

The Significance of Martin Luther

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I propose after a few sentences of introduction to look at Luther in his historical situation. I shall consider his spiritual pilgrimage within the Catholic framework (the only framework there was), and his rediscovery of the evangelical theology. I shall then try to show how I understand Luther's real concern, and finally his abiding significance for men who want to see the Church mended. It is worth recalling in this context that in 1520, before the final break with Rome, Luther appealed for an ecumenical council of church leaders and scholars to go into the malaise of Christendom, provided the Council was (a) international, (b) not dominated by the pope and the papal curia, and (c) not held on Italian soil. It is my own view that the place to begin is where Luther began, and to face together, as Christian men, all the theological issues he raised (and those that have since accumulated), and allow the Holy Spirit to animate and clothe our dead bones and restore us to our feet as a mighty army of God. Hans Küng says that the Vatican Council is 400 years too late. From this awareness we might make a beginning.

Regarding the background to Luther, suffice it for me to say that the Reformation was a theological movement within a vast complex and turmoil of other movements, aspirations, and expectations. There was a nationalist spirit abroad and nations were seeking to loosen the shackles of the pope, or the emperor, or both. There was the great humanist movement with its quest back to sources and its questioning of all authority and authorities. There was the great social revolution when capitalism was destroying feudalism, and when the nobility were being ousted by merchants—when for the first time money talked. There was the decay of Scholasticism when Christian scholarship grew speculative, abstruse, and remote, and not only lost the ears of the people but collapsed before the intellectual activity of the humanists as well as before the theological inquiry of the Reformers. There were also the great movements of exploration of the world, and the invention of machinery and scientific instruments like the microscope and telescope. The new wine could but burst the old wine-skins. Of course, as we all know, the Church had been all along partly alert to the issues which came to a head in the Reformation. Waldus (twelfth century), Wycliffe (fourteenth century), John Huss (martyred, 1415), Savanorola (fifteenth century), all raised their voices, not to mention Luther's contemporaries—for example, Francis Xavier (1506-1552). There is also considerable evidence for the devotion of parish priests through plague, pestilence, and poverty, as well as strong witness of a real domestic piety in Europe. "The great Reformation had its roots in the simple evangelical piety which had never entirely disappeared in the medieval church. Luther's teaching was recognized by thousands to be no startling novelty, but something which they had always at heart believed, though they might not have been able to formulate it" (T. M. Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, Vol. I, p. ix). When the complexity of movement within which the Reformation expressed itself is assessed, what is important for us is to see that the Reformation which was only a theological and spiritual concern was all too often identified with the *Zeitgeist* and thereby confused and corrupted. It was confused with nationalist movements, socialist movements, enthusiastic, spiritistic, and radicalist movements and indeed every movement of the day. Many of these movements may be justified *in eis ipsis*, but to identify or associate the Reformation with the bloody Peasants' War of 1525 or the equally bloody self-will of Henry VIII, to give two instances, has brought

disastrous confusion. Not a little that academic and ecumenical men can do is to differentiate the things that are different in this respect.

Born in 1483 of good, independent yeoman stock, Luther was sent to the ancient University of Erfurt at his father's expense, where he read Law. At the age of 22 he narrowly missed death. This brought home to him the significance of death, the fact that he was a sinner and remote from God. Luther believed death to be a manifestation of the wrath of God. He criticized the philosophical and human idea of death later in his commentary on the Psalms (1541), and described it as the error of Lot's wife who did not understand the terrifying reality of God's wrath.

