

Images of Luther

The half-millennium since Luther lived has given ample time for people to take many different standpoints regarding the German reformer. Before approaching Luther himself, it can help to recall some of the many different images of the man that have circulated, both among his followers and others. Surprising as it may seem, Martin Luther has not even projected a single, unified image among those of the Protestant tradition. Different facets of his life and work have stood out in different eras even of Lutheran history.

Lutheran and Protestant Images of Luther

For more than a century after Luther's death in 1546, Lutherans celebrated Luther as the divinely commissioned restorer of pure Christian doctrine. Lutherans of the generations near to Luther were locked in ongoing doctrinal warfare against both Roman Catholics and Calvinists. At issue were particular truths of belief which, the Lutherans claimed, had been falsified or obscured under the papacy or were now being misinterpreted by the Calvinists. Luther

had been sent by God to unleash the Gospel in all its power and to renew the face of Christian teaching in the light of this Gospel. What really counted for Lutherans was the right account of repentance, Christ's atoning death, faith and works, and the true presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. The seventeenth century was the era of "Lutheran orthodoxy," in which Luther's followers attended less to the Reformer's personal experience and life-history than to the teachings he defended and which were now set down in Lutheran confessions of faith.

Late in the seventeenth century a ruction set in, led by the founder of Lutheran pietism, Philipp Jacob Spener (d. 1705). Here one senses a lively zeal to make Luther's legacy a source of transformed Christian living. Luther once voiced the hope that Christians would form small conventicles for Bible study and a simplified life of worship. Pietism did just this, by forming communities of faith based less on doctrinal correctness than on the pursuit of holiness of life. Spener's followers grasped Luther's insistence on the lived experience of sin and distance from God and on a joyous sense of God's favor and compassion. Luther's own interior struggles came to be rediscovered, and people saw him as a man who wrestled with temptation but broke through to tender love of Jesus Christ. In contrast with the orthodox, Lutheran pietists felt less bound to the totality of Luther's interpretations of Scripture, and some claimed on occasion the right to do as Luther had done and so to work out better interpretations than he held. - The contrast between the dogmatic and pietistic Lutherans suggests that Luther represents a many-sided, perhaps even a many-splendored, event in Christian history.

The eighteenth century shows just how deeply the understanding of Luther is affected by the aspirations and values of one's own age. As European thought basked in the new brilliance of "enlightenment," people perceived yet another side of Luther. Now he was celebrated as the pioneer in the struggle to throw off the constrictive shackles of dogma, clergy, and church. By breaking with the papacy and criti-

cizing indulgences, saint-worship, relics, the priesthood, and the mass, Luther gained for Christians a great increase of freedom and maturity. Luther threw off oppressive authority and thus opened the way for the world to come of age. Luther's protest was a step toward a time when people could think for themselves about the biblical witness to God, Christ, and church. Positively, the German enlightenment prized Luther's courage in taking a stand on the personal convictions he had gained from study of Scripture. His enemies were depicted as hostile to enlightenment and freedom: mired in superstition and bigotry while ready to use compulsion to impose orthodox beliefs. The Reformation had thus contributed to the moral advancement of humanity, but this was an on-going task. The German enlightenment was politically more conservative than its French counterpart, and so it stressed Luther's words on behalf of existing governmental authority and citizens' duties to obey. Princes were taught to value Luther's heritage because it gave them a people instructed in docility, a clergy incorporated into local structures of authority, and freedom from bishops and abbots claiming control over significant areas of the principality. Enlightenment thinkers showed little interest in Luther's preaching of Christ crucified and his strong views on the sacraments, but they held him in high regard as the promoter of freedom of thought, individualized religion, and an overall advancement of culture and European prosperity.

Nineteenth century views of Luther cover a wide span of diversity. The critical tradition of the Enlightenment continued, prompting the Catholic theologian, J. A. Mohler, to say that Protestant theologians were indebted to Luther for the freedom to now believe just the opposite of what he and the Lutheran churches believed. Orthodoxy revived in places, being carried across the Atlantic by German and Scandinavian immigrants to Pennsylvania and Missouri. A leading German theologian, Albrecht Ritschl (d. 1889), read Luther's own works carefully and came to contend that the Enlightenment was misinterpreting what Luther meant by

"Christian freedom." Luther did not proclaim free-thinking about doctrine, but the liberation of the guilty conscience from its burden of fear before God.

