

# Luther as Preacher

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Were the good doctor to have been required to specify his occupation on Form 1040, what would it have been? I wonder whether he would not have been pleased to answer with the words he used to describe himself in a letter to Duke George of Saxony: "By the grace of God, Evangelist at Wittenberg."<sup>1</sup>

It is suggested that in today's world, Luther would be called a professor of Old Testament Exegesis. While his salary was earned for his university duties, the extent of his pulpit work is nothing short of astounding. "Luther's preaching activity was tremendous by any standard since it was carried out in addition to his proper vocation of lecturing to students and his astonishing literary output."<sup>2</sup>

Was lecturing his "proper vocation?" Luther taught no more than three hours a week and also participated in disputations at the university, but Doberstein lists this sampling of the number of sermons Luther preached: in 1522 he preached 138 sermons, in 1524 it was 100, in 1528 he preached 195 sermons distributed over 145 preaching days,<sup>3</sup> he preached 180 times in 1531, 80 times in 1534, and 100 times in 1538. Reminiscing about his preaching during 1517, Luther said, "Often I preached four sermons in one day. During a whole Lenten season I preached two sermons and lectured once each day in the early days when I was preaching on the Ten Commandments." In 1529 he preached 18 times in the 11 days from Palm Sunday to the Wednesday after Easter. The more than 2,300 sermons in the Weimar edition of Luther's works are thought to represent about two-thirds of his total sermonic output.<sup>4</sup>

The good doctor had preaching in his blood. When illness and dissatisfaction with the Wittenbergers' progress in sanctified living moved him to leave the pulpit for months, Luther still preached in his home to family and close friends. Frequently he preached in the Castle Church at the behest of the elector for visiting dignitaries. Whenever Luther traveled, he regularly preached in the cities along the way and at his destination.

When it came to evaluating his writings, Luther was proudest of his books of sermons. It was his verdict that "the postil is the very best book which I ever wrote."<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> He was referring to the Church Postil or Wartburg Postil, the first volume in a series of sermon studies for preachers on the Sunday Gospels and Epistles. This homiletical material greatly spread the influence of Luther to many a parish in Europe.

With preaching so much a part of Luther's ministry, surprisingly little has been written about Luther the Preacher. The biographer and historian are likely more concerned with their subject's "enduring" influence on history, whereas the influence of the preacher is limited to the impression he makes on the hearts and lives of the hundreds who might have been there to hear him. Even the transcript of a sermon just doesn't have the same impact as being there.

Had Luther preached rational revolution, the role of his preaching in the rebellion would receive due attention. Instead, the reformer's preaching proclaimed personal deliverance from slavery to Satan and his minions. He guided souls to follow their Savior through being faithful to their calling, not to pursue some

<sup>1</sup> Ewald Plass, *This is Luther*, p 339.

<sup>2</sup> *Luther's Works* (American Edition), Vol 51, p XI.

<sup>3</sup> Elmer Carl Kiessling, *The Early Sermons of Luther...*, p 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 51, p XII.

<sup>5</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 52, p IX.

<sup>6</sup> The term postil came into usage in the early part of the sixteenth century. It was derived from the Latin *postilla*, "exposition," which in turn grew out of the standard phrase *post illa verba Sacrae Scripturae*, "according to these words of Sacred Scripture," with which the sermonic exposition customarily began.

Christian reordering of society. And that is as dramatic to the historian as watching dough rise. Yet the leavening influence God produced through Luther on the homes of Germany, Europe and the world has led to *novum ordinem seculorum*.

### **Luther's Call to Preach**

Brother Martin did not volunteer for pulpit duties. They were pressed on him in September, 1511, by his order's superior, John von Staupitz, under the pear tree in the courtyard of the Augustinian house in Wittenberg. The vicar-general's order was, "Herr Magister, you must become a doctor and a preacher." Luther protested, citing no less than fifteen reasons why he did not feel himself called to be a preacher and a doctor of theology. Staupitz, however, refused to accept any of the reasons. "Why, my dear fellow, you don't want to set yourself up as wiser than the whole congregation and the Fathers!" Martin then pleaded, "Herr Staupitz, you will bring me to my death. I will never endure it for three months." In his good-humored way Staupitz then settled the matter with the reply, "Don't you know that our Lord God has many great matters to attend to? For these He needs clever people to advise Him. If you should die, you will be received into His council in heaven, for He, too, has need of some doctors."<sup>7</sup>

This appointment of the Lord to the rickety pulpit of Wittenberg's Augustinian Monastery Chapel inaugurated a 34 year preaching ministry that did not end until four days before the reformer's death. The chapel was a dilapidated 20' x 30' building. Quickly his popularity spread, and the little building was packed with townsfolk as well as the monks.

Luther's reputation as a preacher did not escape the attention of the city council. In 1514 they sent him a regular call to assist the sickly pastor, Simon Heinze von Brueck, by preaching in St. Mary's Church. The Town Church, as it is also named, was the parish church for Wittenberg and 13 surrounding villages. So, up to the time the monastery was dissolved, he preached at both locations.

He preached no less often after a healthy John Bugenhagen was called as pastor of the Town Church in 1522. Bugenhagen was frequently out of town for months and years on organizational business for the Reformation.

It was this conviction that the Lord had called him to his preaching position that kept Luther returning to the pulpit as much as his strength allowed. He continued even when the elector released him from his regular assignments in congregation and classroom during his later years.

It certainly was not the money, because Luther received no salary for his years at St. Mary's, only occasional perks like wine, or lime and stone to fix the house he purchased.

Much as he loved the people, he also did not preach because he liked to perform for the crowd. "Believe me," said he, "preaching is not something men can perform in their own power; for though I am an old and experienced preacher, I nonetheless am fearful when I am to preach."<sup>8</sup>

How is it that Luther would preach for as many as 195 services in a year? Well, it was a large congregation, justifying frequent services. Then, too, the sermon was almost the only tool of Biblical instruction. Even catechetical instruction was carried on in the form of sermon addresses.

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<sup>7</sup> This account is quoted from the Table Talks in numerous authors. Luther told it when urging a reluctant Anton Lauterbach to accept a preaching position at the Castle Church.

<sup>8</sup> Plass, *This is Luther*, p 342.

Sunday there were three services: an early service at 5 or 6 a.m., with a sermon usually on the Epistle lesson for the day; morning worship at 9 or 10 a.m. at which the Gospel lesson served as text, on occasion, a series of catechism sermons would follow the Gospel sermon; an afternoon service at which the preacher spun out in greater detail the chief thought of the morning sermon, or he might conduct a series of sermonic lectures on some book of the Bible.

On weekdays all the services would be at 5 or 6 a.m. The order for sermons generally followed in the Town Church was: Monday and Tuesday were devoted to catechism sermons; Wednesday, Matthew was studied; Thursday and Friday it was one of the epistles; and on Saturday, when the worship was in the evening, the Gospel of John. There were special services during Lent.

Luther obviously did not preach every day. But he was the regular homilete at the main Sunday service. The rest of the schedule was worked out between pastors and deacons.

### **The Sermonic Heritage of the Reformer**

The Sermon was not an invention of the Reformation. During the missionary centuries, the fervent preaching of the Gospel of Christ was carried on in one nation after another. The sermon was generally a simple homily, a verse by verse unfolding of the Scripture.

The "Christian" era that followed saw a deterioration of effective preaching. An understanding of the principles of the Gospel was assumed, and the stress was put on the rules for sanctified living.

At the same time, there was a change in emphasis in worship as the Sacrament developed into the focal point of the service and the whole worship experience became that of a meritorious viewing of the performance by the priests, assistants and choirs.