To solve his spiritual problem he entered the Augustinian Eremite monastery at Erfurt. Here he found no answer to his problem, only how deep it was. He tried to resolve the problem of God's wrath and God's love. The customary explanation that it was incumbent on a man so to struggle as to fulfil the will of God and consequently avert the wrath and enjoy the love, Luther found false to experience. Neither the confessional, nor the mass, nor all the normal practices, disciplines, and techniques of the Church could give the reassurance to Luther of being saved by the love of God and not being destroyed by the wrath of God. He felt he could never do enough to make the sinner he was acceptable to God. The problem haunting Luther was whether the Church had the proper means of grace. Could she bring men to the gracious God of the Gospel by her practices? Was the Gospel not something wholly other? He began to feel that the Church had lost the Gospel. It was not that God was far from man and that man must struggle and strive to win the favour of God. The reverse was true. Man is far from God, but God in His righteousness, mercy, and love had sought to remedy this by coming near to man in Christ. It was not a question of man seeking to attain a righteousness which God would accept. It was a realization that man had none to offer, and all a man could ever earn was the wrath of God. But in Christ the wrath of God was combined with the love of God, and nevermore to be separated. Luther no longer saw the Righteous Christ as the awful judge sitting above the rainbow, but the forsaken, rejected one who had come only to save and reconcile alienated men to their Father in heaven, and the realization of this objective activity of God made a new creation of God's righteousness in the sinner's heart.

It was this certain experience of God that Luther brought to expression when he was to teach his students at the university in the general background of the nominalist theology of his day. Luther had to begin with lectures on Aristotle. It was in Aristotle's teaching about the eternity of the world that Luther found his greatest challenge. Luther could not accept Aristotle's teaching on the eternity of ideas and the significance of historical events relative to these permanent ideas. To Luther it gave an unsatisfactory account of man in relation to other creatures, and gave no account of the meaning of conscience. The influence of Aristotelianism on Christian ethics he saw as disastrous. It taught that man's spirit exercised authority over the bodily senses through the power of the free will: that a man could be trained by habit: that a man became righteous by doing right. To Luther here lay the fundamental error of the Aristotelian ethic. Luther believed a man could only *do* right when he *was* right (justified). Man's will is not free to do right but only *se suaque quaerit*. Only when the will sees this is there any possibility of the will undergoing change. This argument comes out clearly in his *Contra Scholasticam Theologiam* of 1517 and most fully in his *De Servo Arbitrio* of 1525 against Erasmus.

This theological position developed when in 1512 he had the responsibility of a chair of Theology. He reacted against the prevailing method of teaching Scripture as a warehouse of

unrelated texts used to support a dogmatic held on other grounds. He taught that Scripture could be understood only from its end-point backwards— that is, from Christ. As he was later to say, *es ist alles um Christum zu thun in der Bibeln* (WA. 7. 600. 1) (1521); or again to Erasmus: *Tolle Christum e scripturis, quid amplius in illis invenies?* (CA III. 101. 29) (1525); or still earlier to Leo X in 1520: *Nolo omnium doctior jactari, sed solam scripturam regnare, nec eam meo spiritu aut ullorum hominum interpretari, sed per seipsam ac suo spiritu intelligi volo* (WA. 7. 98. 40). Further, Luther's argument was grounded in the totality of Scripture. As he said to John Eck in 1519, *scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpretans*. And again: *ideo verbi intelligentia ex tota scriptura et circumstantia rerum gestarum petenda est* (II. 302. 1). When Luther discovered Scripture it was the Gospel he found in it. It was here that he parted company with medieval scholasticism because it was anthropocentric, and with humanism on the ground that it sat above Scripture and criticized it. To Luther man was the judged, not the judge.

Luther's work proved his salvation. His soul was saved in his study. When he came to lecture on the *Psalms* and *Romans* he began to learn what the Scriptures were about and what the Gospel really was. He knew that man could never understand God and His ways, but could understand a God who had sent His Son who endured the cross, whom God raised, and who raises up with His Son all who die to sin in a newness of life. It is absurd to think of God as derelict and fly-ridden on a cross for love of His lost creation. It is absurd to think a man can find life and purpose in death and self-sacrifice. How can love be seen in wrath, greatness in service, strength in meekness, goodness in severity, mercy in anger, life in death? How can an incarnation issue in a crucifixion? This was Luther's evangelical secret.

