

LUTHER THE UNIVERSITY MAN

The very best luncheon address I have ever heard came from my former colleague at the University of Iowa, George Forell. On the occasion of the 16th-Century Studies Conference's one and only meeting in Terre Haute, Indiana, he told the assembled professors and scholars--most of whom were about my age at the time, that is just over 30--that Luther became the historical giant we all know for the very simple reason that he did his work as a professor. In so far as my memory over 15-odd years is correct, George was telling us that Luther not only agreed (albeit under duress) to become a professor--and therefore a university man--but also made a job out of it. I thought then that Professor Forell was correct and I think so to this day.

On the other hand, I am more than willing to grant that George was not telling the whole story, nor, I think did he intend to do so. Instead, he was looking at over 100 professors of Reformation history who were near Luther's age when he became a professor, and he was urging us to do our jobs. He by no means suggested that in doing so we would come to anything like the insights that Dr. Martin Luther received. Rather, he strongly implied that if we did our work we would come to understand that Luther was correct, and that we might play a role in helping others to attain to this truth.

There are other ways in which George was not telling the whole story on that October day nearly 20 years ago, nor did he--or I--have the time to do so. He did not tell how furiously Luther resisted the idea that he should become a professor. "But it will be the death of me," was the

reformer's initial reply to the suggestion of Staupitz that he do so. Luther was right. It was the death of him, at least in the sense that he remained a professor to the end of his life. Moreover, to say that Luther was a university man is by no means to say that he was a "teacher" or, what is worse, a mere "intellectual." One can of course be the one without being the other. But Luther filled his teaching and his intellect with far more than mere duty or knowledge. Toward the end of his life he himself remarked that he became a theologian—that is, a professor of theology—not just by reading and thinking but by following "where my temptations led me." To put it differently, Luther was engaged, heart and soul, in what he soon termed his "calling." He was not just a university man; he was a man in a university.

There is still more to the story, at least if we will be true to the real Luther. He also said of himself—and this very self-consciously in words that are part of the partial autobiography he wrote for the preface to his Latin works of 1545—that "I did not learn my theology all at once but . . . like St. Augustine through much teaching and writing." Here, at last, is what I intend with the title to this presentation, that is, "Luther the University Man." To put the matter simply, any effort to take Luther out of the university or to ignore that he was in it amounts to falsifying his life. The tendency to refer to him as a religious genius or to explain his career by saying that he was driven by apocalyptic premonitions amounts to romantic nonsense and directly contradicts what Luther said of himself. To be sure, Luther was convinced that he had been led "as if with blinders on, able to see neither to the right nor to the left," but he was led through his teaching and writing. This is to say, he was led through his calling as a professor or university man. "I did

not seek this office on my own," he once remarked, "but was compelled to it against my will." Having once submitted, he was then loyal to his calling to the point of almost always signing his letters, "D. Martinus Lutherus," or "Doctor Martin Luther."

Teaching and writing constitute the life of the university man or woman, and without these two activities we remain teachers or writers but not university people. Please note: being either a teacher or a writer is a perfectly honorable and Godly calling. But it is not the same thing as being a professor. The central issue is in fact very close to the oath that Luther took when he became a professor. He swore to teach the truth and to attack falsehood. This oath assumed as a matter of course that he was capable of distinguishing between the two. In sum, he was not simply to report the truth as he was taught it, an activity I take to be the calling of a teacher, or to imagine it, which I take to be the work of a writer. He was to learn and then to teach it both in the classroom and in print. As he himself said, all these activities occurred at once. Nor did he ever come to the end of teaching and writing. Shortly before his death, he scibbled himself a note that said, "We are all beggars. This is true." He was referring there to the process of learning that is necessary in all walks of life but especially in that of a professor. How deeply Luther took his peculiar responsibilities is well expressed in his commonly repeated but not well understood remark, "One must not only teach but also defend--Man muss nicht nur lehren sondern auch wehren." For the many of you who know German, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the word, wehren, means more than "defend" in the passive sense. It can also mean "attack."

As we all know, Luther did that, too. But, thankfully, his work as

defender of the faith is not at issue here. Instead we are talking about Luther the university man, the professor, the scholar. The central question before us is whether we are to take Luther seriously when he said that he learned his theology by teaching and writing. Or are we to cling to the attractive, romantic notion that he had a sudden "evangelical breakthrough," the exact date of which it is very important--for reasons I don't understand--to establish?