Most significantly for all later work on understanding Luther, the year 1883 saw the beginning of what is now the authoritative edition of all of Luther's writings. Study of Luther's thought was thus put on a solid historical basis and the subsequent publication of his correspondence has made it possible to see him in constant interaction with his own contemporaries. It is harder now to form one's image of Luther purely as a response to the needs and aspirations of one's own day.

Moving into our own twentieth century, we note that Protestant theology has been affected by the study of Luther's earliest lectures on Scripture, now available in critical editions and translations. This study fused easily with the strong wave of disillusionment in Europe following World War I to produce theological movements stressing the absolute holiness of God and the sovereignty of God's word over human talk about God. In the theological movement led by Karl Barth (d. 1968), Luther was above all the herald of Christ crucified, before whom faith grasps the paradoxical difference between God's way and human projects for fulfillment. Another modern theology values Luther's way of interpreting Scripture as a message of salvation *for me*. Rudolf Bultmann (d. 1976) sought to initiate the revitalization of Christian preaching in its existential impact on one's self-understanding. Here Luther was celebrated for an epoch-making contribution to hermeneutics, because of his incisive restatement of the purpose and method of a religious interpretation of the sacred text.

A full accounting of even the Lutheran images of Luther in our own day would require a lengthy survey of the many diverse situations in which Lutheran theologians and historians do their work. Luther is bound to be seen differently by a university professor in secularized Scandinavia, a seminary theologian in Marxist East Germany, and a historian in a non-denominational religion department of an Ameri-

can university. Some relate Luther to the great economic and social changes of his day, while others see Luther in interaction with the thought and theology of the late middle ages, about which our knowledge is growing substantially. In the Lutheran churches, Luther is a constant source of inspiration and guidance for pastors and church-members. Most interestingly, Luther is of critical importance in some sectors of the ecumenical movement, especially where Lutherans and Roman Catholics are now dialoging in the pursuit of Christian unity. Among Catholics, we also find that the images of Luther have been and continue to be quite diverse.

Catholic Images of Luther

In 1549, three years after Luther's death, a German Catholic writer, Johann Cochlaeus, published his *Commentaries on Luther's Actions and Writings*, a book that deeply influenced the image of Luther held by Catholics for more than two centuries. Sad to say, Cochlaeus wrote in the white heat of excited anger against Luther. By his own admission, Cochlaeus set out to make his readers feel revulsion toward Luther. Even before his Luther book, Cochlaeus was given to venting his anger in print. His 1534 pamphlet against King Henry VIII of England had so embarrassed Cochlaeus' patron, Duke George of Saxony, that the Duke had Cochlaeus sent away from Dresden, where Cochlaeus had been working in proximity to the ducal court. Cochlaeus represents well the passions of the reformation era, a time of bitter hatreds as the confessional divisions hardened between Western Christians.

Cochlaeus did use Luther's own works, citing from or referring to 140 writings of the reformer. In selecting for citation, Cochlaeus had an eye especially for passages in which Luther attacked Catholic doctrines and institutions. The excerpts were to show the reader a Luther quite reckless in polemics, clearly destructive of church, clergy, and sacra-

menu. Cochlaeus depicts Luther as the cause of the violence in Germany in 1525, when the peasants revolted, and laments the desolation of his native land, all due to Luther's heresies and defiance. Luther, according to Cochlaeus, was not even consistent, but kept changing his views as occasion suggested. In an earlier book, *The Seven-Headed Luther*, Cochlaeus had spelled out Luther's sudden changes of direction doctrinally.

In the original edition, Cochlaeus' *Commentaries* devoted 283 pages to Luther between 1517 and 1534, but only 36 pages to the last twelve years of Luther's life. At times Cochlaeus wrote so hastily as to lose the thread of his narrative. Excerpts often pile up helter-skelter. But although Cochlaeus was careless in his citations, he did not purposely falsify Luther's words. In spite of the disorganization and carelessness, Cochlaeus' image of the devilishly destructive Luther dominated Catholic popular understanding of Luther for centuries. - Fortunately, a German Catholic historian of no little courage, Adolf Herte, published studies on Cochlaeus and his influence (1935, 1943) which make it clear how Cochlaeus had intentionally sketched Luther in the worst possible light so as to arouse suspicion and hatred toward his person. We now know that the Cochlaeus image was wholly in the service of a Catholic verdict rejecting Luther and his work.

