emperor, nor did he object to the hereditary principle as it applied to the electors of Saxony and the other existing principalities and kingdoms of Europe. Though he had no

concept of democracy as we know it, Luther's view of government in service to the people led directly and inevitably to the practice of modern democracy. While he saw the biblical principle of the separate and distinct functions of church and state he made no revolutionary effort to separate them in his own time. Roger Williams, however, grasped the full implication of what Luther had said and quoted him at length in his successful proposal for the separation of church and state in the American Colonies.

The wisdom of a ruler, in Luther's view, had its highest expression in the administration of justice. Though Luther had a high regard for law, Luther said that there is no tyranny worse than law administered and enforced without discretion and love. He urged that judges perform their office without respect of persons. He saw no justice in meting out the demands of the law severely to common thieves and picklocks while rich swivel-chair bandits were permitted to pay for mass or light a few candles to escape punishment.

Luther pleaded with employers, masters and mistresses, not to govern their servants high-handedly. Occasionally faults may be overlooked and winked at. Though Luther approved the execution of murderers, he urged judges to be careful, lest the innocent fall under this severe penalty.

The problems facing people in the sixteenth century were similar to those of our time, high tax rates and usurious interest charges. Luther spoke vigorously against both in the same breath that he condemned merchants who sold shoddy wares and swindled their customers by short weights and other deceits and trickery. Long before it became an accepted practice, Luther advocated progressive income taxes to relieve inequities to the disadvantage of the poor. Luther was outraged over the fact that the clergy were exempt from taxation. He suggested that the clergy renounce this unwarranted burden on the poor. He paid his *Turkensteuer*, a tax in support of the war against the Turks even though he was under no obligation to do so.

Luther's many expressions on the evils of poverty came as early as 1517. In the 43rd of the 95 *Theses* he had written, "He who gives to the poor, or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences." Later he was to call for the implementation of the high-minded goal of abolishing poverty. He urged every city to make provision for the needs of its own poor, and even wrote a plan for realizing the aim. He said that there should be no inadequately housed or undernourished people in any Christian community. All of them should have provisions both for their bodies and their souls.

We readily acknowledge that Martin Luther was the greatest theologian and churchman since apostolic times. We ought also to honor him as a great humanitarian. His thorough knowledge and understanding of Holy Scripture enabled him to give all who heeded his words a clear exposition of God's plan for the salvation of sinners at the same time that he was speaking at length on matters conducive to the welfare of mankind during this present life. Apart from what he knew, his great strength lay in his ability to speak clearly and attractively to the common people. They understood him and took him into their hearts as a pastor who loved them and cared deeply about their welfare. Though he was a busy university professor and a popular preacher who often delivered several sermons in a single day, he was never too busy to give his attention to people under stress. We see him writing a long letter to a man concerned about approaching death, to a woman who had suffered a miscarriage, and to a congregation on the death of their pastor. We hear his plea for a poor peasant who had been caught poaching, and his prayers for soldiers going off to war.

In all of these personal expressions of care and concern Luther appeared in the role of a man who loved the people, spoke meaningfully and effectively to them, and received their love in return. His life at home in the frenetic atmosphere of the Black Cloister was simply the

microcosm of his life in his world community where he was the spiritual father and the fatherly counsellor of the people about him.

In this year we remember his birth 500 years ago and honor him in sincere gratitude. He has shown us all the enriching resource of Holy Scripture. He has recalled the Gospel promise and given us the witness of his faith in the life of loving concern that he exemplified in his home and his community. It is an enduring legacy.

Notes

¹ E. Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1953, p. 279.

² H.G. Haile, *Luther*, Doubleday, Garden City, 1980, p. 94.

³ *Ibid.* p. 329.

⁴ Quoted in E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, Concordia, St. Louis, 1950, p. 597.

⁵ Halle, *op. cit.* p. 26.

⁶ Schwiebert, *op. cit.* p. 227.

⁷ Haile, *op. cit.* p. 42.

⁸ Schwiebert, *op. cit.* p. 267, 268.

⁹ Haile, *op. cit.* p. 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 24.

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