What kept the preaching art alive were causes needing promotion, like the crusades, and the obligation to counter the lively, instruction-oriented efforts of the proselytizing sects and cults, like the Waldensians. The priests of this period were often ill-trained for teaching. So, the nature of the causes referred to led to the rise of the itinerant preachers. The Dominicans, Franciscans and Augustinians were licensed by the pope to train and send out preachers who had authority to work wherever they chose. This led to conflicts between the secular clergy and their bishops with the teaching friars. When they came to town, they rang the bells to draw the crowds, heard confessions, and siphoned off the offerings of the faithful before moving on to the harvest of another field.

The common folk, of course, did frequently benefit from the rousing presentations of the dramatic "Billy Grahams" of the Middle Ages. These fellows also carried into the backwater communities much-coveted news from the outside world.

There was little incentive for the priests of the rural parishes to give much attention to effective sermonizing. At the same time, the competition from the friars provoked the large, urban parishes to engage skilled orators to fill their pulpits. Many of these gained a tremendous following with their earthy descriptions of the popular sins and their vivid pictures of the horrors of hell. They winningly promoted the church's way of salvation through indulgences, the veneration of the saints, pilgrimages and penance. They could always gain nods of approval when they denounced the foibles and excesses of the clergy and hierarchy or condemned the

Jews and heretics, and they used terminology more colorful than Luther's. "Broadly speaking, the content of the pre-Reformation sermon was ethical rather than doctrinal."<sup>9</sup>

The pre-Reformation influences on Luther and his homiletics should also include something on the contributions of scholasticism and mysticism.

The motto of the Schoolmen students of Aristotle was, "*Qui bene distinguit, bene docet.*"<sup>10</sup> When the style of the artless, and sometimes aimless, simple homily had run its course, they reigned in sermonizing and put it in harness. The positive side of this is that they emphasized that, to be memorable, a sermon must be a unity, have a specific central theme and parts that logically unfold the theme.<sup>11</sup> The sermon manuals discussed the appropriateness of different types of sermons, like the homily, the textual and thematic sermons. Thematic sermons were organized much like the majority of sermons today.

The negative side of scholastic preaching came to the fore with the growth of the theory of allegorical interpretation. Sermons became playgrounds for the preacher's genius at inventing comparisons, seeing special significance in numbers or the etymology of words. Here are examples of the excesses from Kiessling's book. An emblematic sermon by Gottschalk Hollen (page 28):

Christus fuit Verbum—

1. indicativum (the incarnation)
2. imperativum (His miracles)
3. optativum (His love)
4. coniunctivum (His resurrection)
5. infinitivum (His ascension)

On page 29 there's the outline of a letter sermon on the name, Maria:

1. mediatrix
2. alleviatrix
3. reparatrix
4. illuminatrix
5. auxiliatrix

There were sermons on numbers. For example (page 29): Maria has three syllables, which represent the Trinity, the five letters in the name stand for five virtues. If you multiply the two numbers you have the number of Psalms of Degrees, etc. Many honored these preachers because "they could distinguish and divide a hair 'twixt south and southwest side."<sup>12</sup>

There are still preachers who trumpet their "wisdom" with games similar to these. They may even make gospel truths memorable by such devices. But their danger is in the subjectivistic methods of Bible interpretation people are tempted to see as legitimate. Is it not modern scholasticism to preach a sermon on women's liberation on the basis of the account of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42)? Luther's sermons before 1521 show his effort to follow the lessons he had learned from the scholastics. Here is Dr. Kiessling's summary of the second oldest sermon of Luther's we have. Please note that, though the methodology might be ludicrous, the point was the elucidation of God's truth.

"The text is Psalm 60:8: 'Moab is my washpot'—but Luther took 'olla' to mean 'cookingpot.' This pot is the world which persecutes the saints. Its three legs are the lust of the flesh, of the eyes and the pride of life—1 John 2:16. In order that we may become a dish fit for Christ—'Bring me

<sup>9</sup> *Interpreting Luther's Legacy*, p 125.

<sup>10</sup> Kiessling, *Luther the Preacher*, on tape.

<sup>11</sup> One of the homiletical manuals of that time pictured the sermon as a tree, the trunk being the theme, etc. In "Design for Preaching," written by Grady Davis in 1958, we read, "A sermon should be like a tree..." (from *Interpreting Luther's Legacy*, p 123).

<sup>12</sup> Kiessling tape

venison and make me savory meat' (Genesis 27:7)—preachers hunt us like beasts in the woods of sin, kill us with javelins of the Word of God and distribute our members—dead to sin, so that we may serve the Lord in justice. Like the quarry we are killed, quartered and skinned, and then placed into the kettle. Christ constantly stirs up the fire, in order to make us boil (suffer tribulations) and steam (send up prayers to God). The process is most signally exemplified in the lives of the martyrs. On the other hand the godless feel nothing of this uncomfortable heat. But if we experience it, we may take it as a sign of being called. God is preparing the crown for us. Among the questions raised is this one: Why does Moab represent the pot? Naturally, because of Moab's incestuous origin. But the true representatives of Moab are the Jews, for they, too, are born out of an abuse of the law."<sup>13</sup>

Luther's "creative" citation of Scripture is also typical of the Bible's frequent misuse in the scholastic sermon. Another example of this from Luther is another early sermon. The text is Matt. 23:24, "Blind guides! You strain out the gnat but swallow the camel." During the course of the sermon, Luther rises to the defense of the scholastic doctrine of synderesis, that man has an ineradicable divine spark of conscience. It shows itself in the desire not to be damned, but saved. "Luther finds Scripture verses to prove it, too. Isaiah, in his forty-second chapter, said: 'The bruised reed shall he not break,' and in his first, 'Except the Lord had left unto us a small remnant.' Job 14:7 also assures us that 'there is hope that the tree cut down will sprout again.'"<sup>14</sup>

Luther pretty much followed the traditional forms for sermon delivery and pulpit decorum. But he did not hesitate to make a number of adaptations to suit his style.

The preacher dressed in cassock and surplice with a biretta on his head. A monk preacher would dress in the habit of his order. Luther was very indifferent about the matter of dress. He wore the garb of the Augustinians in the pulpit until 1523 when the elector sent him cloth for an academic robe and made it plain he expected Luther to have the robe made and wear it. That, then, is what he thereafter wore in the pulpit.

- 1) Once in the pulpit the preacher would utter a short prayer with his hat in his hand.
- 2) Making the sign of the cross, he would greet the congregation, saying, "*In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti.*"
- 3) He recited (or read) in Latin the theme, or the text. If the text were short, it would usually be the theme.
- 4) A pulpit greeting in German, and a prayer, usually the *Ave Maria*.
- 5) The Gospel lesson was read or recited.
- 6) The exordium, an introduction to the text rather than to the sermon. This exordium often consisted of a quotation from the great Aristotle. The quote was supposed to pick up on a thought from the text, though it was frequently not germane.
- 7) The recitation of the sermon parts in Latin (later German) in rhyme if possible. There were rarely less than three or more than five parts in a thematic sermon.
- 8) The congregation was often asked to join in singing a stanza of some familiar "Ruf" or "Leis."
- 9) The body of the sermon. (I'll deal with this separately.)
- 10) The conclusion. Usually quite brief because it led into—
- 11) The confession of faith, confession of sins, and indulgence or absolution.
- 12) The intercessions, sort of our general prayer plus prayers for the dead, special prayers and the Lord's Prayer.
- 13) The announcements. These could be lengthy and involved because the pulpit announcements were the community bulletin board and newspaper. The focus, of course, was on church activities, but the latest on the war with the Turks, etc. would also be dealt with. The following were regularly

<sup>13</sup> Kiessling, *Early Sermons*, p 71f.

