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# Luther Expounds the Gospels

By LEWIS W. SPITZ, JR.

**B**OTH the state of Luther scholarship and the condition of the church have changed radically since the middle of that century of light, when J. G. Hamann lamented: "What a shame for our times that the spirit of this man who founded our church lies thus under the ashes. What a power of eloquence, what a spirit for interpretation, what a prophet! How good the old wine will taste to you!"<sup>1</sup> Though Theodosius Harnack a hundred years later hailed the renewed study of Luther's theology as one of the most joyous developments in theological scholarship, his own work remained the only really significant book on his theology in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> What an upsurge of Luther studies since the festivities of 1917 and the renewal of Luther scholarship through Karl Holl and other stalwarts! The Phoenix has arisen from the ashes. With the publication of the American edition of *Luther's Works*, English readers can now taste the old wine in their own tongue. The enthusiastic acclaim which the first volume to appear received throughout Protestantism is further encouraging evidence of new theological depth in the church of our day. The Luther Renaissance comes most opportunely when evangelical Christendom must look anew to the sources of its strength in the Scriptures and in the spirit of its Founder. In Volume 21, the first volume of his works on the New Testament, Luther, the first Evangelical, expounds the Gospels!

Expounding the Scriptures was, in fact, Luther's whole lifework as a scholar, and the exposition was the sum total of his theology. From that Friday, October 22, 1512, when he was received into the theological senate of the University of Wittenberg, as the professor for *lectura in Biblia*, until his death, he presented no other kind than Biblical exegetical lectures.<sup>3</sup> He became one of the mightiest exegetes of the Christian Church, a true witness of the

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<sup>1</sup> An G. E. Lindner, 9. März, 1759, cited in Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Heidelberg, 1955), p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> Theodosius Harnack, *Luthers Theologie*, 2 vols. (Erlangen, 1862), I, iii.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Boehmer, *Luthers erste Vorlesung* (Leipzig, 1924), p. 1. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luthers geistige Welt* (Lüneburg, 1947), p. 9.



endless wealth of Biblical truth in its singular depth and its manifold breadth. "Theology is nothing else than grammar occupied with the words of the Holy Spirit," he declared with epigrammatical force.<sup>4</sup> If the "Reformation writings" represented in the first instance his great No, then his sermonico-exegetical writings were his resounding Yes. They were, to turn Goethe's phrase, his "higher affirmation."

Protestant scholars have been so enthusiastic in heralding Luther's return to first principles that they have almost been thrown off balance by a new type of Roman Catholic criticism more subtle than the usual frontal assault on the three *solas*. Thus Adolph Harnack spoke of Luther's work as an "enormous reduction" to the truly religious. Wilhelm Dilthey suggested that the way to this simplification was prepared by German mysticism and the *philosophia Christi* of the humanists.<sup>5</sup> Others have joined in the chorus proclaiming Luther as the true *theologus crucis*.<sup>6</sup> His Paulinism and his evangelical experience conditioned all his exegesis. Precisely so, responds Joseph Lortz, an excellent moderate Roman Catholic scholar, who criticizes the "disarming misinterpretation of Luther by Denifle and his ice-cold trial by Grisar," but Luther was not *völlig-hörend*, his ears were not open for the full counsel of God, he did not include all the elements of the Bible in his message.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Berlin, 1860), p. xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Adolph Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte* (Berlin, 1922), III, § 79, *Das Christentum Luthers*: "Das, was er erlebt hatte, lernte er aussprechen, und da ergab sich, gemessen an dem Vielerlei dessen, was die Kirche als 'Religion' bot, vor allem eine ungeheure Reduktion." Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II (Leipzig und Berlin, 1929), pp. 53 ff. On p. 55 Dilthey speaks of "die harte Einseitigkeit seiner Auffassung des religiös-sittlichen Prozesses."

<sup>6</sup> The twenty-first theological thesis in the Heidelberg theses of 1518 reads: *Theologus gloriae dicit malum bonum et bonum malum; theologus crucis dicit id quod res est*. Walther von Loewenich, *Luthers Theologia crucis* (Munich, 1939), demonstrates that this reduction to the pure essence of Christianity means the orientation of the many aspects of theology around a central point of orientation, not merely a reduction to the least common denominator.