The totality of this evangelical doctrine, this foolishness of the Gospel, this message of reconciliation and forgiveness as the work of Christ alone, Luther saw summed up in the great Pauline phrase, Justification by Faith. Nothing we are, nothing we have, nothing we can do can restore us to God. He came down to us. When man is confronted by the work of God in history, and it is preached and explained to him what his condition is and how God in Christ met and meets this, there is created a faith and trust in God that was not there before and which he does nothing to make. It is like a man who had believed another man was an enemy and one day was made to realize is enemy, unbeknown to any, had been working on his side. A new relationship is sparked off. This is what justification by faith means.

All that we know is that we are sinners needing forgiveness and conciliation, and in this realization the whole power of Christ's Work in the Gospel becomes operative in the sinner and changes him into a new creation by the constraint of what God has done and what God has promised.

Of course, there was nothing new in this, but it made everything new. This new view of God and the new view of Christ was not a Pauline doctrine. It was a plea to let Christ do His proper work. And this plea of the Gospel took precedence over all other authorities, Pope, Church, Tradition. When it became sharpened in the Pauline phraseology of "Justification by Faith Alone" it was sharpened in the interests of preserving a New Testament Christology in opposition to a doctrine of works or merit. It wants saying quite clearly that this rediscovery of the Pauline theology has sometimes served to mislead Protestantism. Sometimes the Protestant Church has used or even the word faith as a sort of shibboleth. This makes faith into works: it is something we offer into the bargain, some psychological mess that we contribute. We believe in faith, even believe ourselves justified by our faith: we would do better to substitute Christ for faith. It is not our faith that justifies but the work of Christ who

brings about a faith whereby we accept Him in gladness.

Luther's new evangelical instincts were by now (that is, prior to 1517) well formed. They centred on the forgiveness of sins made known and effective by God's unearned grace shown in the Cross of Christ. This showed to Luther the reality of the wrath of God and its reconciliation with the love of God. God in Christ had routed all the spiritual enemies and in His resurrection empowered man to die to sin and rise to newness of life.

All this was but simple, traditional, evangelical theology. The disturbing element lay in Luther's inferences and conclusions. He revolted against the buying and selling of grace; he objected to the whole doctrine of the mass both in its theory and practice; he criticized the prevalent doctrine of the Church, not merely its corruption. He attacked the anthropocentric institution it was so that a pure New Testament Christology would prevail and be preached. He sought to stop the Church rotating on the axis of the Pope and his Canon Law, and set it spinning in its true gravitational axis of Christ and His Gospel.

It was the revolting traffic in indulgences that occasioned the break in 1517. His concern was that true penance and real forgiveness were obscured and that true peace was a gift of Christ to the forgiven heart. The Church was doing a very great disservice to Christ and the Gospel purveying these. If the Pope could release souls from purgatory for money, why could he not do it free? The Pope had no power over purgatory, or even the remission of sin and its penalty. The rest of the story is familiar to all. By means of various interviews and disputations Rome tried to "quieten down the man", but by the time of the Leipzig Deputation in 1519 the ship of the Reformation was on the high seas and Luther was at the helm. In 1521 he stood before Emperor and Church, and was outlawed by the one and finally cut off by the other.

We have now reached the point where we can estimate Luther's real concern.

The beginning, end, and totality of Luther's theology is Christ and Christ alone. We do Luther a disservice when we use the well-known labels like "justification by faith" or "the monarchy of God's Word" to sum up or to epitomize his theology. These were polemical sharpenings of the issue over against others who sought justification in works and merit, or authority in the Pope.