In the age of confessional polemics, important Catholic theologians, like St. Robert Bellarmine (d. 1621), published lengthy arguments against Luther's teachings. Here the aim was to strengthen the cohesion of the Catholic church, by training the clergy for defense against Lutheran views on Scripture, faith, grace, sacraments, and church authority. Luther was spared the insults and recriminations of a Cochlaeus. Counterreformation Catholicism, however, showed little awareness of the abuses the Reformation sought to correct and rarely referred to Luther's catechisms, sermons, hymns, and instructions on prayer. In a way that reminds one of Lutheran orthodoxy, Catholics of the Counterreformation gave no thought to the possibility that Luther could be a source of edification and inspiration.

In the eighteenth century, confessional passions subsided. Catholics influenced by the Enlightenment at times wrote appreciatively of Luther's deep piety and of the cultural advancement due to his translation of Scripture and promotion of the reading of the biblical text. But in the nineteenth century the confessional oppositions flared up again in Germany as the Prussian state marginalized Catholic organizations and institutions. Part of the Catholic response was to renew the attacks on Luther for his baneful influence in shattering Christian unity. French Catholic thinkers were hostile to all things German and so were closed to any values in Luther. In the 1870s, the Catholic historian, Johannes Janssen, began a widely read history of Germany on the eve of the Reformation, stressing the flourishing state of culture and piety, with the effect that Luther was again depicted as the destroyer of the true and good. But the spirit of exact historical research had been born in the nineteenth century, and it was inevitable that Catholics would come to reinterpret Luther from the full span of source documents then being retrieved from the archives for publication.

As the twentieth century opened, there was good reason to look for a Catholic revision of the historical image of Luther. This in fact came, but not in the direction one would expect. The old hostilities broke out afresh. Just as the bases were being laid for overcoming prejudice by objective historical reporting, polemics broke out afresh, resulting in the postponement for decades of an ecumenical rapprochement over Luther. In 1904, an Austrian Dominican, Heinrich Denifle, published a volume on the beginnings of Luther and Lutheranism. Denifle had been working since 1883 as assistant archivist in the Vatican and had published important historical works on medieval universities and mysticism. He had expert knowledge which could have served well in understanding Luther's earliest works. Denifle even found in the Vatican a manuscript copy of notes taken during Luther's lectures on Romans in 1515-16, a key expression of the reformer's early thought which was up to then unknown in the scholarly world. But Denifle, a pugna-

cious Tyrolian, chose not to understand Luther but to demolish him, showing Luther to be a theological ignoramus and decadent, fallen monk victimized by unruly passion. According to Denifle, Luther's theology rests on the conviction that the human heart is wholly dominated by lust, anger, and pride. Luther had not taken monastic discipline seriously and failed to cooperate with the graces God offered him. Luther had fallen into numerous sexual sins and his theology then is simply a clever justification for a life without self-discipline and moral striving. Along the way in his exposition, Denifle heaped intemperate abuse on Protestant accounts of Luther for their misunderstandings of medieval thought. He opened one of his concluding chapters with a flourish, "Luther, there is no ounce of godliness in you!"

Catholic university men in Germany were reserved about Denifle's bombshell from Rome. Some coolly pointed out that a person so depraved as the Luther depicted by Denifle could not possibly have produced the literature that in fact changed the course of Christian history. It was lamented that the new documents Denifle presented would never lead to corrections of Lutheran views of Luther, since the Dominican had clothed his work in a vitriolic rhetoric repulsive to Lutherans.

There were hopes that another account would soon rectify the common image and understanding of Luther among Catholics. A Jesuit professor of church history at Innsbruck, Hartmann Grisar had been publishing articles on detailed points of Luther's life and thought in the 1880s and 1890s. Finally in 1911-12, Grisar brought out three massive volumes totalling nearly 2600 pages that collected all his investigations into Luther's life and thought. Grisar refrained from accusing Luther in the insulting manner of Denifle and proved untenable numerous anecdotes about Luther's personal life used to discredit the reformer in popular Catholic literature. The key to Luther for Grisar was his education in the decadent system of William of Ockham. Add to this Luther's fascination with a mysticism of passiv-

