

Preface

According to Luther, theology should be about “the kernel of the nut, the interior of the wheat, the marrow in the bones.” He wanted to find out what matters in life and death and to distinguish the essential from what is inessential or even hurtful. As regards his own time, he may well have been largely successful. But in the meantime half a millennium has passed, and the question arises whether from today’s point of view he was able to separate the chaff from the wheat, whether he succeeded in getting to the marrow of the bones, and whether the heart of the nut he cracked is still tasty today and will continue to nourish in time to come.

It is nearly impossible to get a complete overview of the literature on Luther; his own works, in their various editions, represent a challenge to anyone studying them. Where is the core, the marrow, the innermost part of the wheat to be found? What is strong and nourishing here, what is digestible? There is need for a critical examination in view of a radically altered socio-cultural situation and the theological questions that require an answer today. The present book seeks to make its contribution in this context.

I myself am thus returning to my theological beginnings, though Luther has accompanied me throughout my entire life. I always especially enjoyed giving lectures on his theology in Marburg, and they were not devoid of laughter. At the end of a summer semester we got together to eat “Luther bread” I had brought from Wittenberg. Every lecture was introduced with a word from Luther, followed by a “minute of silence.”

Having grown up in a Lutheran state church, I was later able to get to know worldwide Lutheranism, in Lutheran centers for theological study in Hungary, Japan, and India. I gave guest lectures on topics in Lutheran theology in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and in Saõ Leopoldo, Rio Grande do Sul. Ecumenical communication of Luther was the subject of lecture series at the Istituto di Studi Ecumenici, first in Verona and then in Venice and at the Waldensian seminary in Rome. I was even able to introduce Luther into the interreligious dialogue at the Buddhist Otani University in Kyoto. All this lent me a plethora of insights, experiences, and materials to which I can now have recourse. This book summarizes my decades of engagement with the Reformer, which became more and more critical over time.

My companion in study, Prof. Dr. Bernhard Brons of Nuremberg, reviewed the manuscript with great theological-historical and systematic-theological skill. Quite a few of his objections and comments would be worth a separate publication. I am grateful to my former doctoral student, Prof. Dr. Gernot Schulze-Wegener of Rauschenberg, for help in correcting the text and for a number of suggestions, and likewise—as with all my previous publications—to my wife, who in our many conversations about Luther has done great honor to her middle name, Käthe. Frau Inge Radparvar has again been brilliant in overcoming the technical problems of producing the manuscript. Diedrich Steen, lector and program director at Gütersloh, has earned my gratitude by his attention not only to overlooked typos but also to the appealing presentation and composition of the book. I regret that in this book once again I have not succeeded in making meaningful use of inclusive language.

Retired Landesbischof Prof. Dr. Gerhard Müller has read some of the chapters, and I am grateful to my Marburg colleague, Prof. Dr. Hans Schneider, for some helpful suggestions. Not all my conversation partners agreed with all my theses. Some of them pointed out that those who did not share my decisions would express criticism. Meanwhile, someone else has warned me that I should “not be too critical.” The frame of reference for my critique has been my understanding of Christian faith as I expressed it in my work on dogmatics (in its third edition of 2008). Every reader will have to work out a further critical examination of Luther’s theology for herself or himself. The numerous footnotes are primarily for specialists.

While I was working on my dissertation (on Luther) I made a reference card with a quotation from Luther that I had found by accident (WA 17/1, 81, 30-31): *Utut mecum sit, tamen Deus est Deus*: whatever may become of me, God is still God. For me, that is the “kernel of the nut.”

Marburg, Reformation Day 2008
Hans-Martin Barth