The evidence is simply overwhelming. Luther was telling the truth about himself when he said that he learned his theology through writing and teaching, that is, in the life and calling of a professor. Anyone who has followed Luther through his early lectures up to the famous series on Romans and beyond knows that Luther began his career as a professor secure in the theology that he was taught and then torturously uncovered a completely different understanding of how God deals with his people. It did not come in a flash of insight or the much vaunted "moment" of inspiration. It came through hard work, through, as George Forell put it, doing his job.

To make the matter perfectly compelling requires taking three steps. We must first understand what Luther was taught; we must then compare it with what he came to teach; finally, we must trace his steps from the one to the other. In the process it will become very clear just how deeply Luther, that is, the Luther who remains historically important, was a university man.

We begin, then, with Luther the student. Save for a bow toward it at this very moment, I will say nothing about the thunderstorm, the vow to become a monk, Luther's spiritual struggles, or any of the things that make for great drama. It is not that these things are untrue. In so far

as we can know, they all happened, and there can be no question but that Luther himself could be and was eloquent about them. His struggles to obtain some sort of assurance--and he never attained it fully--should stand as a lesson to all of us who think that we are fully aware of God's gracious will for us and that we can happily lead our lives in the delusion that we will be forever after guilt and doubt-free. Luther was not and, to the extent that we are honest with ourselves, neither are we. In fact, we are taught daily--and sometimes by the church--precisely the view of God that led Luther, and will surely lead us, nearly to the point of despair.

Before plunging into the understanding of these matters that has become so evident during the last generation of scholarship, two observations are in order. First, the theology that Luther was taught is not unbiblical in the sense that it paid no attention to the apparently straightforward message of the Bible. Frequently enough we Lutherans happily dismiss the theology of the late Middle Ages as mere "works righteousness" and are then done with it. We throw a piece of Romans 1:17 at our Roman Catholic neighbors and assume that the issue is settled. But we need to understand first that the study of the Bible was the heart and core of the medieval theological curriculum, and that it was in just this study that Luther began. In this regard the fact that the Bible was commonly chained to a lecturn is not evidence that people were discouraged from reading it but quite the contrary. After all, in those days Bibles were very expensive--as were most books--and they had a habit of growing legs and feet if they were not chained down. For students to read one required making certain it was available, above all. Hence, the issue is not whether someone--say, Luther the student--read the Bible but instead

how he read it. I take Romans 1:17, the great Reformation passage, as an example. "The righteous shall live by faith." Now, I ask you, what does this passage mean? Let us put it this way: who shall live by faith? The answer should be obvious. It is "the righteous." Simple common sense dictates that the converse is also true. If one is not righteous, then one cannot live by faith.

Certainly--and here I am merely referring to Luther's teachers and to the early Luther himself--one can have partial faith. Given a little hard reasoning of the kind that went on late at night at least when I was an undergraduate, most anyone can be compelled to the conclusion that there is a God who created everything and who retains the right to judge human behavior. We've all been reminded often enough to be a "good boy" or a "good girl" to acknowledge that some sort of judgment is coming even though deep down inside we really enjoy being at least a little naughty. In sum, we know that we are not "righteous," save perhaps now and then, and the conclusion is obvious. We therefore cannot live by the sort of saving faith that led Abraham to be willing to sacrifice Isaac, the one who literally embodied God's promise to him. After all, is not Abraham's righteousness evident in the fact that he was prepared to do God's apparent bidding, that he trusted God, and that God therefore acknowledged Abraham as truly righteous?

Let me be clear that I no more regard this as the proper reading of the text before us than the mature Luther did. I nonetheless submit to you that it is not an obviously false or wrong-headed reading of the text that will doubtless be the basis of this Sunday's sermon. Luther's teachers, and Luther himself at least initially, read it in just this way, and they went on to note the part of the text that refers to proceeding

"from faith to faith" as evidence that one was obliged to "grow in faith," to use some more biblical language that has been turned into contemporary Christian jargon in some circles.

In any event, it should be clear that even the core text can be read in a way to require works in order to achieve salvation. In this case, the "work" envisioned is a work of faith, that is, being faithful no matter what the circumstances. In this regard Luther's teachers and Luther himself distinguished between "partial" faith and faith "perfected in Christ." Partial faith was the faith that humans could summon up when all else had failed. What this means is that this faith was their own possession, something they had, and something they could show to God as evidence of their own righteousness. Then God would give them something more. Here was what it meant to go "from faith to faith." It was pretty poverty stricken, but it was at least something. I leave it to you to imagine what could be done in this way with the story of the "widow's mite" without at the same time doing obvious violence to the text.