ity, and one can grasp why Luther polemicized against good works. Luther's early successes made him proud and unresponsive to sound correction. Grisar looked at times to psychology for understanding Luther. In this account, Luther verged on neurosis as he swung from pseudo-mystical quiet to intemperate attack and near-hysteria. As Luther dealt with his maladjustments he came to hold doctrines diverging from church teaching. Late in life Luther suffered bouts of dismal depression, but then he would swing over to jocularly, frenetic work, and violent polemics. Grisar had vast factual knowledge of Luther, but he also showed a subtle talent for stirring suspicions about Luther. He repeatedly showed how problems plaguing modern Protestantism stemmed from Luther. At the age of 80, Grisar prepared a one-volume condensation of his studies: *Martin Luther, His Life and Work* (1926, out in English in 1930). The shorter version was for decades the standard Catholic source for understanding the originator of Protestantism. Still, the basic aim dominating this work is to reject all that Luther stood for and to undercut any tendency to dwell on good points in Luther or to learn from him. It is strange today to read in the preface of Grisar's one-volume life that Luther's influence was in decline. The moment was actually at hand when a new surge of Luther's influence would be felt all across the Christian confessional spectrum.

Denifle and Grisar left deep marks on both theological and popular presentations of Luther by Catholics in the twentieth century. But the vehemence of Denifle and the blanket rejection by Grisar began to stir reactions. Sebastian Merkle, Catholic church historian in Wurzburg, objected to Denifle's tone and method, asserting that denying Luther historical justice was no service of the church or of truth. The effect was to worsen the relation between the churches. Merkle had to defend his critical stand against suspicions over his fidelity as a Catholic, but he stood firm and in 1929 published an essay contrasting good points in Luther with bad points in his Catholic critics. Merkle underscored the religious depth evident in the young Luther, his

struggle with temptations to despair, and the low state of the church on the eve of the Reformation. It is no mystery why many did follow Luther out of the church in order to seek a more authentic faith. It is no credit to Catholicism, according to Merkle, that many try to show their loyalty to the church by insulting and reviling Luther. - It was becoming clear that Denifle and Grisar did not exhaust the possibilities on the Catholic side for forming an image of Luther.

The intuitions of Merkle came to realization in the life's work of Joseph Lortz. Early in the 1930s Lortz published a one-volume history of the church focusing on the interplay of ideas through the centuries. When Lortz turned to the Reformation, he brought a sharpened awareness of the ebb and flow of diverse themes and structures in the historical realizations of Christianity. Early on, Lortz expressed the hope that calm collaboration could replace the hostilities between Catholics and Protestants as they study the Reformation. The Catholic need make no apologies for his faith and loyalty to the church, but then from this standpoint his historical work must be a relentless pursuit of understanding the past. A great step forward regarding Luther came with Lortz's two-volume *History of the Reformation in Germany* (1939-40, in English 1968).

Lortz saw Luther as a person dominated by a central religious intention, above all by the search for the God of grace. God, for Luther, is a tremendous and fascinating power. In God's sight human efforts pale in importance. God took the initiative in sending his Son for our salvation and this initiative breaks out ever again in the preaching of the Gospel. Luther confronted a Christianity mired in abuses, as fiscal principles dictated church policy at the highest level. In doctrine confusion was rife, and the theology of the day, especially the Ockhamist views Luther learned, was in tone and content far from the Bible and out of touch with numerous key insights of the church Fathers. The piety of Luther's early environment was such as to isolate the individual from the social organism of the body of Christ. So, Joseph Lortz came to his famous conclusion:

"Luther wrestled and overthrew a Catholicism that was not Catholic."

Lortz, however, was far from being an uncritical enthusiast for Luther. He pointed out extremes in Luther, such as a lack of restraint in fulminating against his opponents. Lortz found in Luther an extravagance ill-befitting a teacher submissive to the word of God. Impulsive in interpreting the Scriptures, Luther distorted the full message of the New Testament by subjective selectivity. But there is for Lortz a large reservoir of Catholic content in Luther, and not just in the young Luther. Even the elder Luther, often bitter and crude in attacking the priesthood and papacy, was a teacher of the sovereignty of God, a defender of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and an effective teacher of faith in Christ the Savior. Lortz's account of Luther was critical, but his criticism was penetrated by amazement over Luther's pulsating spiritual richness, the wide range of his talents, the vastness of his productive labor for the new community, and the concentration of all his thought on God's grace revealed in Christ and transmitted by the Gospel. Lortz gave Catholics an image of Luther marked by prophetic greatness.