<sup>14</sup> Kiessling, *Early Sermons*, p 73f.

included: "the announcement of marriage bans, of excommunications, or canceling of excommunications, and of festival, fasting and saints' days during the week, with the amount of indulgence obtainable in each case. The last feature was salted with admonition, lest the people...should unwittingly sin by feasting when they ought to be fasting or miss the chance of winning a hundred days' indulgence."<sup>15</sup>

All this made up the sermon in Luther's day. The congregation expected this would consume a full hour. The sermon, as we know it, was probably no more than twenty to thirty minutes long even then.<sup>16</sup>

We have a bit more to say about the body of the medieval sermon. As the preacher expounded the various parts of the sermon to develop the theme, he would take pains to prove the point he wanted his hearers to accept and take with them. This proof was not so much driven home by arguments from reason as it was by quoting authorities, biblical and church.

Some today would be surprised to hear that the Bible was the foremost authority to be cited. The Word of God was not exactly "a hidden treasure" to the preachers before Luther. Jerome Dungsheim in his *Manual of Homiletics* (1514) writes:

"If they desire to be shepherds of the flock of Christ, the Word of God provides them with the only pasture and nourishment for the flock; if they would be physicians of souls, the Word of God offers the only remedy; if they would be spiritual leaders of the congregation, God's Word is the sword they must be able to wield....How then can they accomplish this task without a thorough knowledge of this same Word and unless they have studiously acquired and practiced the art of using it rightly?"<sup>17</sup>

On this we have already seen that the Word was sometimes used, even by Luther in his early days, to make a point in the very face of sound hermeneutical principles.

There were other corroborative authorities that were constantly cited. There were the Church Fathers, especially Lombard's *Sentences*. And there was that great philosopher, Aristotle, who settled all debate.

Following such proofs the homilete would root the point into the minds of the simple folk by means of one or more *exempla*. An *exemplum* was a story or illustration from any number of sources or even from the preacher's experience and imagination. The legends about the saints were exceptionally popular.

For preachers with less than photographic recall, there were numerous concordances, books of quotes and illustrations arranged topically, if you please.

Toward the end of the sermon the preacher would pose a number of questions based on the text which he would answer. Too often the questions dealt with foolish matters more to demonstrate the speaker's brilliance than to deal with real problems. For example, "Will cut off hair and fingernails also be resurrected?" or "Why were the first believers called Christians and not Jesuans?"<sup>18</sup>

At first, Pastor Martin made every effort to incorporate the conventional into his addresses. Soon, however, he dispensed with artificialities or altered the traditional forms to suit his purpose of communicating the Word of truth to his flock.

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<sup>15</sup> Kiessling, p 32.

<sup>16</sup> Luther was quite conscious of time and complained at the way John Bugenhagen ran on for two hours. Luther once even left church in the middle of one of his sermons. Bugenhagen's response was to quote John 8:47, "He who belongs to God hears what God says."

<sup>17</sup> Kiessling, p 34.

<sup>18</sup> Kiessling, p 40.

His oldest extant sermon uses the Golden Rule as the text. He begins with the announcement, "This sermon will have three parts. First, I shall say something which is noteworthy by way of introduction; secondly, I shall draw a useful conclusion for our own instruction; and thirdly, I shall answer some questions with regard to what has been said."

In the first part he distinguishes three kinds of human goods. He follows the classification of Aristotle without mentioning his name. (Luther developed an enduring animosity for this pagan.) He quotes Ps. 37:27 as the guide for how to use our goods to do good to others.

In part two, he announces three subparts to prove by reason, by authority and analogy that it's not enough not to harm others. One must also do what he can for others. The second subpart lists six authorities or sub-sub-parts, five coming from Scripture and one from Augustine (actually Ambrose). In the third subpart he makes his point in two analogies, one from the plant world and the second from the animal kingdom—his favorite animal illustration, the pig. From those analogies he draws six conclusions that bring out his main point.

In part three Luther raises three pertinent questions and responds to them. The first, "Can't I just wish my neighbor well in my heart?" The second, "I will let him go in peace and do him neither good nor ill." The third question is, "Can't I do what I want with what belongs to me?" Luther's reply to the third question is an enunciation of one of his favorite themes. "All the goods we have are from God and they are not given to us to retain and abuse, but rather to dispense."

Throughout, there is no reference to Christ and the Gospel. It seems clear that that is assumed. The whole is simply a lecture on ethics.<sup>19</sup>

Since I had access only to selected sermons, the change in Luther's presentation is rather dramatic from one sermon to the next. With the Wittenberg congregation his style is conversational. His authority is almost exclusively the Bible, and he uses the passages in a much more natural way, weaving them into his presentation to make the truth clear rather than waving them to show he's correct. One thought flows on to the next without a discernible framework of parts and subparts. Instead, he elucidates his theme by looking at it from various points of view. He uses questions throughout the sermon as a means to focus attention on a point or as a transition. More and more, God and our Savior are the center of attention rather than man and ethics.

Still he can take a figure from the text and allegorize it up. In his sermon of 1517 on Jesus' stilling of the storm, Luther has this theme, "In this Gospel the sea is a symbol of this world, that is, this troubled unstable and transitory life."<sup>20</sup> You can imagine how he carries this out to show that Jesus brings peace. These sentences end that sermon. "We do not want perils which will drive us to cry out. We would rather perform good works in order to have peace. But this is to perish a thousand times. Woe to those who do this!"<sup>21</sup>

As far as form in the sermon is concerned, Luther rarely bothered much with a formal exordium of any length. For example, "This is the Epistle for today (2 Cor. 3:4-6) and it is our custom to preach on it, but I do not like to preach on this Epistle because it is not for the people who cannot follow it. However, in order not to disturb the order, I shall deal with it briefly."<sup>22</sup> Another example, the text is John 11:1-45: "I have told you the story of this Gospel in order that you may picture in your hearts and remember well that Christ our God, in all

<sup>19</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 51, pp 5-13.

<sup>20</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 51, p 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p 25f.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p 221.

the Gospels, from beginning to end, and also all writings of the prophets and apostles, desires of us nothing else but that we should have a sure and confident heart and trust in him."<sup>23</sup>

One more comment about Luther's sermon outlining, or lack of it: there was recognizable progression that Luther stressed with "first, second, third, etc." Sometimes he lost count and repeated numbers or skipped one, but he kept his audience with him.

Because the announcements, etc., usually followed the sermon (or were considered part of the sermon) the reformer's conclusions are abrupt or non-existent. There is seldom a summation of what was covered or repetition of the theme. Sometimes it was, "Let this suffice for the time on this text."<sup>24</sup> Or, "May the Lord help us, I cannot go on further now."<sup>25</sup> Or, "About this it would take a lifetime of preaching."<sup>26</sup> Or, "What the spittle is and the meaning of the washing in the pool of Siloam we shall save for another time."<sup>27</sup> Or how about this for an upbeat ending? "Oh, you snoring priests! Oh darkness deeper than Egyptian! How secure we are in the midst of the worst of all our evils!"<sup>28</sup>

Yet, on occasion, Luther concludes with beautiful summaries of his theme and sermon. He ends a sermon on the Lord's Supper thus: "First, the Sacrament is Christ's body and blood in bread and wine comprehended in the Word. Secondly, the benefit is forgiveness of sins. This includes the need and the benefit. Thirdly, those who believe should come."<sup>29</sup>

By the time of Luther, scholastic preaching had gone about as far as it could go. It had carried the logical organization of sermons to its ultimate. It had kept alive an acquaintance with the Scriptures and awakened a thirst for the Word. But the cold night of preaching of the Law to regulate morals and social behavior had to give way to the warmth of the Gospel's Son.

Scholasticism may have taught Luther careful analysis of every detail of God's Word, but mysticism introduced him to theology with a heart. That was also an important preparation for Luther to be able to proclaim the heart of Gospel theology, Christ.

Mysticism was a reaction to the schoolmen's stress on obedience to the church and its rules. The mystics preached that the true goal and happiness of life is the soul's communion with God. To achieve that communion, one had to suffer the hell of dying to the world, to all sensuality, to mechanical ecclesiastical practice, and even to one's self in order to begin contemplating God in Christ. Before God, man had no virtue, only resistance to God. He had to cultivate a perfect passivity, so God could come and do His work. Direct, immediate communication with God and communion with God was the goal, to enjoy the bliss of God's presence even as Christ did. Fortunately, most mystics were practical enough not to pursue their principles to the ultimate. Christian love kept the balloon from soaring off and kept them in touch with the ground.