This was the university theology that Luther was taught and that Luther himself taught. 'Lest the point be lost, it should be clear that the same way of understanding the text could and was in operation with respect to most if not all of the common texts of the New Testament. Perhaps the most obvious of them are the passages that have to do with love. In this regard I am perfectly aware that I Cor. 13 is commonly used for weddings. Having been married to the same woman for almost 30 years, I am also perfectly aware that I--and certainly she--do not measure up to it. But I point you instead to the way in which the Beatitudes can be and are commonly understood. Let us try "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." So, what is necessary in order to inherit the earth?

It is necessary to be "meek," that is humble. Being humble is a virtue and therefore something for which we should strive. When we are sufficiently humble we can claim our inheritance, and we can do so by right. But then there's that great line in the musical, "Camelot," according to which "It's not the earth the meek inherit; it's the dirt." I suggest that no amount of spiritualizing this text will make this fact go away. It is not easy to be proud of being humble.

Here was Luther's problem, and this was the contradiction that he saw. It was far more than a logical contradiction, but it was that too. It was a contradiction that he saw in his own life. The more he tried to be humble and the closer he came to this goal, the more he exalted himself. Here is what he intended when he said, "If anyone could have achieved heaven by the works of a monk, it was I." The classic example of this life-related contradiction that also holds theological contradictions is the problem of confession. Luther was famous (or, with his confessors) infamous for the zeal with which he confessed his sins. He himself once remarked that if you would confess all your sins in a timely manner, you would have to "carry a confessor around in your pocket." Staupitz in fact once told him to go out and commit a real sin and then come confess it, but above all to stop bothering him with "petty, artificial" sins. As an example of a real sin, Staupitz had in mind something rather like rape or murdering one's parents. In this regard it should be noted that Luther continued for the remainder of his life to confess his sins daily, and that they never became "real" sins.

There is a theological problem here, too, and once again it is not a matter of whether one reads the Bible but how. The theme of repentance is common in the Scriptures, but what does it mean? Luther was taught (and I

think correctly) that what God demands is full contrition, that is a complete regret for our sins and one that is regret for the harm we have done the person against whom we have sinned. But the only thing of which we are normally capable (and one hears it from the television and radio evangelists daily) is fear for saving our own necks from a righteous God who will not abide our behavior. Confession thus becomes the ultimate selfish act and the ultimate sin. Can there be any wonder that the mature Luther could remark, "Even when we are at our most spiritual, we turn God Himself into an idol"? That is, God becomes the cosmic bellhop whose sole function is to meet my needs on more or less my terms.

I may, perhaps, have spent too much time with Luther the student. There are nonetheless many people today (and I am one of them) who are rather like him in the sense that they have never stopped going to school. We all (and Luther was no exception) spend our entire lives working from what we were taught as students. What he did as a professor cannot therefore be understood without a thorough comprehension of what he was taught. Luther's special gift is that in his calling as a professor he was able to unlearn practically everything he was taught, that is, to put it on its head, and to teach something very different. That something is of course the unmerited grace of God in Christ.

We turn, then, to his early work as a professor and in particular to his early lectures, in which we find him slowly, slowly--just as he himself said--working a theological and ultimately religious revolution. It can be no surprise that in his first extant lectures--those on Psalms of 1513-1515--he began by repeating the things that he was taught. He even once said, "When I became a Doctor (that is, professor), I did not know that we cannot make propitiation for our sins;" or, to put it

differently, that we cannot in any way earn salvation or contribute anything to it. But this was the late Luther. How did he get there is the question? As quoted earlier, he got there by teaching and writing.

The most striking example of this process comes, to my mind, from his lectures to his students on Psalm 71 with its repeated refrain, "In thy righteousness deliver me and rescue me; Incline Thine ear to me, and save me. Be Thou to me a rock of habitation, to which I may continually come; Thou hast given commandment to save me, For Thou art my rock and my fortress."

Luther himself declared very near the end of his life that "I hated that word, 'the righteousness of God,'" and for reasons we have already seen. And here it was, with Luther facing the one problem that most professors face at some point in most courses they teach: they have got to give their students a coherent lecture on a subject they hate. For me as an historian, that subject is the industrial revolution; for Luther it was the righteousness of God. He found it absolutely terrifying, because he knew that if God judged him according to His righteousness, he--Martin Luther--was finished.

But the psalmist was saying something different. He said, and he said it repeatedly, "In thy righteousness deliver me and rescue me," while saying nothing about his own righteousness. He made no claims on God and indeed later called himself a feeble, gray-haired old man with nothing to offer. So, what did Luther tell his students about this Psalm?