<sup>7</sup> *Die Reformation als religiöses Anliegen heute* (1948), p. 144, and *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, passim, cited in Walther von Loewenich, *Luther als Ausleger der Synoptiker* (Munich, 1954), p. 10. Loewenich has a rich discussion of this whole problem, including significant bibliographical notices on the question of Luther's Paulinism and its effect on his attitude to the rest of the New Testament, pp. 4, 9 ff. Loewenich's book is not so much about the hermeneutical principles as about the content of Luther's exegesis.



Thus we are treated to the spectacle of an inversion from the days of the Reformation, when Luther set the Bible against the fathers and tradition, to today's polemical argument that the Roman Church lives by the fullness of the Scriptures which Luther understood only in part. Did Luther's Paulinism lead him to a slanted view of the Old Testament or a one-sided interpretation of the rest of the New Testament? Did Luther's overwhelming experience of God's love and grace in Christ, so clearly presented by Paul, leave him with sufficient inner freedom and intellectual independence to interpret adequately the rest of the Scriptures in their full scope and with their special emphases? That is the basic question.

Obviously, the two areas of exegetical study which demand direct attention are Luther's treatment of the Old Testament and of the Synoptic Gospels. There is a mountain of material for Luther's understanding of the Old Testament, twenty volumes of *Luther's Works*. Heinrich Bornkamm says that if Luther were a professor on a modern seminary faculty, he would hold the chair for the Old Testament, not the New.<sup>8</sup> One might offhand assume this to be true of Calvin, but the idea comes as a surprise when applied to Luther. He lectured on Genesis, Deuteronomy, the Song of Solomon, Isaiah, the Minor Prophets, and more. Volume 12 of *Luther's Works* has given us a good sample of his work in the selected commentaries on the Psalms, for the Psalms were Luther's special love.<sup>9</sup> Luther gave, to be sure, a Christological interpretation to much of the Old Testament, for he found there the swaddling clothes and the crib in which Jesus was laid.<sup>10</sup> "For the whole Old Testament contains nothing but Christ as he is preached in the Gospel," he explained.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, in addition to this evangelical orientation, Luther had such an immediate perception of God's voice in the Law and the Prophets, and he was so alert in perceiving the direct affinity between the Children of Israel and

<sup>8</sup> Vol. 21, x.

<sup>9</sup> Luther's intimate knowledge of the Psalms is illustrated by such asides as, "There is hardly a single psalm that has a prayer more than five or six verses long," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, p. 143. "Everywhere, but especially in the Psalter, Scripture is full of statements like these . . ." *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, p. 207 et passim.

<sup>10</sup> Weimar Ausgabe X<sup>1</sup> (1. Hälfte), 15. The Weimar Ausgabe will hereafter be referred to as W. A.

<sup>11</sup> W. A. X<sup>1</sup>, 80.



the people of his own society, that he embraced in his vision all facets of the Old Testament message and history. In fact, there is ample evidence in Volume 21 alone that Luther drew insights from the Old Testament which shed light upon the New and exploited it for basic ideas and not merely "glosses" in his study of the New.<sup>12</sup>

Luther's exegesis of the Synoptic Gospels presents a parallel, though more subtle problem. He has given us many commentaries also on the New Testament books, such as Romans, 1 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 1 John, and Hebrews, although only the commentary on Galatians compares with the Old Testament commentaries in formal method. There will be ten exegetical volumes on the New Testament in *Luther's Works*, but only Volume 21 is on the Synoptics. Luther reserved the exposition of the Gospels entirely for sermons, stressing especially Matthew and John.<sup>13</sup> Over half of the material in the Gospels, including John, is contained in the pericopes. There are about one thousand sermons on the Synoptic Gospels alone.<sup>14</sup> In addition to the many postil sermons which were formerly available, with their triple palimpsest of additions and hagiographic mistletoe, modern scholars have brought to light hundreds of Luther's sermons in the direct notes of his amanuenses. Comparing these with the others is like drinking from a spring after drinking from a cistern.<sup>15</sup> Luther knew the Synoptic

<sup>12</sup> Cf., e. g., the references to Psalm 37, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 22, 25; the association of Christ's idea on "works of mercy" with those of Hosea and Isaiah, p. 131; Habakkuk's social criticism, p. 344; the many references to historical persons and events as examples, pp. 141, 211 et passim. Cf. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament* (Tübingen, 1948), p. 214, for the difference between Luther and the church fathers in their treatment of the relationship of the Old and New Testaments.