John von Staupitz was a practical mystic who had great influence on Luther. So also did the writings of John Tauler and the book "German Theology." Luther edited two publications of this book. Its influence colored many of his sermons from 1516-1522. The clearest and most frequent allusions come in the first two years. Luther's confrontations with the Enthusiasts pretty well ended the romance with mysticism.

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<sup>23</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 51, p 44.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p 287.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p 312.

<sup>26</sup> Kiessling essay, p 18.

<sup>27</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 51, p 43.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p 31.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p 193.



Here are some examples of Luther's sermons from Dr. Kiessling's book:

"It is impossible at the same time to have faith and the things of the world. As long as the heart has a single thing in the presence of which it is happy and in whose absence it is unhappy, it has not faith...for one must trust only in the unseen, after leaving all things....Righteousness out of faith is so wonderful because it leaves all things."<sup>30</sup>

"This is the pure and select myrrh, to resign oneself to pure nothingness as we were before we existed, and to long neither for God nor for anything outside of God, but only let ourselves, according to the good pleasure of God, be led back to His principle, that is, to the nothing. For as we were nothing and longed for nothing before we were created, except to be in the knowledge of God, so we must go back again and in the same manner know nothing, be nothing, this is the way of the cross through which we come to life."<sup>31 32</sup>

Luther's temporary preoccupation with the mystical kingdom within us comes out in a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. There he defines "daily bread" as the heavenly, spiritual bread, Jesus Christ. "Here lies the real hunger and thirst of the soul."<sup>33</sup> How different this is from Luther's catechetical explanation about ten years later.

From Luther's journey with mysticism he took several worthwhile concepts while, at the same time, discarding the unscriptural ideas that would actually have drawn him, and those who attended to his preaching, away from the Lord. He learned that all idea of merit before God must be discarded, a most important truth. But, whereas the mystics saw sin as a lack in man, Luther, on the basis of his personal struggle with sin, had to acknowledge that sin is actual guilt before God.<sup>34</sup>

Luther was a man of his times. God molded him through this heritage into the reformer he became, neither a revolutionary nor a perpetuator of the status quo. What made Luther the leader of the Reformation (not the Revolution), is that he came on the scene with no prescription to change the church and the world. He came as a man struggling with God and himself. His congregation shared in his struggle and grew with him as the Lord led him on to peace through faith in Christ. So Luther's personal experiences became universalized. Grimm adds this thought: "This deliberate, gradual evolution of his own religious life and doctrines gathered to his cause not only the learned and cultivated classes, but also the common people, from whose ranks he had risen."<sup>35</sup>

## God's Gifts to the Preacher

No one, least of all Martin Luther, is strictly a product of his heritage. God bestows unique talents and gifts on a person which also affect the work of his calling.<sup>36</sup>

We are accustomed to think of Luther's appearance as characterized by portliness with peasant features. At the time of the Leipzig debate, this verbal description was given. He was "of middle height with a slender body worn out both by study and care, so that you can almost count his bones. He had a peculiar erect bearing,

<sup>30</sup> p 84.

<sup>31</sup> p 85.

<sup>32</sup> Luther's reference to "the way of the cross" is an emphasis we shall touch on in a later part of this presentation.

<sup>33</sup> p 87.

<sup>34</sup> This sort of reminds one of the current controversy over alcoholism being a disease rather than a sin.

<sup>35</sup> p 60.

<sup>36</sup> We are indebted to the book by Rev. H.J. Grimm for bringing together this material. We shall not cite his sources but the pages of his work.

bordering on stiffness, so that he seemed rather to be bending backward than forward."<sup>37</sup> Luther's constant health problems make it questionable whether he ever became heavy set; or, if he was in later life, whether it was a result of the bloated look that goes with heart and kidney problems. Not a glutton, Luther's dietary philosophy he expressed in this way, "I eat what I want, and suffer what I must."

The most distinctive feature that friend and foe refer to was his dark, piercing eyes that fixed whomever he was addressing.

His hair turned gray relatively early in life, but he had a youthful appearance that caused many to underestimate his age by about ten years. "Luther was a man in whose face one may read benevolence, charity and cheerfulness."<sup>38</sup>

Luther was indifferent to what he wore and did not think twice about wearing clothes that he had patched. He did not care a whit what the preacher wore in the pulpit. His concern was for dressing the service itself in proper evangelical garb and not whether the preacher "have a silver or a golden cross carried, or wear a cap and gown of velvet, silk or linen; and if one cap and gown be not enough, let him put on three, like Aaron."<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Luther had high standards of personal hygiene. "He had a bathroom with tubs in his house."<sup>40</sup>

Luther's unusually sharp, clear, baritone voice was one of his outstanding assets. "His voice is mild and mellow; his delivery is very graceful. Whoever heard him once will desire to hear him again."<sup>41</sup> When Luther traveled, he often spoke to such large crowds the church building could not hold them—crowds of up to 25,000. Yet he could make himself heard and understood by all. One of the noteworthy things about his preaching style is that he is said to have been a slow speaker. That was held up as the ideal of preachers at the time. He had little love for histrionics and exaggerated gestures in the pulpit. In fact, he was very impatient with those who paced the chancel to dramatize their preaching. He wanted nothing to distract from the communication of the message from heaven.

It is, however, hard to imagine Luther speaking without gestures or that he did not raise his voice to a shout or increase the speed of his delivery. Even in print, some of Luther's language has such an incendiary effect that it could not have been spoken in any kind of slow and tranquil tone. In a sermon to the Augustinian order in 1515, he berated the clergy in these words, "Sunt enim vergiffete Schlagen, Verraetter, Verloffter, Moerder, Diebe, Stroeter, Tyrannen, Teuffel, und alles Unglueck, verzeiffelt, unglaeubig, Neidhardt und Hasser."<sup>42</sup> There were a few occasions when the effect of Luther's sermon on the hearers started such disturbance in the audience that the sermon had to be stopped.

The natural character endowments of Luther also made him a popular preacher in the best sense. We are again indebted to Grimm for this summary. "These natural characteristics consisted primarily in (1) manliness of character, (2) a sympathetic love for humanity, and (3) a poetic love for nature."<sup>43</sup>

R.W. Dale well describes Luther's character in these words:

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<sup>37</sup> p 13f.

<sup>38</sup> p 15.

<sup>39</sup> p 16.

<sup>40</sup> p 16.

<sup>41</sup> Kiessling, p 58.

<sup>42</sup> T. Harwood Pattison, *The History of Christian Preaching*, p 131.

<sup>43</sup> p 21.

"He had a fiery and passionate hatred of falsehood and of sin; a dauntless courage in the assertion of the claims of truth and righteousness. He had a boundless faith and a boundless joy in God. His joy was of a masculine kind, and made him stronger for his work. His faith was of a masculine kind, and relieved him from worrying doubts and fears about his soul's affairs. He had his gloomy times, his conflicts with principalities and powers in dismal and solitary places; but he had no morbid dreams about the sanctity of misery, nor did he suppose that the ever-blessed God finds any satisfaction in the self-inflicted sufferings of his children. His massive face and robust form (sic!) were the outward and visible signs of the vigor and massiveness of his moral and religious character. He was a man, and did not try to be anything else. God made him a man; what was he that he should quarrel with God's work? He had flesh and blood; he could not help it. He did not desire to help it. He ate heartily, and enjoyed seeing his friends at dinner. He married a wife and loved her; he loved God none the less. He liked music and songs as well as preaching and sermons. He could laugh as well as preach. He had a genial humor as well as deep devoutness. He was a brave man, strong and resolute, with abounding life of all kinds; a saint of a type with which for many evil centuries Christendom had been unfamiliar."<sup>44</sup>

No one had a more prestigious host of enemies, except Luther's Master. They were the likes of the emperor of a realm on which the sun did not set, the hierarchy of the church that claimed authority over all the nations of Europe, and the king of England. For twenty-five years he lived under the ban of the empire. Yet, with God assuring him through His Word of Truth that Luther was in the right, the reformer continued to advance the kingdom and glory of the Savior courageously and cheerfully by wielding the sword of the Spirit.

