

INTRODUCTION

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This volume concentrates unapologetically on Luther's *theological* writings.¹ Such a focus aligns with Luther's self-understanding of his life's work as a pastor and theologian. For the Reformer, theology helps the church speak about God—specifically about the God revealed in Jesus Christ. That is, theology helps the church *preach* the gospel. As a professor of theology, Luther was called to help the church speak clearly and cogently about that revelation.² Therefore, for Luther, wherever the church speaks in ways that obscure or misinterpret the gospel, it needed to be reformed.

Luther took the vocation of theology so seriously that a collection purporting to identify his basic writings must look at his theological contributions. This perspective looks away from the trendy and the excessively topical. Such a focus provides a perspective that much of the debate in recent decades over Luther's thought seems to have missed, with its concentration on topics related to his political and social impact. The various trends of the debate, coupled with the complexity of Luther's

thought and personality, gave rise to an astonishing variety of "Luther portraits." One must admit that each of them possesses a degree of accuracy. And each of them also shows the unmistakable marks of when, by whom, and for what purpose it was drawn.³

The Reformer, however, did not understand himself as either a social revolutionary or a political operative. He saw himself as a theologian—that is, as one who interprets the Scriptures for the mission of the church. Thus, for Luther, theology and the Bible go together. The guiding principle, the *Leitmotiv*, of his work lies in his famous distinction between law and gospel (a theological assertion!). For Luther, this interpretive tool both arises from the Bible and then informs how he interprets the biblical text. This, theological dynamic of law-gospel directs his statements about the nature of God and how God deals with the world politically and socially.

For Luther, the distinction between law and gospel is a vitally important element—and, in the judgment of some (notably, Karl Barth), a fatal element—in his interpretation of the authority of temporal government and social custom and of how Christians relate to them. Several of the selections in Part VI have been chosen with this debate in mind, but they come where they do because the fundamental ideas about the Word of God in Part II and about grace that appear in Part

1. This introduction (as well as the introductory materials throughout) builds upon and synthesizes the introductory material of the prior editions.

2. Douglas John Hall makes a compelling case for Luther's continued relevance as a *theologian* in his theological memoir, *Bound and Free* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2010). Years before, the late George Forell devoted much of his career to making a similar case. See "The Place of Theology in the Church," in *Martin Luther: Theologian of the Church*, ed. William R. Russell (St. Paul: Word and Word, 1995), 125–43.

3. Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Interpreters of Luther* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1968).

III must be clear if the reader is to make sense of the social and political ethics of Part VI. This book attempts to take Christian doctrine seriously as an object of study in its own right, not merely as a prelude to politics.

Much of what Luther, a sixteenth-century German, says about politics pertains chiefly to his own time and place. But the Luther who speaks in this volume is primarily an *international* figure. Sometimes he did see himself as a defender of Germanic values against Roman ones, but usually he strove to articulate his teachings in a larger, more international context. The Wittenberg of Luther's day was a crossroads for students from many countries who returned to bring the Reformation to their own peoples and churches. Indeed, Shakespeare tipped his dramatic hat to this dimension of Luther's work when he wrote into Hamlet's character the Prince of Denmark's connection to Wittenberg.

For much of its history, however, German academics have dominated Luther studies. Indeed, students could not get very far in the field without the pioneering work of German scholars and editors in the past centuries. In the second half of twentieth century, however, that began to change substantially. Luther scholars in many lands have gone on from the tutelage of their German mentors to create a truly international community, reflected, for example, in the attendance at the International Congresses for Luther Research since 1956, in which researchers from around the globe now participate.

These scholars also come from all the branches of Protestantism and from Roman Catholicism. Like the Luther Congress, therefore, this compendium is also explicitly *ecumenical* in its orientation and intent. In the history of theological controversy, Luther occupies a special place, both because he had a remarkable knack for recognizing key doc-

trinal issues and because his powers as a veritable sorcerer of language enabled him to express that recognition with a pungency and force that could often verge on polemical overkill.

The Reformer was generally suspicious of what moderns call "ecumenism." Luther, the arch-polemicist, the descendant of Augustine and Jerome (and of St. Paul), expresses these suspicions here, in substantial selections from *The Bondage of the Will* (1525) and in the defenses of Baptism (1526) and the Real Presence (1528), as well as in his infamous anti-Jewish rant, *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543). But these are outweighed quantitatively and especially qualitatively by those writings in which Luther expresses—with characteristic force and eloquence, imagery and compassion—the great consensus of most Christian teachers and of their churches.

Closely related to the ecumenism of this compendium is its communal orientation. Luther has too often been stereotyped as a modern individualist (at Worms he did appeal to his conscience and supposedly said, "Here *I* stand"). But if twentieth-century Luther research has made any point that is sure to remain central in future study, it is that, according to Luther, he stands in the company of the church as it listens to the word of God and as it prays. A stinging critique like Luther's *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) is not an attack on the church but a defense of the church by its faithful servant against all its enemies, foreign and domestic. *The Small Catechism* (1529) stands together with his translation of the Bible as a contribution to the life of the whole church. *On the Councils and the Church* (1539) demonstrates that Luther spent his career probing the meaning of the theology of the church and its practical implications. Luther on scripture, Luther on the sacraments, Luther on reform, Luther

on the gospel, Luther on ethics—this is the theologian who speaks in these pages.

The Reformer's ongoing concern for the practical interface between Christian theology and Christian practice also shapes this volume. The critical issues facing the church in the twenty-first century, the twin issues of mission and doctrine, require the witness, wisdom, and wit of the whole communion of saints, "of every time and every place." And, because Luther occupies a special place in that communion, the church would do well to listen anew to his voice.

