INTRODUCTION
LUTHER'S CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY TODAY

This anthology has been prepared with the special hope that it might be useful in making the writings of Martin Luther available as a resource for contemporary work in theology, both in academic settings and in current struggles about theology in the life of the churches. Is this hope realistic? There are several obstacles.

First of all, there is no question that Luther is interesting nowadays—historically, psychologically, and ecumenically. There is also no question that Luther—in contrast to some other theologians—is a man whose life and work are closely connected, so that his own particular voice and struggles come through clearly in his writings. But can the theologians and the churches actually hear Luther today? What is initially interesting can come to seem merely personal.

Second, Luther is an occasional theologian, not a systematic theologian! He wrote no single summary of his own teaching that can stand next to the greatest compends of Christian doctrine. The person who wants to listen to Luther has to follow him through the concrete struggles for the gospel in the context of the sixteenth century church and society. This serves as valuable protection against bringing Luther into current discussions in too facile or immediate a way, but it also makes him seem somewhat dated, time-bound, and even old-fashioned.

Third, Luther has extremely strong views about theology and is hard on opponents (and on himself, to be fair about the matter). He is extreme in language and is passionate about any issue that seems to have bearing on how the gospel is heard in the church. This makes Luther a lively person to read and study. But the impression persists that he is unfair, unbalanced, and not a steady guide to the subtle distinctions of which much of theology consists.

Finally, the deepest obstacle to hearing Luther in today's theological discussions is that his theology is so rich, complex, and dialectical that he seems unreliable both as an opponent and as an ally. There is always with Luther the element of surprise. That same "on the other hand…" which seems to give depth to Thomas Aquinas leads many people to distrust this element in Luther as a sign of muddled thinking or evasive paradox.

That impression is correct in one sense. Luther concentrates on the question of the gospel and the right way of speaking of God so intently that he can rarely offer a simple yes or no to a question. A survey of his concerns in this anthology will show that he is at odds with many of the favorite causes and slogans in contemporary theology.

But a closer look might show that Luther is not simply one who would say no (or *Nein!*) to the hopes and legitimate concerns of theology today. He is a valuable resource and a classic source for theology partly because he is able to generate dialog. A careful reading of these writings of Luther will *both* challenge *and* affirm many of the characteristic features of current theology.

Three examples can help to show how Luther can offer us a very stimulating yes and no:

1. The Question of Theological Method (See Part II of this anthology). Luther's authorship, as contained in these selections, begins with the "Disputation Against Scholastic Theology" from 1517. Here he makes a powerful case that the reigning scholastic method, with its dependence on certain forms of philosophy, has played a major role in obscuring the gospel. That word of grace from God in Jesus Christ is not something that emerges within human wisdom or moral achievement but is a word of judgment and mercy set *over against* even the best that humans could achieve. The heavy dependence of theology on philosophy, he argues, has led to a situation in which the distinctiveness of the gospel was so blunted that it could not be understood.

Luther's judgments against reason sound harsh when applied to recent theology with its high level of interest in dialog with philosophy, with the social sciences, with culture and with the world religions. It also seems narrow and triumphantly Christian. But contemporary theologians who favor apologetics and try to fit the gospel into the needs and worldview of modern humanity need to consider to what extent Luther's critique is a fair judgment on their work. Or is the situation now so different from that of late scholasticism that Luther's warnings are irrelevant to contemporary projects?

Yet other starting points may be more promising. In his "theology of the cross" set forth in the "Heidelberg Disputation" of 1518 (see again Part II), Luther develops a theme that could open an interesting and more positive dialog with current theology. His insistence that God is not to be found in the great successes of humanity, whether intellectual or moral, but instead in the cross of Jesus, has an affinity with some strands of liberation theology. Of course Luther was no proto-Marxist, no friend of political revolution in any form. But this sense that God has been hidden from the powerful and the wise and revealed to the lowly and the humble could be the starting point for a fruitful and perhaps surprising dialog.