One can only imagine these things, but it would seem that Luther was seized by this text, because here is where the revolution began. Here the harried professor told his students, "This is the righteousness of God, that by which he makes us righteous, wise, and strong, or that by which he

judges us." His best students must have been astounded at what they heard, and I leave it to you to guess what his poorer students thought.

If they were anything like many of mine, they were just plain annoyed. Here the course was going along just fine and everything was in neat order. Now the worst of all possible things had happened: the professor had introduced an element of ambiguity into things. What, after all, is an assiduous note-taker to do with this awful word, "or"? As I commonly suggest to my students, now is the time to pay attention. And I tell my graduate students that when they encounter something in the sources that is odd, out-of-place, or apparently crazy, this is just the thing to investigate more closely. So too is it with Luther.

In the first place, what he was saying was odd. He had been taught and he had been teaching that the righteousness of God was one of God's qualities. It was not that, as the old generic protestant hymn has it, that "God is good and therefore king," but quite the contrary. God is king and therefore whatever God is is good. According to this view, God's righteousness was a standard that everyone must meet, and--as St. Paul has it--"all have fallen short of the glory of God." Therefore God in his righteousness rightly judged all fallen creatures. Whatever else one might say of him (and Thomas Aquinas and others said a good deal), God was right and there was simply no sense in discussing the matter. God was also merciful, but that was another matter and one to be worked out in this world so that God would be merciful to me.

In the second place, what Luther was saying was confusing. Please note that in our citation Luther did not even use the words "mercy" or "merciful," and neither does Psalm 71. Instead Luther seemed to be saying that God's righteousness saved and condemned at the same time. Here a

little historical imagination is necessary. If some of you, who have been taught this theology since you were children, can find this connection a little confusing, think of the reactions of students who were taught in the traditional way. The keenest and most advanced among them must have walked out of class muttering to themselves, "What on earth is Professor Luther up to now?"

I admit that all of this contains some speculation, perhaps even a bit of fancy, but there is good evidence to support the idea that this was innovative in Wittenberg's theological faculty. In the first place it was innovative for Luther, so innovative that he did not even realize what he had done until later in life. But it made so much sense to him that in a later lecture, also on the Psalms, he simply discarded the late medieval understanding of the righteousness of God and substituted for it what he came to call "passive righteousness." In this instance, he concluded the gloss on the text and presumably his lecture by saying, "Therefore, whoever wants to understand the Scriptures wisely needs to understand all these things as they pertain to life—truth, wisdom, salvation, justice, namely with which He makes us strong, saved, just, and wise. So also the works of God and the way of God, all of which things Christ is in the literal sense, while morally all these things are faith in him." The professor at work, and under the pressures of teaching his students, had undergone a revolution in his understanding of the Scriptures.

Earlier I said that all teachers spend their entire lives working from what they were taught. Most never really leave it behind them. To be sure, they elaborate on it and refine it in the light of new information, but they don't change its basic structure and content. Luther did, but it took time and more work. The famous lectures on Romans followed those on

Psalms and continued from 1515 to 1517. These show that now Luther was working from what he himself had learned in his struggles to understand the Scriptures and teach them to his students.

With the problem of the righteousness of God settled to his satisfaction, he now moved to another issue in late medieval theology: the synteresis or the spark of goodness and of the divine that was supposedly left in humankind after the fall. For the scholastic theologians this spark was at least the urge to save one's own neck, the instinct for self preservation, if you will. For the mystics it was a deep yearning for the divine or what we would probably call the meaning of life itself. Moreover, all agreed that it was to be found in human reason or the conscience, and that if it were fanned it would become a flame that would at least begin to consume the evil that lay in human hearts. The synteresis was thus the medieval foundation for the notion of free will and the keystone for a religion in which works played a prominent part.

There can be no question but that Luther began his work by agreeing that there was such a thing as a spark of goodness. In the Psalms lectures, he declared "And there is such a natural desire in human nature indeed, because the synteresis and desire of good is inextinguishable in man, though it is hindered in many." A little later, he told his students, "For there nobody so bad as not to feel the murmuring of reason and the synteresis." In summary, he insisted that "the remnant (that is reason and the synteresis) always cry to the Lord, even if, forced by sin, the will should sin." In the Romans lectures—even after passing the famous "Reformation passage," Romans 1:17—he could say, "For we are not wholly inclined to evil, since a portion is left to us, which is affected toward good things, as is evident in the synteresis."