<sup>13</sup> Vols. 22 and 24 of *Luther's Works* will contain Luther's moving exposition of St. John's Gospel. In 1866 Eberle made a continuous harmonized edition of Luther's commentaries on the Gospels in two volumes. The latest publication of this kind is Erwin Mühlhaupt, *D. Martin Luthers Evangelien-Auslegung*, 5 vols. (Göttingen, 1939—54), designed for every evangelical pastor's study. The only English equivalent is *Luther's Works*, Vols. 21 to 24.

<sup>14</sup> Walther von Loewenich, *Luther als Ausleger der Synoptiker*, p. 14. W. A. XXII, xli—lxxxiii, lists the sermons according to the pericopes.

<sup>15</sup> Georg Buchwald, for example, in 1893 found in Jena many hundreds of sermons in the transcript of Georg Rörer. Over half of the almost four hundred sermons on Matthew listed in the index of W. A. XXII, xli ff., are from Rörer's manuscripts, often as the exclusive source.



problem, of course, frequently commenting on the necessity for comparing the three Gospels for additional information and detail. For Luther the Gospels meant something very special. Neither he nor Melancthon ever lectured on the Synoptic Gospels. He did not merely treat them when they were "at it," when it was time for them. He constantly lived and thought them. For him they were the direct proclamations by and about Jesus the Christ. They sounded forth the kerygma. They reverberated with the *viva vox Dei* and as such were best heralded from the pulpit.

This sermonic-exegetical technique gave free reign to Luther's special *methodus heroica*. For other examples of truly theological exegesis, vibrating with the exciting combination of the knowledge of God and life with God, one must go back far beyond the scholastics, perhaps as far as Augustine and some of the fathers. His Gospel commentaries demonstrate beyond compare the utility of the exegetical task for Biblical preaching. In the preface to the first volume of his Latin writings, Luther demurely declared that he wished his books would be forgotten and buried in order to make room for better ones. The modern scholar indeed has many exegetical aids which Luther lacked. But in one respect his commentaries will never be superseded: in the congeniality of the expositor and the text, in the sympathetic bond of feeling and understanding uniting the strongly religious man to the source of his faith and Christian understanding.<sup>16</sup>

Luther learned much from his predecessors in the field of exegesis. He was particularly impressed with the efforts of Nicholas de Lyra, who was also a favorite of Reuchlin. The development of the fourfold interpretation from the patristic period through the long medieval tradition is an intricate story. Late medieval exegesis

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<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelien-Auslegung* (1942) is the most thorough study of Luther's hermeneutics for the Gospels which is available. Ebeling was also the first to study the relationship of Luther's exegesis of the Gospels to the exegetical tradition. See also Ebeling's interesting historical discussion, *Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift. Sammlung gemeinverständlicher Vorträge* 185 (Tübingen, 1947). A very pleasant introduction is Walther Köhler, "Wie Luther den Deutschen das Evangelium erzählt hat," *Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte*, XXXV (1917). Much more work remains to be done on the late medieval thought world along the lines of Gerhart Ritter's *Studien zur Spätscholastik*, which were published by Heidelberg University over thirty years ago.



was marked by extravagant use of allegory and typology. In the exploitation of etymologies, a variant and favorite device of allegory, Luther was often dependent on tradition.<sup>17</sup> Luther was too clear-eyed in his search for the *sensus literalis* to take allegorizing too seriously. Though he sometimes used allegory, he seems often to be toying with it, using it for a rhetorical effect rather than for definitive interpretation. Luther was familiar with the historical and philological advances of humanism. He knew Valla no less, to say nothing of Reuchlin and Erasmus, and was well abreast of the times, but they were still his times. Erasmus, too, like Origen, whom he greatly admired, had to resort to allegory from time to time.<sup>18</sup> Luther needed more than the cold appraisal of a text. He had to meditate, to place himself in the posture of direct existential immediacy to God, who was speaking in the text, for the word was for him the living Word of God. For him right preaching does not stop with a historical understanding but proceeds to benefit the hearer spiritually.<sup>19</sup> For the sake of the message, Luther dared to bring this Word to the people, brushing aside the esoteric hesitancy and misgivings of the humanists about the intellectual capacities of the common man. Luther was aware of these differences and in one of his after-dinner rambling discourses ventured the observation that Erasmus had only words, he had only the substance, but Melanchthon had both the words and the substance.<sup>20</sup>

The two selections in Volume 21 of *Luther's Works*, the commentary on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the commentary on the Magnificat in Luke, are probably the most significant and influential works coming from the Synoptics, the editor, Dr. Jaroslav Pelikan, tells us.<sup>21</sup> Like Luther's writings on the Lord's

<sup>17</sup> Walther von Loewenich, *Luther als Ausleger der Synoptiker*, pp. 28 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament*, pp. 211 ff., 214. Bornkamm believes that Luther rejected allegorizing on principle, though he sometimes used allegory.