Joseph Lortz had the effect of creating a new context for Catholic approaches to Luther. The fascination with Luther's person gave way to study of his religious message. Lortz became in the years after World War II a pioneer of ecumenism, as he gave frequent lectures on Luther and the Reformation to Catholic and Lutheran audiences in Germany. For many younger Catholic scholars, Lortz's work on Luther became the platform from which to view Luther and to enter into deeper dialogue with his teachings. In 1966 Catholics began to be active participants in the quinquennial international congresses of Luther scholarship. In the midst of the ecumenical revolution flowing from the Second Vatican Council, Catholic research on and interpretation of Luther has made a helpful contribution to the official ongoing dialogues between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, both on the world level and in North America.

Recent Catholic Interpretations of Luther

It would go far beyond the bounds of this chapter to survey all the Catholic contributions to Luther scholarship between 1960 and 1980. Helpful sketches of the work of the 1960s have been published elsewhere. Still, some highlights can be mentioned, in part to situate more accurately the standpoint of this book on Luther and his legacy.

Some recent studies are clearly in the tradition begun by Joseph Lortz. For instance, Erwin Iserloh has thrown light on the beginning of the Reformation through a controversial book, *The Theses Were Not Posted* (1968), which shows that Luther went through correct channels on October 31, 1517, in his effort to remedy the misleading claims of the indulgence preachers like John Tetzel. Luther quietly sent his theses to the bishops, hoping they would act as responsible supervisors of the indulgence campaign. Iserloh is also the author of the account of the German Reformation in Volume V of the collaborative *History of the Church*, edited by Hubert Jedin. This latter work is for many a model presentation of Luther's development and interaction with others as he became the leader of reform. We could mention others influenced by Joseph Lortz; in fact, the perspective of the present book has been shaped considerably by Lortz's views of Luther.

Other Catholics writing on Luther are sharply critical of aspects of his thought. A convert to Catholicism, Paul Hacker, wrote on Luther's notion of faith, which he faulted for being egocentric. Luther, in this view, teaches the Christian to wrestle with the word of God until it engenders a consoling certitude of salvation. This causes Luther to slight the role of love and the self-forgetting gift of one's heart to God. Also critical of Luther is another German Catholic, Theobald Beer, who claims to have uncovered profound divergences between Luther and the patristic and medieval classic theologies of sin, Christ, and grace. It does seem significant, however, that even these sharp critics of Luther's thought avoid deprecating Luther personally; they

cite him carefully and at times extensively; they clearly take Luther seriously as the author of a Christian theological tradition meriting careful examination.

While Catholic scholarship in the 1960s concentrated on Luther's views of sin, human freedom, grace, and the new life given in Christ, more recent work has focused on how Luther sees salvation mediated to the believer. A German Catholic scholar, Frido Mann, studied the doctrine of the Eucharist in Luther's works down to 1520. Mann showed why Luther's teachings were unacceptable in the Catholic church of his day, but then went on as well to sketch the striking expansion of Catholic horizons after Vatican II. The result is that important concerns of Luther's early eucharistic doctrine are being taken up for the enrichment of Catholic worship and theology. Catholic teaching now affirms that all believers share in the priestly dignity of Christ, that proclamation of God's word is constitutive in Eucharistic worship, and that the Eucharist is an event expressive of Christ's love for and union with his people. With these emphases, we have a new possibility for constructive dialogue with Luther and his followers on topics that earlier led to acrimonious disputes.