At the same time, he was moderate in his reforms. He was humble and awe-struck before his superiors to whom he nevertheless could not yield one iota of the truth. His behavior was predictable because he was an open, frank person. What hurt him most was when foe or friend resorted to duplicity.

Luther lived a simple life and loved people. He continually surrounded himself with family and friends—not for the adulation they accorded him, but because he loved them. His gardener, his barber and his children were on intimate terms with the great man. In his sermons he expressed his deep admiration for the superior sanctification lived by these his beloved, for the mother nursing her child and caring for her home. His sermon *exempla* are taken from the daily life of the farmer, craftsman or servant, not from the legends of "the saints." He took on fellows like the firebrand Karlstadt when the time came for the rebel to pay the piper.

"When we are in the pulpit, we should nurse people and give them milk to drink; for a new church is growing up daily which needs to know the first principles. Therefore, one should not hesitate to teach the Catechism diligently and to distribute its milk. The lofty speculations and matters should be reserved for the wiseacres. I will not consider Drs. Pomeranus, Jonas and Philipp while I am preaching; for they know what I am preaching better than I do. Nor do I preach to them, but to my little Hans and Elizabeth; these I consider. He must be a harebrained gardener who wants to consider only one flower in a large garden and neglects all the others. Therefore see to it that you preach purely and simply and have regard for the unlearned people, and do not address only one or the other."<sup>45</sup>

Luther loved all God's creation. The flowers, birds and animals, he observed carefully with the perceptive eye of the poet-philosopher and used them regularly in the most effective illustrations.

"Do as the birds do. Learn to trust, sing and be happy, and let your heavenly Father care for you....I have one preacher that I love better than any other on earth. It is my little tame robin, who preaches to me daily. I put crumbs on my window sill, especially at night. He hops to the

<sup>44</sup> T. Harwood Pattison, *The History of Christian Preaching*, p 131.

<sup>45</sup> Plass, *What Luther Says*, Vol 3, p 1130.

window when he wants his supply and takes as much as he needs. Then he always hops to a tree nearby, lifts his voice to God, sings his carol of praise and gratitude, tucks his little head under his wing, goes fast to sleep and lets tomorrow look after itself. He is the best preacher I have on earth."<sup>46</sup>

Of all the animals, Luther was most fond of the pig for his illustrations. "Who blasphemes the name of God is like a priest who feeds his pig out of a chalice....Anyone who despises hearing the Word, let him remain the pot-bellied pig he is."<sup>47</sup> A sermon on soberness and moderation<sup>48</sup> focuses on the pig throughout as a metaphor for the German people. The cow also comes in for frequent mention. "Don't look at death as a cow stares at a new gate."... "Love is blind. It is as likely to fall on a cow pie as on a lily leaf."<sup>49</sup> Earthy he may be, but Luther does make his point rememberable.

His imagination, eye and poetic sensibilities all combine to instruct most nobly in a passage as this:

"I saw lately two miracles. First, as I looked out the window, I saw the stars in the heavens and the whole fair dome of God; yet did I see no pillars on which the Master had placed this dome. Nevertheless, the heavens fall not, and the dome still stands fast. Now there are some that seek for such pillars. They would fain lay hold of the, and feel them. And because they cannot do this, they really struggle and tremble as though the heaven must certainly fall for no other reason than because they cannot seize or see the pillars. Could they but lay hold of these, the heaven would stand firm.

"Next, I saw also great thick clouds hover over us with such weight that they might be likened to a great sea. Yet I saw no floor upon which they rested or found footing, nor any vessels in which they were contained. Still they did not fall upon us, but greeted us with a sour face and flew away. When they were gone, then shone forth both the floor and our roof which had held them—the rainbow. That was a weak, thin, small floor and roof; and it vanished in the clouds; and, in appearance, was more like an image such as is seen through a painted glass, than a strong floor, as well as on account of the great weight of water. Nevertheless, it was found in truth that this almighty image (such as it seemed) bore the burden of the waters and protected us. Yet there are some who consider, regard and fear the water and the thickness of the clouds and the heavy burden of them, more than this thin, narrow and light image. For they fain would feel the strength of the image, and because they cannot, they fear that the clouds will occasion an everlasting flood."<sup>50</sup>

One more I like: "A preacher must not only feed his sheep, but keep the wolves from attacking them. A wolf can readily tolerate a good pasture for the sheep. He likes them better for their fatness. What he cannot endure is the hostile barking of the dogs."<sup>51</sup>

God gave Luther an extraordinary memory. In his school days he read the Latin classical authors and the Greek wise men as well as a wide range of German satires, fables, plays and ballads. This was in addition to his thorough acquaintance with the Church Fathers. He seems to have been able to recall most of it at will and quite accurately.

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<sup>46</sup> *Concordia Pulpit*, Vol 7, p 30.

<sup>47</sup> Kiessling tape.

<sup>48</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 51, pp 291ff.

<sup>49</sup> Kiessling tape.

<sup>50</sup> Pattison, pp 139ff.

<sup>51</sup> Kiessling tape.

But there was nothing he knew, loved and understood better than the Scriptures. He deftly weaves into his sermons Bible quotations by the dozens, and he is as skilled at finding an appropriate remark from Proverbs, Job or a Minor Prophet to make his point as he is in quoting a word of Jesus. I wouldn't know where to begin to illustrate this point.

Prayer was one of God's gifts very highly praised by Brother Martin. We all know what a man of prayer he was. Let me just cite here a pulpit prayer he recommends. "When you are about to preach, speak with God, 'Dear Lord God, I will preach to Thy honor and speak of Thee. Thee will I adore, and praise Thy name, although I cannot do it as well as I could wish to do.'"<sup>52</sup>

"I did not learn my theology all at once. I was constrained by my perplexities to search deeper and deeper. The Scriptures cannot be understood except through perplexities and temptations."<sup>53</sup> This enabled Luther to speak heart to heart with the sheep under his care. He didn't need the platitude, "I know how just how you feel," he had at his hand the Divine comfort that brought him through the agonies of soul he had had to face. He would never let go the Word of God, he would never be at a loss for how to use the sword of the Spirit as the shepherd of the flock of the Lord, not when he first had to use it to fight his won battles. The Word of God was the making of Luther; it was Luther.

Direct, simple, outspoken, fearless, tender, loving all describe Luther and his pulpit work. But I rather like Robert Browning's lines:

Grand rough old Martin Luther  
 Bloomed fables—flowers and furze  
 The better the uncouth,  
 Do roses stick or burrs?<sup>54</sup>

### **Luther's Concept of the Pulpit in Worship**

In a gem of a work, "Luther on Worship," Vilmos Vajta distils the insights of Luther, challenging us to review or rethink our concept of what worship is. We can be nearly as confused on this subject as the parishioner is who longs for more contemporary (sc. Reformed) worship or who will defend to the death the traditional as the only way worship can be done among Lutherans. Our concern here is what we are doing to or with the sermon in worship.

In the 19th century, some deduced that Luther's view of worship was pedagogical. H. Jacoby called the church and her worship, "An institute of the mature in faith for the training of the immature." Notice what this specious description of worship does. The mature Christian really has no need for worship unless he is the instructor. And God really has no place in worship except as the possible subject of the presentation.

The opposite was also proposed, to wit: "Worship is the believers' common sacrifice of praise." Here the believing congregation is the agent of worship. But it becomes meaningless for the "weak" who have no faith or little faith to present to God.