<sup>19</sup> "In cor non accipimus verbum: per aurem intrat, per alteram egreditur. Sed ut faciamus et de verbo ad verbum, ut munda animalia illud *kauen*, Euangelium ruminabimus," W. A. XV, 676; "ne maneat in historia," W. A. XVII, 256; Walther von Loewenich, *Luther als Ausleger der Synoptiker*, pp. 83, 108.

<sup>20</sup> W. A., Tischreden, III, 460, Nr. 3619: "Res et verba Philippus, verba sine re Erasmus, res sine verbis Lutherus, nec rem nec verba Carolstadius."

<sup>21</sup> P. xvii.



Prayer and the Sacraments, the Magnificat adds welcome supplementary insights into his use of the Synoptics in his regular homiletical exegesis. It was due only to special providential guidance that Luther produced either one. Luther once said God had led him along his path like a horse wearing blinders. It was through circumstances beyond his control that he came to produce his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.

Like a harassed seminary professor of today, in addition to his teaching duties, Luther served as vacancy pastor in the city church at Wittenberg during the absence of John Bugenhagen (Pomeranus), who was in Lübeck organizing the reform of the church. He had done so once before in 1528—29, when Bugenhagen was active in Braunschweig and Hamburg. This time he was gone from the end of October 1530 until the end of April 1532. On December 1, 1530, Luther wrote to his friend Wenzel Link: "I cannot find time to write to everyone, since I am now no longer Luther, but Pomeranus, an official, Moses, Jethro, and what not? All things to all men." On November 24, 1531, Luther wrote to Bugenhagen that he could wait no longer. Nevertheless, he had to carry on for five months more. During this difficult period for a year and a half Luther preached a series of sermons on Matthew each Wednesday, and from this series came the commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>22</sup>

The Sermon on the Mount has attracted the attention of other famous men in the world's history. Ironically, Bismarck wrestled with it as an academic question when in his law-school doctoral dissertation he tried to determine whether it would be possible to rule a state on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi was led under its spell to his doctrine of nonviolence. The story is told that when a vast crowd pressed about his train in a railroad station to give him an ovation, he stepped out of the car with the New Testament in his hand and read to the people from the Sermon on

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<sup>22</sup> Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte I* (Tübingen, 1932), 248, n. 4, refused to recognize the authoritativeness of the Weimar text, believing that he could isolate Melancthonian insertions. Hans Krumwiede, *Glaube und Geschichte in der Theologie Luthers* (Göttingen, 1952), p. 16, takes issue with Holl in turn. Allowing for the possibility of minor editing, the whole style and tenor of the commentary is indisputably Luther's, to make a Gestaltist judgment without detailed historical or philological examination.



the Mount. Is the Sermon on the Mount the daily rule of an ideal human society, a communistic group from which a peaceful world will develop? Is it a metaphysic of moral economy, as Tolstoi believed? Are its preachments impossible of fulfillment in the present world and intended as an ethic of a coming aeon? Are its demands applicable here and now only to the relationship between individuals and not states or peoples? Or are the words of the Sermon not to be taken as commands and legal rules for life, as the Pharisees took them, but only as a demonstration of a general intention independent of all legal prescriptions? Is it a rebuke to human moral pretensions and a guide to the regenerate Christian?<sup>23</sup> Luther, after a prayer that God in His grace would help to preserve and keep the true, sure, and Christian understanding of this teaching of Christ, proceeded to wrestle with the problems manfully, that is, like a man of God. On the one hand, he scourges the papal canonists who make of Christ's clear commandments only evangelical counsels. On the other hand, he rebukes the sectaries who make a literal application of the injunctions in order to abolish private property, oaths, government, and the like, rather than perceiving the true spirit of the commands. For the reborn Christian it becomes increasingly possible, as he grows in sanctification, more and more to approximate the spiritual ideal demanded by the Master. Luther's inspired common sense and Biblically rooted interpretation of these difficult sayings cannot fail to evoke an enthusiastic and grateful response from the reader.<sup>24</sup>