A Dutch priest working in the Catholic diaspora of Finland, Jan Aarts, published a 1972 monograph on Luther's early doctrine of ministerial office in the church. Luther stressed how the ministry serves God's word of redemption which calls believers into community. Ministry rests on God's will and institution. Although priesthood is common to believers, office-holders in the church are really distinguished from other members of the church by their mission from God to preach. Aarts' clear and sensitive reading of Luther has set in focus one of the most difficult issues being faced in today's ecumenical rapprochement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

A 1977 book by Wolfgang Schwab followed Luther's ideas of the sacraments along the lengthy trail of the reformer's development. Schwab singled out the constancy with which Luther accented the initiative of God's generos-

ity over the meritorious action of the human recipients of the sacraments. These signs and events are God's own word and work, to which our submissive faith is due. Grace and forgiveness do not arise from the human heart, but are communicated in dialogue, as God speaks a loving word of promise and salvation. Schwab showed clearly how Luther's exchanges with traditional theologians and church officials were skewed by misunderstandings. The result was a prejudicial treatment of some of Luther's sayings, the original context of which was not grasped then. Catholics have long been oblivious of large areas of Luther's work on sacraments, for instance, his determined battle to prove the real presence against Zwingli's denials. Against enthusiasts who were "high" on the experience of the Spirit, Luther asserted adamantly that God's authentic gifts are mediated by the Gospel and the sacraments of Christ. - On the basis of these studies of Luther, it becomes clear why Lutherans and Catholics are approaching each other in a fresh manner in the ecumenical dialogues.

Potentially, the most significant recent work on Luther by a Catholic scholar is Otto Pesch's giant dissertation on the theology of justification in Luther and Thomas Aquinas, published in German in 1967. Pesch created a new genre, perhaps best termed "dialogical theology," and then went on to give a massive demonstration. Pesch is not simply concerned to reevaluate Luther, nor is he concerned with primary historical work in the mode of the three recent studies on ministry and sacraments. Pesch offers instead a systematic and comparative study of the two classic representatives of Protestant and Catholic theology. Pesch begins from the work of reputable scholars on the reformer's notion of sin, law and gospel, grace, justification, and sanctification. He then probes in Aquinas in search of agreements and disagreements. One is immediately amazed at the large area of common ground Pesch can point out. He then goes on to ascertain what Luther has added over and above the matters of common conviction, and to see whether there are any indications that Aquinas might show an openness to what is specific to Luther. In both parts of Pesch's work we

encounter a wealth of detail lucidly set forth. In an arresting final section, he asks what the fundamental reason is why Aquinas and Luther differ on particular points such as free consent to grace, certitude of justification, and merit through good works in grace.

According to Pesch, Aquinas is a "sapiential theologian," who is concerned to describe and even celebrate God's wisdom in the harmonious total plan of creation, fall, redemption, and the consummation of all in Christ. Such a theologian is in part the contemplative observer, giving God the homage of profound attention to all parts of his creative and saving work. But Luther, on the other hand, is an "existential theologian," for whom every theological issue centers on what God is saying to the individual person. Every theological statement by Luther arises from the struggle to properly take hold of God's judgement and saving gift. Conversion, trust, and joy in the Lord impinge on Luther's teaching of Christian truth. Experience is near at hand in this theological project. Pesch concludes with the question whether we are not dealing here with two complementary styles of doing theology, styles which could very well coexist within the same ecclesial home and which may even need each other as insurance against the distortions likely to arise from exclusive use of one method.

It is not easy to evaluate just what has been gained through Pesch's work. We look with anticipation to the outcome of the present phase of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States, where justification is under discussion, to see what help Pesch's work has contributed. It is true that Pesch's dependence on the work of other scholars for capturing the spirit and content of Luther's work adds a tentative quality to his book. Scholars' results have a way of suffering diminished relevance with time. Still, Pesch's use of Aquinas insures that his thesis is based on a true and perennial classic of the Catholic tradition. The assertion of the basic complementarity of Luther and Aquinas needs to be tested in other areas, such as Christology, ecclesiology, and sacramental doctrine, to see if it stands up.

Toward a Perspective on Luther

Clearly, past encounters with Luther have resulted in a notable variety of images of the man and his legacy. The variety can encourage us in approaching Luther afresh, from our own viewpoint in the late twentieth century. A new image is clearly possible. We will now suggest some convictions to bring to Luther, convictions that form the perspective or standpoint from which this book has been written. Our method is to first list certain areas in which Luther's contribution can be significant in our own day.