Luther taught that God was hidden in nature and in history, and thought that all man could learn of God by the exercise of his reason was perhaps that God existed, that He created the universe, and that some moral order could be discerned in it in that sin and evil seemed to bring in their own destruction, and that goodness seemed to be rewarded with continuance. This was the limit which Luther would concede. The nature of this God who existed, the purpose the Creator effected and effects, and the real meaning of good and evil were closed to natural and rational man. The *Deus Nudus* was *Deus Incognitus*, and none of this knowledge could save a man by bringing him into a living relationship with his God. In Christ alone man learns the heart and mind and will of God. To Luther the proper activity of man was not so much to find out God's nature (an activity he thought invalid), but to learn in Christ how God looks at man. This knowledge was saving knowledge. In Christ God had shown His hand, and therefore in Him alone was real knowledge of God and in Him alone could man be saved. It was the *Deus Revelatus* only of whom Luther spoke and wrote, never the *Deus Nudus*.

The theological error of Rome existed in that ultimate authority lay in the Pope and the Church (with which are included the traditions, decretals, etc.), and when Luther described the pope as Antichrist it was not abuse but theological statement. In the ministry of Rome salvation was proffered by the establishment and within the establishment, and not clearly and unequivocally in Christ. On the other hand, in "Enthusiasm" ultimate authority lay in the alleged experience of the Holy Spirit direct. To Luther both were wrong, on the grounds that neither would set Christ in the centre and let Christ do His proper work of salvation. Luther believed that he had restored to the Church the original Christology of the Christian Gospel which had gradually been eroded during the centuries, and in the place of which had grown a Church ruled by a pope and guided by tradition. The Romanists offered an anthropology instead of a Christology.

Luther was no innovator as the Romanists accused him. His theology was the original and true theology, captured by the New Testament (particularly in John and Paul), enshrined by the Creeds, and preserved by the Church Fathers. The Romanists, in the natural interests of the Church, and not, or at least, less in the interests of the Gospel, had been guilty of all the innovations: an infallible pope, the treasury of merits, the doctrine of transubstantiation, a highly developed non-New Testament doctrine of the mass, the invocation of the Virgin and the saints, and all the other novelties like rosaries, purgatory, indulgences, paternoster stones, pilgrimages. . . .

It was their theology that was wrong, and the root error of their mistaken theology was an inferior and non-New Testament Christology.

It seems to me that it is in the light of Luther's Christology that we understand his attitude to Scripture. Luther was no wooden "fundamentalist" or literal biblicist who brought in an infallible book in the place of an infallible pope. This is to misinterpret him woefully. Nor was he subjective and selective as many of his critics aver, exercising a free hand over the canon of Scripture. Scripture was God's revelation, particularized in Christ, and all Scripture though read forwards had to be understood backwards. Luther mined his Gospel out of the rock of the Psalms and Genesis, and reduced it to the precious metal of the Gospel whose touchstone was Christ. It was on the principle that Scripture was the revelation of the Christ Event that he compared, related, criticized, and evaluated the varying books of the Bible. It was this same principle that gave to Scripture when Christologically interpreted that authority to which creeds, councils, theologians, and popes must alike submit, for in Christ and Christ alone is a man saved. It was this same principle that gave him that unerring discernment between God's handling of men in the old covenant of Law and God's handling of man in the new covenant of the Gospel, the magic touch that released the cleansing and refreshing evangelical streams over Christendom, sources all too long dammed up. "As the meadow is to the cow, the house to the man, the nest to the bird, the rock to the chamois, and the stream to the fish, so is the Holy Scripture to the believing soul," he comments on Ps. 84: 4.

Luther had a high doctrine of the sacraments. Baptism meant to him regeneration, and the mass the real presence of Christ offering remission of sins. His *gravamen* against the Church in the matter of baptism was that the stress on penance as a sacrament deprived baptism of its New Testament reality. His *gravamina* in the matter of the mass were that, in the first place, it had lost its original evangelical meaning of Christ's sacrifice to redeem man's sin, and had had an alien philosophy imposed on it concerning substance and accidents; that, secondly, it had been perverted from the offering of Christ Himself and what He did for us men and for our salvation into an idea of merit or works which a man offered; and that, thirdly, instead of

being a free proclamation of the grace and mercy of God, it had grown largely towards increasing the power of the priests as something they might withhold rather than something they are in duty bound freely to offer. The mass had been turned into a kind of spiritual medicine in the hands of the priests and had been dissociated from a worthy theology of grace.