Three examples show how Luther might speak to the church in this still-young twenty-first century.

Theological Method (Part I)

In his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* (1517), Luther makes a powerful case that the reigning scholastic, academic method of his day, with its dependence on Greek philosophy, obscured the proclamation of the gospel. That word of grace from God in Jesus Christ, says Luther, is not obtained by any human wisdom or moral achievement. The word of God is a word of judgment and mercy set *over against* even the best that humans might achieve. The dependence of theology on Scholasticism's philosophical method, he argues, led the church to misrepresent—in the name of reason—the distinctive character of the good news in Jesus Christ.

Luther's judgments against reason sound harsh when applied to recent theology, with its interest in conversations with philosophy, science, culture, and world religions.⁴ In such a context, Luther can seem narrow and triumphantly Christian. But contemporary theologians who favor apologetics and try to fit the gospel into the needs and worldview of

4. Cf. Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth, ed., *The Devil's Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011)

modern humanity need to consider to what extent Luther's critique is a fair judgment on their work.

Similarly, with the Reformer's theology of the cross, so evident in the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), he develops a theme that could open an interesting and perhaps more positive dialogue with current theologies. Strands of liberation theology and the theologies of emergent churches can find an affinity with Luther's insistence that God reveals the divine self at the margins—not in the great successes of humanity, whether intellectual or moral, but in the cross of Jesus. Of course Luther was no proto-Marxist, no friend of political revolution in any form, but his sense that God has been hidden from the powerful and the wise and has been revealed to the lowly and the humble could be a most fruitful and perhaps surprising contribution to the contemporary conversation among global churches.

Justification (Part III)

Luther considered his critique of Erasmus's view of "the free human will," in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), one of his most important theological contributions to the witness of the church. Yet this theme, which drives his theology as early as 1517, finds relatively few advocates in today's theological conversations. Indeed, many theologians dismiss, often without a serious look, Luther's conviction regarding predestination.⁵ Contemporary theologians tend to set a different course, developing a basically positive or affirming view of human

5. A notable exception in this regard is the work of Gerhard Forde, who consistently interpreted Luther in the context of the Reformer's notions of "the bound will" (*Theology Is for Proclamation* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990]; *The Captivation of the Will: Luther Versus Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], 2005), as well the "theology of the cross" (*On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], 1997).

capacity. They often claim that Scripture has been misread in a negative way by the Christian tradition that talks too much about sin and guilt. Others insist that humanity needs more accountability than what they believe a grace-centered theology provides.

Over and against this, Luther's insistence on the bondage of the will deserves attention. First, Luther speaks of the bondage of the will, not so much in reference to human capacity for ordinary or even extraordinary action, but in reference to the question of salvation—the God relationship—which is almost always at the center of his thinking.

Indeed, 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 more an implication of his Christology than his anthropology.

Modern theology would benefit from a conversation with Luther on these issues. 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.

Ethics (Part vi)

Contemporary ethicists disagree profoundly about the general form that Christian action ought to take. Some Christian theologians, nervous about the current moral laxity and permissive society of the West, are eager to find new ways to establish a binding moral code to withstand the relativism of our age. Other theologians and many nonreligious persons see talk of “virtue” and “character” as a worn, old

Christian moralism that stands against human freedom, particularly in areas such as sexual behavior.

Luther, himself no lawless (that is, “antinomian”) dispenser of “cheap grace,” can offer something vital to this debate. His own proposal about the shape of the Christian life, as set out in *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), places freedom and service together as the indivisible marks of what life in Christ entails.

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. At the same time, against any reduction of this freedom to an opportunity for self-centered license, Luther makes service the hallmark and goal of Christian liberty.⁶

Beyond these three general categories, numerous other examples of how Luther might address contemporary theology could arise from other sections. For example:

- Luther's interpretation of Scripture as law and gospel (Part II) provides a clear and practical approach to the Bible—and does so in striking contrast to many of the current proposals that appear too complex, too esoteric to influence the life of the church. The law-gospel dialectic can be misused, and often has been, to set the New Testament against the Old. But this is something Luther never did, and a clear-eyed look at his interpretive principles can help today's church understand its interpretive mission.
- Luther's view of the sacraments (Part IV) highlights the gospel and emphasizes God's activity in them so as not to confuse the means of grace with human accomplishments, however gloriously performed. The Reformer self-consciously preserves

6. This was a major theme in George Forell's interpretation of Luther's ethics, preeminently in *Faith Active in Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1964).

the mystery of Christ's real presence in the bread and wine of holy communion, and he vigorously preserves the sacraments as a means of grace. He rejects all over-rationalizing interpretations of the sacraments because he saw that reason could be used either to explain Christ's presence or Christ's absence in the sacraments.

- Luther's approach to reform in the church (see Part V) is striking in its passionate caution and deliberative action. He insists on the education of and concern for "the person in the pew." He thinks that all folks ought to be able to understand what the church is doing. Present-day reformers could learn from Luther how to approach parishioners pastorally and to institute change in ways

that do not unnecessarily offend the wishes and opinions of the people.

In the end, perhaps the best way to read this book as a text is with both generosity toward Luther's own context and style and with imagination about how to make connections between Luther's academic and pastoral problems and those facing folks in the present. Often Luther has been there before us in this task of faith-forming and faithful-reforming. Whether we accept or reject, embrace or alter the Reformer's particular proposals, Luther deserves to be read and not just read about. This collection seeks to bring his voice more fully into both the study of theology and history and into our current conversations.