Three major groupings of subjects among the hundreds of topics discussed received special emphasis in the commentary, the question of Law and Gospel with its corollary, works and faith, the question of individual ethics and social problems. In the preface to the commentary Luther underlined the necessity for distinguishing between Law and Gospel as a major concern of his discourse, and in the postscript he concludes with a discussion of salvation

<sup>23</sup> Karl Heim, *Die Bergpredigt Jesu* (Tübingen, 1949), pp. 5 ff.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. H. W. Beyer, *Der Christ und die Bergpredigt nach Luthers Deutung, Lutherjahrbuch*, 1932. Georg Wünsch, *Die Bergpredigt bei Luther* (Tübingen, 1920), intended as a monographic supplement to Troeltsch's *Soziallehren*, is only very limited in value, largely because his sharp division between *Diesseits* and *Jenseits* religion leads him to minimize Luther's *Diesseits* concern and practicality.



by grace or merit.<sup>25</sup> It is quite clear that Luther, in contrast with a substantial element in contemporary Protestantism, viewed the Sermon on the Mount as Law, not as the Gospel by which man can be saved. But what was the relationship of the Law of the Mount to the Law of Sinai or the Law of Nature? Ernst Troeltsch believed that at a period in Luther's life between 1523 and 1532, the Decalog came to replace the refined conception of Law in the Sermon on the Mount and that from this point on the Decalog became the base for Protestant ethic.<sup>26</sup> In general, to be sure, Moses is the Law-giver and Christ the Dispenser of grace. But Luther saw that Jesus interpreted the Law on the highest spiritual plane. This interpretation was not a new Law, but only an explanation of what was implied in the Law of Moses. He thus applied the refinements of Jesus to the Law of Moses rather than the reverse. What is more, the Law here expounded is qualitatively the same as natural Moral Law, some glimmer of which is to be found in each human heart. In contrast to the Law of Moses, the Jews of the Old Testament introduced legalisms which were not only unnecessary but contrary to the spirit of the Law. In contrast to the Law of Moses, to Christ and St. Paul, the Pharisees of the New Testament, the papal priests, monks, and doctors introduced legalisms beyond and contrary to the spirit of the Law, and they did so precisely because they sought to make of the Law a ladder for reaching God's grace.<sup>27</sup> The antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount make it clear that man cannot be saved by works, for it is precisely the Pharisees who are attacked here (Matt. 5:20 ff.). Luther notes a correlation between the commands of Jesus and the criteria of the Last Judgment.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Pp. 284 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (Tübingen, 1912), p. 494: "Dabei ist es nun aber charakteristisch, dass ihm als die den inneren Trieb objektiv darstellende Offenbarung des Sittengesetzes nicht die Bergpredigt erschien, sondern der Dekalog. . . . So erwuchs der Dekalog zu seiner für den Protestantismus charakteristischen absoluten Bedeutung als Ausdruck und Inbegriff der vollen Lex naturae und der mit dieser identischen evangelischen Ethik; see also p. 494, n. 225. Cf. Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, I, 38, n. 1, pp. 247, 248, n. 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, p. 70, on the relationship of Jewish legalism and papal laws; p. 262 for the contrast of the Carthusians and the law of Paul and the Ten Commandments.

<sup>28</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 31 f.



The commentary on the Sermon on the Mount serves as a wholesome corrective to any notion that Luther failed to stress the importance of good works and of a high individual ethic. Jakob Burckhardt in a polemical criticism of Luther's doctrine of justification said that good works would always have a natural attraction for people. Of course, Luther replies in his commentary, but works have their proper place in the divine economy of things. Luther made it a special point to emphasize good works. "I have said before that these eight items (in Matthew 5) are nothing but instruction about the fruits and good works of a Christian. Before these must come faith . . ." he wrote.<sup>29</sup> Again, he explains: "For these three good works include just about all the rest. The first means that we do all kinds of good works toward our neighbor; the second means that we are concerned about all sorts of needs, both public and private, and that we bring these before God; and the third means that we discipline our body."<sup>30</sup> With great and even untoward vigor Luther struck at all who would play down the demands of Jesus for good works: ". . . He explicitly calls them 'commandments.' On this basis they have thought up the twelve 'evangelical counsels,' twelve bits of good advice in the Gospel, which may be kept by anyone who pleases if he wants to attain a perfection higher and more perfect than that of other Christians. Thus they have not only made perfection as well as Christian salvation dependent upon works apart from faith, but they have even made these works optional. I call that forbidding true and fine good works — which is just what these vulgar asses and blasphemers accuse us of doing."<sup>31</sup> In no sense can Luther's explanation of the Sermon be construed as an attempt to sharpen up Christ's injunctions. But the magic of his feather pen adds many nice touches to the call for high personal ethic. He sensibly denies the literal application of "plucking out the eye" or "cutting off the hand." "Rather," he says, "the injunction 'Do not swear by your head' makes even our heads a sanctuary." What is meant by pure