2. The Bondage of the Will (See Part IV of this anthology). Luther considered his finest theological work to be his defense of the bondage of the human will against the views of Desiderius Erasmus. Those who read this anthology will find this theme was already central to his theology as early as 1517. Yet the bondage of the will is a particularly distasteful theme for theology today!

Most contemporary theologians wish to set a different course, developing a basically positive or affirming view of human capacity. They often claim that Scripture has been misread in a negative way by the Christian tradition. Or they insist that humanity be held more accountable than a grace-centered theology would seem to do. Others argue that concepts like sin and guilt have been too prominent in past theologies.

Over against this, Luther's insistence on the bondage of the will deserves exploration. Two things emerge quickly: First, of course, Luther speaks of the bondage of the will not in terms of human capacity for ordinary or even extraordinary action, but in reference to that salvation question—the God relationship—which is always the center of his thinking.

Second, Luther insists that the bondage of the will has less to do with pessimism about humanity (although some of that is surely there) than with the grace of God that has been revealed in Jesus Christ. The bondage of the will is an implication of his Christology, rather than an item of free floating pessimism about human nature.

Modern theology would benefit from a close dialog with Luther on these issues. Does optimism about human will in its theoretical form really lead to humanity's being more accountable and more responsible? Or do many other factors come into play? And what does modern theology say about the connection between its typically optimistic view of human prospects and its own Christology? It may be that the contemporary sense of discontinuity with classical Christology is to be found not only because the categories seem alien, but more basically because there is little for Jesus to do or to be, beyond serving as moral exemplar or a sage for the ages.

3. The Shape of Christian Ethics (See Part VII of this anthology). Contemporary ethics seems to be deeply divided about the general form that Christian action ought to take. Many Christian theologians, fearing the current moral laxity and permissive society of the West, are eager to find new ways to ground a binding moral code of human behavior to stand against the relativism of the age. Other Christian theologians, and many nonreligious persons, see in this new stress on virtue and character the old Christian tyranny of standing against human freedom, particularly in such an area as sexual behavior.

Luther, often dismissed as an antinomian or a dispenser of "cheap grace," actually has something vital to offer to this debate. His own proposal about the shape of the Christian life, as set out in "The Freedom of a Christian" from 1520, places freedom and service together as the indivisible marks of what life in Christ must include.

Against those who really do resent human autonomy, who are convinced that the church always knows what is best for people, Luther is a vigorous advocate of Christian liberty. But against any reduction of this freedom to an opportunity for license, self-preoccupation, or indifference to the needs of others, Luther makes the service of others the hallmark and goal of how Christian liberty is to be used.

Other examples of how Luther might address contemporary theology could be developed from the other sections of this anthology:

- Luther's hermeneutic of law and gospel (See Part III) can be misused, and often has been, as when the law/gospel distinction is seen as setting the New Testament against the Old. But Luther offers a clear and preachable approach in striking contrast to many of the current proposals that appear too complex ever to influence the life of the church.
- Luther's view of the sacraments (See Part V) insists on critique in light of the gospel, to ensure that the sacraments are the means of grace rather than human tasks, however gloriously performed. But the mystery of God in Christ present in water, bread, and wine is vigorously preserved against all attempts of interpretation to give a rationalizing account.
- Luther's approach to reform in the church (See Part VI) is striking in its caution and deliberation. But his insistence on education and on concern for popular understanding of what the church is doing could be a crucial missing factor in many of the current church campaigns which seem to falter when the dreams of the leaders are set over against the wishes and opinions of the people.

The best connections that the reader can make may well be the ones that she or he is personally able to discover. The way to read this book as a text in theology is with both generosity toward Luther's own context, so that he is not dismissed by the critical standards of the last century, and with imagination about those academic and pastoral problems with which the reader is currently engaged.

For in many instances Luther has been there before us, in this task of faithful reforming, and he is always at least a helpful case-study, whether his own proposals are embraced, altered, or rejected. Luther deserves more from the church today than to be ignored or consigned to being an interesting exhibit in the museum of church history. Luther deserves to be read rather than read about. This anthology seeks to bring his voice more fully into both the study of theology and our current debates.