Once again, this was all standard stuff, but Luther soon changed his mind and gave his students one more shock. Commenting on Romans 4:7, he repeated the standard teaching on the subject, stopped, and shouted, "Fools! Pig-theologians! This tiny motion towards God which a man can perform by nature they dream to be an act of loving God above all things. But behold, the whole man is filled with sinful desires, this tiny movement notwithstanding." By the time he had worked his way farther through Romans, the spark of goodness had gone the way of his teachers' understanding of the righteousness of God. "It is said that human nature has a general notion of knowing and willing good but that it goes wrong in particulars. It would be more accurate to say that it knows and wills the good in particular things, but that in general it neither knows nor wills the good." Luther the professor tossed the synteresis onto the theological trash heap.

But what about the "evangelical breakthrough" or the "tower experience" of which so much is made in what I can only call more romantic treatment of Luther's development? There can be no doubt that Luther himself wrote that there was one. He described a rush of understanding about the righteousness of God, which must be dated in 1519, and declared, "I felt as if I had been reborn, and the gates of Paradise swung open for me."

This is heady stuff. To this day it is used in some circles to undergird notions about sudden conversions. One particularly enthusiastic Luther scholar even wrote that "God laid his hand on Martin Luther's head." Others have tried to explain it away by pointing out that Luther wrote this remark in 1545, long after the fact; perhaps his memory was failing or perhaps, like many old men, he was romanticizing his youth. In

fact, it probably happened. But what was it? Taking all the evidence into account, this "moment" was the sudden realization that he had solved the problem. It was as if he said, "Aha! Now I know!" In fact, he had known for some time. He just hadn't known that he knew.

If time permitted, I could pile up enormous quantities of evidence in support of the assertion that he was a university man as well as a tortured conscience and that the university man is of far more historical significance than the tortured conscience. After all, he was by no means the only person in the 16th century to have real doubts about the eternal status of his soul. To put the matter quite simply, Elector Frederick the Wise--Luther's prince--had a relic collection in the building on whose door Luther posted the 95 Theses from which the faithful could earn well over a million years off their time in purgatory. The Elector made so much money from the indulgences "sold" there that from it he could and did pay for all the public works construction--roads, fortifications, and the like--in all of Electoral Saxony. The dictum still holds: "You can't sell refrigerators to Eskimos." The laity wanted the spiritual benefits that supposedly came with indulgences, pilgrimages, the veneration of relics, and the like, just as today many will whore after the likes of a Jimmy Bakker or a Swaggert. That world, and perhaps ours, was filled with tortured consciences. So, too, was Luther. But Luther was also a professor and an extraordinarily gifted one.

Above all, he was a university man in an intentional way. By this I mean that he worked within the university and thought that what happened in the university world was crucial. I suppose everyone knows that the 95 Theses were written in Latin for academic disputation. What is less well acknowledged is that the first converts to Luther's side were his own

colleagues in Wittenberg's faculty of theology. Indeed, the "Reformation" was initially known as "the Wittenberg theology," that is, the theology that was taught at Wittenberg. The term, "Lutherans," was first used to denote those theologians elsewhere who agreed with Luther, much as one could be called an Augustinian, Occamist, Thomist, or Scotist. In 1518 Luther in fact wrote in a letter, "I am convinced that there will be no reform unless the universities are reformed first." In the Address to the Christian Nobility of 1520, he declared, "The universities need a thorough reformation. I say this, no matter whom it offends."

The picture of Luther as a university man also has a touching side story to it. After the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, he was riding home with one of his former professors. Here you have to understand that one of the closest relationships any professor has is to their own professor. We even call such people our "Doctor Father;" it is as if they have adopted us. Spending some time with this person is always a special moment, one that most of us use, at least in part, to get caught up on what we're thinking now. Luther did just this on that long wagon ride home, but he had no success. Of his former professor he wrote, "All the old man did was to become confused, and shake his head in disbelief."

Thus, the real Luther, the Luther of historical significance, was the university man first, and many other things second. But what is that to us? We have now come full circle, back to George Forell's homily in his after-dinner talk years ago to a bunch of young professors and his admonition to us to do our work. Luther said much the same. After recounting his struggles to understand the righteousness of God, he described how the great moment of realization came to him "At last, meditating day and night and by the mercy of God, I gave heed to the context of the words, 'In it

the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" One can almost picture the scholar in his study, laboring away. Finally it comes, and the professor gives thanks to God. We could all do worse, no matter our calling.