First, Luther can be a forceful teacher of lived religion. He can be a resource for the enrichment of personal spirituality for members of all Christian confessions. In many of Luther's works, one does not have to read far before touching on the subject of conversion from proud self-reliance to trusting acceptance of God's grace. Luther's accounts of conversion bear numerous marks of their own time, as accounts written between 1509 and 1546. But that was a profoundly religious and spiritual age, the same age in which St. Ignatius Loyola set forth the pattern of conversion found in *The Spiritual Exercises*. As with Ignatius, so with Luther, the account of conversion has become a classic of the Western church and its spirituality. One thinks here of Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*, of his exposition of the *Miserere* (Psalm 51), and of his preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

Luther can lead the spiritually dedicated person to the retrieval of easily forgotten central truths. Like Ignatius, Luther is sceptical about enthusiastic claims of having the Spirit. Luther leads the believer back to the word of Scripture, to baptism, and to the words of absolution and eucharistic institution. There faith can take hold of reliable communications from God. Above all, Luther sought to help people be struck personally by the word and work of Christ. Both Ignatius and Luther teach that Christmas is a time to marvel that God became man for *me* and for *my* salvation. As one reads the Gospels and prays over them

along lines suggested by Luther, a leitmotif will inevitably be the line, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). Luther is a dedicated foe of any proud satisfaction over having arrived spiritually at a point of rest. Penance for him is a lifelong concern, which is as well the message of the annual observance of Lent in the church year.

Second, certain concerns of contemporary theology, especially in Catholic circles, suggest that Luther can provide enrichment. For instance, he insisted on occasion on integrating experience into his interpretation of Scripture and his teaching of Christian truth. This gave many of his expositions, especially on sin and grace, a tone of profound, even anguished, feeling. For him, sin and guilt were terrifying, grace and union with Christ liberating and filled with delight. Faith, for Luther, brings an experience of strength and courage become imperturbable and of trust and joy deep in the heart. In Luther's day, academic theology in the universities had long been divorced from the Christian insights of the monastic and mystical traditions. Luther was one who brought the academic, that is, systematic and exegetical, concerns into renewed connection with Christian experience.

There is no real point in denying the importance of theology practiced as an academic discipline. Being "academic" means being clear, critical, and reflective, while grounding statements in the evidence. But Luther shows that even technical treatments of theological topics, as in disputations and expositions of Scripture, are really related to being humble before God, confident and joyous in laying hold of redemption, and constant in bearing the cross of penance. Luther can help theology regain a vital connection with lived religious experience. Catholic theology needs this today, as it works to overcome its twentieth century divorce from the personal subject, as was mandated in the anti-modernist period of 1908-1960.

Christology is clearly the place of the central theological ferment of our day. Catholic theologians are producing a

host of new presentations of the person, message, and meaning of Christ the Lord. Luther can serve here as a forceful reminder that soteriology, the doctrine of Christ's saving work, is the center of all Christian words and teaching. Faith, for Luther, focuses sharply on the redemptive mystery, on Jesus' life and death for us and for our salvation. Actually, contemporary Christology attends less to the factors that constitute the Incarnate Word, that is, divinity and humanity, and much more to Jesus' relationships. Jesus is seen as the eschatological revelation of the Father who related to the world by extending a hand of mercy to sinners. Here is a place for an easy entry of Luther's legacy into contemporary reflections. For Luther, the cross of Christ is the most illuminating revelation of God. The heart of the Father is shown us in his Son, and faith in the Father is always through the Son. Focused as he is on salvation, Luther stresses how Christ brings grace and forgiveness to the fearful and saddened hearts of sinners. Luther does offer a relational Christology closely based on Scripture.

Another concern of contemporary theology is biblical hermeneutics. One senses an increasing dissatisfaction with contributions to theological work by the practice of the critical-historical method on Scripture. Biblical scholarship at times uses methods that atomize the texts into tiny particles. Other analyses so stress the special individuality of a particular biblical author as to leave us no single message from the New Testament. Another kind of interpretation seems needed, that goes beyond the initial phase of work with the text. Above all, a method is needed which does not lose sight of the perspective arising from the faith which prompts us to pick up the Bible in the first place. Now Luther did practice theological and religious interpretation of Scripture. Taking his stand on Paul's form of the Gospel of grace, Luther moved out confidently to point out what was going on in the prayers, narratives, and sermons recorded throughout the Bible. His Old Testament interpretations focus on faith and the trials besetting the lives of God's servants. Luther explains the Psalms as Christian

prayer. He comes to the gospel narratives quite aware of the mission of Christ to bring salvation to sinners. Thus Luther provides a model of interpretation of the biblical text that is focused on the religious core of revelation.