How different Luther's view actually was. He starts with God, not the congregation. God is both the revealed God and the hidden God. The only God we can know and worship is the revealed God. It is as the revealed God that He graciously chooses to deal with us. The revealed God, the God who is worshipped, is none other than the God who is preached. This revealed God is revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. By

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<sup>52</sup> Pattison, p 135.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p 135.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p 137.

revealing Himself to us in Christ, God institutes for us a definite form of worship. In the incarnation, He humbled Himself to be able to meet us on the earthly level and clothed His Gift to us in earthly forms. It follows, today, that there can be no fellowship between God and man except through the means of grace.

Worship is based on the nature of man's fellowship with God. Worship confesses that God is not the naked God (i.e., God in His absolute essence and majesty), but the God who is worshipped and clothed in human form. Worship and God in Christ are inseparable. Worship must be more than our response to God, because this implies a freedom on our part to respond or refuse to respond.

Luther also speaks of God revealing Himself through His Word and work. The activity of God in this world (work) is only interpreted and made clear by His Word. Like God revealed in word and work, so preaching and worship belong together as an organic unity. There is only this distinction that God's works can never take the place of His word; and His word becomes empty apart from the works of God to which the Word of God points.

It is in the light of this that the preacher must see the calling God gives him. The sermon is much more than talk about God and his works and acts. He is there to reveal God Himself in Christ. Thus the dictum of Luther must be our concern. We must be constantly asking about our preaching "ob es Christum treibet." And it is in this light that the preaching of sin and sanctification must be carried on to combat the self-exaltation of man and his self-justification.

On the human side of worship Luther put the element of faith. Through the revelation of Himself God gives faith and faith rests on God's revelation of Himself. It is through the preacher that all this is accomplished by God. How vital it is, then, rightly to wield the Word! These were principles Luther constantly, consciously strove to apply. Some fault him for preaching too often without them or for hiding the theme. But his theme was always "Christ" and his every sermon gave his flock another view of the God revealed in Christ.

### **The Influence of Luther's Sermons on His Hearers**

Attempting to deal with this aspect is rather like a counselor trying to patch up a marital dispute when only one spouse is willing to talk. All we have is the collection of Luther's sermons, not what Frau Lena and Herr Omnes said and did during the week that followed. Had Luther preached revolution rather than the reformation of the sinner, we could take a reading on lives destroyed and property put to the torch. But how does one evaluate the effect of the Lord's still, small voice? Works are not necessarily a fair barometer of the status of the new birth, especially when the weather observer does not even live in the same time and at the same place.

The closest we can come to discovering the situation on the other side of the pulpit is in a book by Werdermann, "Luthers Wittenberger Gemeinde." His study is based in Luther's church announcements which the "scribe" Lauterbach jotted down during the period between 1528 and 1532. This I was not minded to examine.

Luther saw his calling as that of being the revelator of God to His flock. Calvin and Zwingli are the reformers whose influence over their congregations can be much more readily researched because they much more continued in the scholastic mold of preaching social ethics.

This is not to say at all that Luther neglected the ethical dimension in his preaching, "I do preach works, but works that come from faith."<sup>55</sup> He has few equals in fulminating against sins and the external practices of contemporary piety, done out of pride and for merit. That itself instructs Christians in matters of sanctification. He did not stress fruits so much as he sought to cultivate the vine that bore them. Every farmer knows that this is all he can do. The rest must be provided by the Lord of the harvest. Fruits follow faith as day must follow night. "Workless faith is unreal like a vision in a mirror."<sup>56</sup>

Wittenberg, unfortunately, did not automatically turn into a Garden of Eden. The soil was sandy and barren. Is this the fault of Luther's preaching? He sent the people home week after week with a greater knowledge of the infinite love of God. He could not tie grape clusters to the branches.

The houses of prostitution outside of town did not waste away from lack of customers. Luther frequently made his frustrations known. Freed from the papacy, they abused their freedom by indulging in all sorts of sordid pleasures. This, of course, is not a completely fair approach to comment on the garden as a whole and not have anything to say about individual plants that were bearing fruit in abundance.

In the early 1530s, Luther threatened to leave Wittenberg for good. He actually did withdraw from preaching for two years, partly because of poor health. Again in 1540 and 1545 he threatened and once more left the pulpit for short periods.

Was Luther too idealistic to preach Christ and not to put more emphasis on the outward discipline of works for the benefit of the common folks who may not be capable of distinguishing the proper relation of faith to works? For our direction and comfort as well, let's answer with Jesus' questions. "Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?"<sup>57</sup> Eternity will give us the final answers concerning the influence of Luther in the pulpit—answers we have no basis for seeking now.

The pulpit announcements may have been in the city newspaper, and the preacher was in charge of the editorial page. However, in the sermon proper, Luther rarely referred to local, state and national events; and certainly he did not presume to be the conscience and director of the response of others. He did plant the seeds out of which faith grew and was pruned and trained by the principles of the third use of the law.

It is interesting to note that there is so much of a timelessness about the reformer's sermons that there is still a ready market when they are published today. Few other popular preachers have that staying power.

To read his sermons, preached at critical times, you would hardly know it was not business as usual. His sermon at Erfurt, on the way to Worms, speaks about faith in Christ and the true piety that faith brings forth. His blast against the Roman Church comes naturally out of the subject that Rome urges the unimportant work one does for his own benefit, not the true piety of working for the good of the brother. There's only the remark, that he knows some may be annoyed by the truth he is preaching. His personal life is usually left out of the pulpit.

We need to deal here with the obvious time when Luther preached, the congregation listened, and changes were made—the famous eight sermons of Lent, 1522, preached on his return from the Wartburg.

I believe I am correct that this dramatic event is depicted, in the old Luther film, somewhat as follows: In the pulpit we see Luther trying to swallow his rage, his lip quivers. He points his finger or shakes his fist and blasts them with words like, "How dare you!!..." It makes for good drama.

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<sup>55</sup> Kiessling tape.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Matthew 7:16

In fact, this is how the first sermon begins:

"The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another's ears, but everyone must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me. Therefore, everyone must himself know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian. And these are what you, my beloved, have heard from me many days ago."<sup>58</sup>

Little is said directly of the events that turned the city upside down. But he turns each one of the abuses they perpetrated into an example to instruct them about the matter and how to act properly. The strongest condemnation Luther levels against the flock he is leading to repentance is to say, "I cannot defend your action....You could have consulted me."<sup>59</sup>

To me the most memorable passage in this sermon series comes in the second sermon:

"The Word created heaven and earth and all things;<sup>60</sup> the Word must do this thing, and not we poor sinners. In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."<sup>61</sup>

If Luther, and often we, had only recalled this truth in the times he was so frustrated with the congregation that he used threats and self-imposed exile to teach them a lesson and force artificial fruit! The strength of Luther was the strength of the Lord and the power of His Word. "Let us not become weary in (this way of) doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."<sup>62</sup>

### **Doctrinal Emphases in Luther's Sermons**

Unlike the preachers before him, whose emphasis on ethics was solidly grounded in Roman theology, Luther was led to start over with the proclamation of "new" doctrine grounded on the bedrock of God's Word:

"Wickliffe and Hus assailed the immoral conduct of the papists; but I chiefly oppose and resist their doctrine; I affirm roundly and plainly that they preach not the truth. To this I am called; I take the goose by the neck and set the knife to the throat. When I can show that the papists' doctrine is false, as I have shown, then I can easily prove that their manner of life is evil. For when the Word remains pure, the manner of life, though something therein be amiss, will be pure also."<sup>63</sup>

The obvious, in this connection, bears repetition. Luther's theology didn't spring fully mature from the pages of an open Bible. It developed step by step, replacing the errors of the past little by little. It was developed

<sup>58</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 51, p 70.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p 73f.

<sup>60</sup> Ps. 33:6.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p 77.