To Luther sacraments were a revelation event in a way exactly parallel to the incarnation in flesh and blood, or the Spirit through Scripture, or Christ in preaching. Wherever there is a revelation it is a revelation of the total Christ: the two natures of Christ are not separable. Transubstantiation is wrong-headed and not scriptural, and is no more necessary in the case of the bread and wine of the mass than it is in the water of baptism or the flesh and blood of the incarnation. Luther believed purely and wholly in the real presence of Christ “in with, and under” the elements. The importance of sacraments lay in that God had chosen to deal with men in that way, and Luther accepted the sacraments with the same glad heart he accepted the incarnation. They were to him a *verbum visibile*: the sacraments *spoke* the Gospel and were a tangible, comprehensible expression of it. Luther purified the sacraments of any mechanical or magical efficiency alleged to be at the priest’s disposal *ex opere operato*. He also freed the sacraments from any and every idea of selling grace like spiritual merchandise. The priest was the servant, the assistant, never the master. He could only proffer the Gospel.

The abiding significance of Luther lies in the fact that he recaptured for Christianity the original dynamic of the New Testament evangelical theology at a time when the Church had utterly lost her original charter. All parts of the Church have been, are, and doubtless always will be guilty of this charge in varying degrees, whether it is the Church of Rome, or the Church of England, or the Church of the East. He argued on the basis of a Christology over against an anthropology, of what God had done rather than what man must do. His emphasis on Christ forced him into a polemic against the Pope, canon law, and papal decretals. His emphasis on Christ and a burning theology of grace turned him towards Augustine and gave him a nausea for the catholic practice of redemption with its exaltation of the priest, an almost magical doctrine of the sacraments, its doctrine of indulgences and purgatory, its exaggeration of priestly penance, the centrality of the virgin and the saints, and all the paraphernalia of wonder-working images, shrines, pilgrimages, paternoster stones, rosaries, and all the rest. In all this polemic remember that the issue as Luther saw it was that Christ should be given the central place and allowed to be Christ, do His proper work. Luther’s concern was not about these trivialities in the first analysis. All modern Christology goes back to Luther.

He raised and raises the problem of authority. The authority of the Church, the authority of the Bible, the authority of tradition.

He restored the Gospel to the Church and made men see the inter-dependence of those two. When he restored the Gospel he captured men’s minds with the great doctrines of our Faith: the doctrines of sin, redemption, and reconciliation. He showed again the differences between a religion of the Law and a religion of the Gospel. He gave gain a fresh doctrine of the mass and of baptism. He revived the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and with that a new understanding of the sacred and the secular and the role of the laity. He gave again the primacy of the Word of God and put that study in the centre of university life. He gave again the sobering but enheartening theology of predestination and election. He gave men a fresh doctrine of the Church rooted in the call of Abraham, sustained as the faithful remnant, reconstituted in and by Christ, non-institutional, non-ecclesiastical, the great people

of God, the Israel against whom the gates of hell would never prevail.

Apart from his colossal stature—he achieved single-handed in some twenty years what it took six great Englishmen two hundred years to achieve, namely:
he gave his people an open Bible (Tyndale, Coverdale, Rogers);
he gave his people an evangelical liturgy (Cranmer);
he gave his people a classical catechism (no parallel);
he was a preacher as great as Latimer;
he was a hymn writer which we only achieved in Isaac Watts;
apart as I say, from this colossal stature, his theology gave him a fresh insight on education, politics, and economics. Yet apart from all this he was specially significant in that he was at the death bed of the world and assisted at the birth of the new. All the fundamental questions for ecumenical men go back to Luther or were handled by Luther, and I feel we should heed the request he made in 1520 that the *whole* Church should give her attention to these matters. Are we ready to move forward to a fresher and larger Catholicism great enough to hold the force and forces of Protestantism? That is the line of Luther's thought.

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