Finally, this book is written from a standpoint in the tradition of Roman Catholic historical theology. It does not present Luther as alone a sufficient guide to Christian truth. It is written from a perspective not identified with the Lutheran confessional tradition, with a clear awareness that Luther's movement was rejected by the Catholic church. In fact, down to the very recent past, the feeling about the rejection was shared mutually on the Lutheran side.

Doctrinal decisions were made at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which excluded numerous formulations made by Luther and his first followers. Now dogma is first a regulator of church language in preaching and catechizing. At key points, for the sixteenth century, Luther's language was novel, startling, and extreme. Not for nothing did the judicious Erasmus finish his 1524 refutation of Luther with a list of the exaggerations in which Luther went well beyond what was appropriate. One needs to be on the lookout for Luther's rhetorical flights, and to be judicious in discriminating between the substance of his message and the linguistic extremes with which he sometimes made his points.

To be frank, there are three serious, central points of doctrine on which this author finds even the substance of Luther's positions erroneous. This prophetic figure has left a flawed legacy, especially because of his convictions on these three points. First, Luther's doctrine of conversion did resolutely exclude the free assent of compliance by which the human person ratifies and appropriates the grace of God. This assent, the Catholic tradition rightly holds, could be dissent or refusal in a given case. A mystery of freedom, human freedom, penetrates conversion under grace. But Luther projected a mystical passivity into this area.

Second, there are Luther's polemics against the sacrifice of the mass. History shows the many reasons why a reform movement had to take up the mass in the sixteenth century.

Protestant reformers did do away with abuses connected with stipends, the vast number of masses without the people, lay passivity or attention to other devotions during mass, withholding the chalice, celebration in a tongue alien to many, and neglect of preaching at mass. But Luther went on to teach a purely receptive posture of faith in the central moment of worship. Receptivity is right, but Luther's exclusion is not right. Eucharist is a prayer of praise and dedication addressed to the Father in the Holy Spirit. It is intrinsic to the action to give all honor and glory to the Father through, with, and in Christ. A sacrificial movement of self-offering by the church is essential here. Luther's passion to display the grace of God in the Supper led to an exclusion of this movement toward God by the community united with Christ.

Lastly, and most fundamentally, Luther believed that Scripture had a power of self-interpretation based on the content of its central message. Luther felt that the norms for understanding all biblical texts arose from the Pauline gospel. *Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* is the basic Reformation tenet asserting this self-interpreting power. There is, of course, more than a grain of truth here, but alone the tenet does not suffice. Scripture does provide important motifs and assertions that should inform interpretive work. But still the Bible only comes to us because it was made canonical by the church, and this Bible is first of all an element in the life of this church. Ultimately, an adequate interpretation, the stimulus of developing Christian doctrine, arises out of the interplay of the biblical message and this church.

Thus, we have noted three objectionable exclusions by Luther of the human factor - in conversion, in worship, and in biblical interpretation. One could easily draw out indications of opposing excesses on the part of Luther's attackers in his own day and among recent Roman Catholics. Too much has been claimed for free choice and will power before God. Offering sacrifice to God has been separated from God's anticipating initiative and also made an

individual instead of a corporate ecclesial act. Church authority has neglected listening to Scripture and Catholics have set the church over Scripture and made the church an independent source of truth.

But our main point is that the excesses and mistakes do not make up the whole of Luther. One who differs from Luther can still read many of his works in the quest of instruction and edification. The inquiring probe into the reasons and proofs he gave for unacceptable positions can be a bracing challenge. There is a fascination even in seeing a prophetic giant go wrong.

Luther's thought remains a classic of Christianity. If we have to disagree with him on basic points, this is not the last word. One can be further encouraged by significant works of Catholic-Lutheran collaboration produced in 1980. The occasion was the commemoration of the 450th anniversary of the *Augsburg Confession*, the statement of belief on which the earliest Lutherans took a public stand in the German Empire as reformed territorial churches. The commemoration brought Catholic and Lutheran theologians together into new dialogue over the key articles of the *Confession*. They did not come to complete agreement, but a new increase of understanding did result. Mutual recognition came closer. The disagreements are being placed in ever clearer light at their proper level in the hierarchy of Christian truths. With such dialogue still in process, it is a good time to take a fresh look at the man who started the Lutheran movement, to see how he addressed Christians of his time.

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