<sup>62</sup> Gal. 6:9.

<sup>63</sup> Edwin Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, Vol 1, p 375.



by the Spirit through study, inner conflicts of great magnitude, and, yes, through confrontation and provocation from his enemies.

Luther's theology is one that we have passed on to us fully developed. There is, honestly, nothing we nor the most reprobate of "Lutherans" can do to Luther's theology except misrepresent it. But for Luther, every sermon he preached, every lecture, every writing established Lutheran theology. Still, whatever we have of Luther's words is subject to the most critical of scrutiny. This is something we should be cautious about. When his doctrinal emphases are discussed, it makes a difference at what time in his career he said what he said. The context in which he spoke also makes a difference.

In addition to emphases past quotes have already given you, let's take up a few more emphases. Justification immediately suggests itself. Very seldom does Luther not touch on it. He does so, sometimes most vividly, in his sermons on works in order to clarify our understanding of the one against the background of the other.

A lot of issues came together before Luther understood what God has always been saying. Rome tolerated the promotion of more than one view about the way to salvation. The most commonly held was that applying oneself diligently to the works promoted by Rome would eventually earn one a place with God in heaven. But Luther was trained in the Occamist School and held and preached the view that God, like the church, is sovereign and elects to save whom He will. His choice is not based on merit but solely on a predestining act of grace. That was qualified in the sense that God's grace and acceptance would be given to one who had done his best. This was the theory Luther early expressed. "The doctors rightly say this, that to men doing what is in them God infallibly gives grace."<sup>64</sup> (After 1517, he sang this song, "If a man does what is in him, he is always sinning.")

The problem was in knowing if you were doing your best to be predestined for salvation by God's choice. It was Luther's problem. He did not find a satisfactory answer in Rome's telling him, "Just do what we say." He felt hatred toward a God so arbitrary in His election; and that, he knew, was blasphemy, sin that would disqualify him from God's choice. Staupitz, the mystic, directed him to give up on his efforts, deny himself and turn to establish communion through "the perfect work of the Savior and to look upon the love of God's justice as the end, not the beginning or necessary condition, of repentance."<sup>65</sup>

Then followed the 1515 conviction that "the righteousness of God" is God's gift to man rather than His demand of man, and now the idea of predestining will of God no longer scared him. This gift-of-God truth, culled from the mystics, brought him his confidence in his salvation. With that absolute assurance, because it all depends on the gift of God, Luther became bitter against the lie of human merit. He soon discarded the excesses of mysticism. He was ready to take on the do-religion when the Tetzal scene afforded him the occasion. The scholastics brought Luther to his knees, the mystics got him to raise his eyes to heaven, and the Word brought the very presence of God to him.

The congregation grew along with their new preacher as the gifts and works of God became more the subject of his sermons and they were urged to give God glory for his gift. Trust God, not your own righteousness, is his call.

Another closely-linked emphasis Luther came to trumpet was the concept of faith. There was little use for the term, faith, in a religious world tooled-up to do all one can. Faith was sometimes classed as one of seven

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<sup>64</sup> Kiessling, *Early Sermons...*, p 93.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p 94.

cardinal virtues. Luther, in going back to Paul on justification, also brought back the clear understanding of faith.

Luther came to preach that faith is ultimately based on the suffering of Christ which supplies us satisfaction for sin, the power to put away sin and lead a clean life, and eternal salvation. Nothing we do or have, whether contrition, virtue, or faith (in so far as it is our work) can earn these blessings from Christ. But to the question just how Christ's blessings are communicated to us, Luther answers: through faith. Faith is itself a gift—not the reason for the gift:

"The heart becomes pregnant with the Holy Ghost, and Christ is born in us as He was in Mary, only spiritually. This faith is a new life resulting from the union of two elements: the human or passive and the divine or active. In the measure a man has faith, has experienced this divine activity, faith is valuable to him."<sup>66</sup>

One other theology Luther refers to on occasion is termed the "theology of the cross." Cross here refers to the sufferings man experiences on the way to being brought to faith by God; also, to the discipline suffered by the believer. This theology is first referred to in a sermon of 1516.<sup>67</sup> The text is, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims His handiwork."<sup>68</sup> Luther conceives of God as undertaking two kinds of works. God's proper work is to give us righteousness, joy, peace, etc., which he equates with the gift of Christ's resurrection. But cannot accomplish His proper work unless He first undertakes an alien work. He finds reference to that in Is. 28:21, "The Lord will rise up...to do His work, His strange work." That work is like the crucifixion of Christ in that God makes us suffer enough to see our wretchedness and sinfulness. Since He can make just only those who are not just, He is compelled to perform an alien work in order to make them sinners, before He performs His proper work of justification. Thus He says, "I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal."<sup>69</sup> The "wise" don't want their old Adam killed, so they don't come to receive God's proper work. Romans 4:25 says, "Christ was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." So conformity with the image of God<sup>70</sup> includes God's alien and proper works for and on us.

Luther consistently urges on the Lutheran princes patience in suffering. He makes this point in his sermon to his elector at Coburg Castle in April, 1530:

"Christ by His suffering not only saved us from the devil, death, and sin, but also His suffering is an example....Though our suffering and cross should never be so exalted that we think we can be saved by it or earn the least merit through it, nevertheless we should suffer after Christ, that we may be conformed to Him....It should be, however, and must be the kind of suffering that is worthy of the name and honestly grips and hurts....Beyond this, it should be the kind of suffering which we have not chosen ourselves, as the fanatics choose their own suffering....One can comfort oneself by saying, 'Very well, if I want to be a Christian, I must also wear the colors of the court; the dear Christ issues no others in His court; suffering there must be.'"

It would seem that Luther took a somewhat unique journey to arrive at a position which is Scriptural. It is likely that Luther is here universalizing his own intense, inner personal struggle to be led to the truth. He is expecting others will surely go through the same agonies to reach and appreciate the assurance of salvation God gives.

<sup>66</sup> Kiessling, *Early Sermons...*, pp 102ff.

<sup>67</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 51, pp 14ff.

<sup>68</sup> Ps. 19:1.

<sup>69</sup> Deut. 32:39.

<sup>70</sup> Rom. 8:29.

It is very interesting that he never refers to his struggles in his sermons except in a very vague and indirect fashion. I doubt his congregation would have had any idea Luther could be speaking of himself in 1516 when he said this:

"Thus are those men of God who are led by the His spirit. After they have been taught the discipline of the outward man, they neglect it and look upon it only as a prelude. They are now ready to offer themselves for any real task the Lord may have chosen for them. And when God leads them through sufferings and humiliations they know not wither, they cling to no favorite plan of their own, but still submit all things to the Lord. Thus their work will be without a name at the beginning, because they are not leading, but being led."<sup>71</sup>

### **Luther, the Preacher's Teacher**

Prof. Luther never taught a course in homiletics; but just as he inherited a good deal from those who came before, so he left a rich heritage for our profit. Luther reformed preaching by bringing back the teaching of the Word and the centrality of Christ to displace the teaching of ethics with the support of Bible passages.

It is much easier and more popular to preach social behavior. The subject matter is concrete, and the preacher can easily find the stories from life to illustrate the behavior to be condemned or promoted. This is typical of the "popular" preacher today. But Gospel preaching exalting the "old" Christ is the only way to provide the fertile soil on which the joyful life in the Spirit can feed and flourish. Luther's overriding concern was to let the Lord speak through his prophets to His people. "Our Lord God alone wants to be the preacher."<sup>72</sup> The most direct way to accomplish this was the verse by verse exposition of a passage. This approach is particularly evident in the "postile"—those popular sermon studies Luther himself wrote or allowed others to publish in his name, though it is to be feared that there is more of the editor than the preacher in some of these latter. In the pulpit sermons I read, there is somewhat less of this running commentary approach, but there is no question that his audience would come away with a better understanding of the text.<sup>73</sup>

Because of the preeminence of the Word in preaching, Luther gave negligible attention to homiletical form or style. The people, to whom God wants to communicate the Gospel, come second. He understood the difficulty of holding the attention of the people. Every few sentences he uses some colorful, concrete metaphor, story or proverb. In a fresh way these convey the truth he wants to bring home. You have heard a number already. Here are a few more: "Justified sinners are like bake-ovens full of fire, giving of flames of good works." "Justification is the lantern searching for the coin of righteousness and sweeping the world clean in the search, not a miserable coin of works looking for the lantern." "He who offers his good works on this day of judgment only furnishes the devil with \_\_\_\_\_ (an article used in the bathroom)." "It is easier to make a bad man pious than a pious man better."<sup>74</sup>

Luther caught people's attention with dramatic exaggerations. In his defense, he always qualified his remarks, but naturally people only remember the shocking part. "Aristotle says, 'Practice virtue, and you will acquire the habit and become godly.' But I say, 'Do not perform good works to become godly,' (that's the

<sup>71</sup> Kiessling, *Early Sermons...*, p 144

<sup>72</sup> Kiessling lecture, p 9.

<sup>73</sup> Except when he starts out the sermon in this fashion: "So far the Epistle. I don't want to preach on it, but will speak further about prayer, which is a little better than the Epistle of James." (Kiessling lecture, p 16).

<sup>74</sup> Kiessling, *Early Sermons...*, pp 139ff.

remembered part), "but if you are godly, then perform good works." (the forgotten part).<sup>75</sup> "Things never stood better with the church than when many preachers were killed."<sup>76</sup>

Luther also loved to make his point by means of dramatization. "God says, 'Let me worry, you work.' And we turn it around, 'I will worry; you, God, have to work.'"<sup>77</sup> He personifies evils, calling them "Junker Fleisch" or "Frau Isabel" or "Frau Holde mit der Polznase" (Reason). "Hans Narr" is an unbeliever, etc.

Here is a sample of Luther's use of dramatic dialogue from a sermon on the Resurrection, based on 1 Cor. 15:40: "You don't find anything in the Koran about the resurrection or among the Jews in the Talmud, nor in the papal decretals. The Pope and his crowd doesn't believe it." He goes on to a vivid description of a corpse as it putrifies.

"So death has its victory through sin. But, lo, life has its victory through Christ. Death for a long time has sung, 'Yo! Triumph! I am king and lord over all men!' Our God lets him sing little song. Then finally, He shouts, 'Yo! Triumph! Life is king over death!' Death takes a second look at the corpse and shouts again, 'Yo! Triumph! I have won. Here is nothing but death and no life at all.' But God simply repeats, 'Yo! Triumph! I have won! Victoria! Victoria! There is no death here!' Death thinks it over, 'I kill young and old and many more with sword and pestilence!...Life enters, 'You did not devour me before, but now you will have to leave me undevoured.'"

This goes on further.<sup>78</sup>

Another interesting thing Kiessling notes, when he reads through Luther's sermons, is that, when Luther came across a new insight, he used every opportunity for several sermons in a row to help the concept find a home in the minds and lives of his hearers. In other words, he didn't hesitate to "ride a hobby," but he did know when to get off of it.

The vivid language which Luther used did not come across as studied or artificial because Luther did not specifically prepare these catchy expressions in advance. They came from the wit of a heart concerned with communicating the Gospel to the Lord's sheep in the most memorable way, that mined the treasures of a life of study and of the rich endowments he had from God.

It does not seem that Luther ever wrote out his sermons beforehand. That does not mean he shook the sermon out of his sleeve. After prayer and meditation, he prepared a *Konzept* for each sermon. These were notes, sometimes fairly thorough, sometimes just key words and phrases to remind him of the sequence of thoughts. Sometimes he discarded the *Konzept* when he reached the pulpit because the Lord gave him another approach.

It is fascinating to compare one of the few extant *Konzepte* with the scribal notes on what Luther preached:

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<sup>75</sup> Kiessling tape.

<sup>76</sup> Kiessling, *Early Sermons...*, p 142.

<sup>77</sup> Kiessling lecture, p 15.

<sup>78</sup> Kiessling tape.

*Konzept*

"It is necessary that our prayers be impudent and unreasonable, that in praying we be filled with trust. Not that we are dignified by that, but that God would freely help us."

*As Preached*

"Our prayer must be shameless because whoever is bashful when he begs will not amount to anything as a beggar. As it was once with me when I begged at New Years, when a companion and I came before a house and sang for a sausage. But when the proprietor came running out with a shout and said, 'Where are you, you boys?' and brought two sausages, my partner and I ran away. We thought he intended to whip us until he called us back. Such people are no good as beggars or pray-ers. One has to doff the little 'shame' hat and realize that our Lord God wants it that way, that it pleases Him and that it is His desire to give much."<sup>79</sup>

Luther said that it was a recurring nightmare of his that he would be required to preach and had no *Konzept*.

John Gerhard labeled Luther's sermon form "heroic disorder." It's heroic because Christ is the Victor valiant proclaimed as the sinner's only Champion in every sermon from every text. It is disorder because Luther had no concern for organizing material as to coordinate thoughts or subordinate thoughts. He just progressed from one idea to another. And he makes his transitions in a very casual manner. Most often he just uses numbers, first, second, third, etc. (once up to twelfth). Sometimes he forgets what number he was on and skips or repeats. Another kind of casual transition is, "This is the first part of the Gospel. The next speaks of the Sabbath." "We have said a little about the Sacrament, now we will speak about the resurrection."<sup>80</sup>

The Table Talks contain numerous remarks from the old master about sermonizing. He said of his approach to preaching, "I try to take one theme or statement and stick to it and show people so plainly that they can say, 'This was the sermon he preached.'"<sup>81</sup>

"When I preach, I always take an antithesis."<sup>82</sup> By this he meant that he would see to it that error would be held up for scrutiny alongside God's truth. This is one reason we hear so much about the Pope, the Schwaermer and all the foes of the Gospel. And he doesn't proclaim the Gospel without showing it up against the work righteous views and efforts of man. He will not discuss works without presenting grace.

"If the preacher wishes to use fine, adorned language, he must be sure that it accurately portrays the thoughts he wishes to express, just as skillfully executed pictures portray objects exactly. A preacher must be a *dialectic* and a *rhetor* at the same time. As a *dialectic* he will supply the body of the sermon, and as *rhetor* the ornamentation. He must, above all, be sure that he knows what he wishes to include in his sermon; then he must be able to define, describe, and portray the doctrines which he has decided to teach; in the third place, he is to strengthen the doctrines by means of Scriptural quotations; then he is to clarify and demonstrate by means of apt illustrations, and finally, he is to admonish and rebuke those who are indifferent and those who have adopted false religious notions."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Kiessling tape.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> *Luther's Works* (AE), Vol 51, p XX.

<sup>83</sup> Grimm, *Martin Luther as a Preacher*, p 88.

"It is commonly said that there are three qualifications which mark a good preacher: First, that he step up; secondly that he speak up and have something to say; thirdly, that he know when to get down."<sup>84</sup>

These ten virtues are needed by a preacher. "To begin with, he must be apt to teach; (2) he should have a good head; (3) be eloquent; (4) should have a good voice; (5) a good memory; (6) should know how to stop; (7) should be industrious in his work; (8) should hazard life and limb in his work; (9) should let himself be plagued by everybody; (10) finally, he should patiently bear the fact that nothing is seen more easily and quickly in preachers than their faults. Dr. Jonas has all the virtues of a good preacher, but people cannot overlook the fact that the good man clears his throat so frequently."<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps the best Luther had on preaching is that pulpit prayer he prayed, and the way the Lord answered. "Dear Lord God, I will preach to Thy honor and speak of Thee. Amen."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Plass, *What Luther Says*, p 1109.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Demary, *Pulpit Giants*, p 85.

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