<sup>29</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, p. 155. In W. A. X, 293, Luther says works must be stressed, for some took the *sola fide* as an excuse for sloth.

<sup>31</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, p. 4.



in heart? It is a heart "that is watching and pondering what God says and replacing its own ideas with the Word of God."<sup>32</sup>

Rudolf Stadelmann in his short history of the Reformation describes Luther as a fighter not merely for conscience but also for community, for church, against the hindrances of the papacy, a wholesome emphasis.<sup>33</sup> Because of Luther's sense of the direct applicability of the text to contemporary problems, his commentaries are replete with references to social problems reflecting his Christian concern for society. The applicability of the Sermon on the Mount to social institutions, which are after all human institutions, is a difficult question. Luther faces up to it squarely. Long before the sectaries raised such questions about the outward order of society, Luther had given much thought to such problems as law, force and power, war and peace, economics, the two orders in the world, and the like. In this commentary he turns against both the extramundane asceticism of monkery and against the intramundane asceticism of the gray-coated sectarian vermin as false solutions.<sup>34</sup> With Jesus he blesses the peacemakers and attacks the warring princes.<sup>35</sup> He commends the offices and laws of secular government, "all of which have been completely subjected to reason."<sup>36</sup> Social criticism is not wanting, as when he rejects the argument that one's dignity of rank as a prince, nobleman, or prelate requires extra wealth, for this opens the way to greed.<sup>37</sup> He advocates proper social planning for the common need.<sup>38</sup> He attacks monopolies and the greed of an increasingly acquisitive society—"The world is one big warehouse, completely submerged in greed."<sup>39</sup> If the modern reader finds his direct application to immediate antagonists disconcerting, let him remember that these were

<sup>32</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 90, 104, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Rudolf Stadelmann, *Das Zeitalter der Reformation. Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte*, II (1936), 1—125.

<sup>34</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 27, 263, 266, 267; pp. 158, 160, 161. Karlmann Beyschlag, *Die Bergpredigt und Franz von Assisi* (Gütersloh, 1955), pp. 206 to 225, compares the understanding Francis had of the Sermon on the Mount with Luther's understanding of it.

<sup>35</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 39 f.; on defense, p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, p. 93; on church and state, p. 105.

<sup>37</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 183 f.

<sup>38</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, p. 172.

<sup>39</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 180, 184.



days of conflict and revolution. Luther was God's pikesman as well as spokesman. On the other hand, there is nothing more serene and winsome in all exegetical writing than his interpretation of the Lord's Prayer contained in this commentary.<sup>40</sup> He spoke with the authority he had learned from his Master and not like the scribes and the scholastics.

Beyond compare for insight into the paradoxical workings of God is Luther's commentary on the Magnificat. Its *Entstehungsgeschichte* is fascinating in itself, for its composition was interrupted by Luther's summons to the Diet of Worms in 1521. He completed it on the Wartburg, dedicating it to Prince John Frederick, nephew of the Elector of Saxony, which makes its concern for the poor and lowly all the more admirable. The Magnificat is significant especially on two accounts, Luther's image of Mary and his understanding of the way in which God acts in history, that is, in human affairs in time.

It becomes immediately apparent that it is no longer "der katholische Luther" speaking in the Magnificat. During the late Middle Ages there had been a great increase in veneration for Mary and an acrimonious debate between Franciscans and Dominicans over her immaculate conception. The humanists generally joined the fray on the side of Mariolatry. Luther would have none of this. His Mariology is Christocentric and theocentric throughout. Her importance to the Christian lies in her relationship to Christ, as the mother of the Incarnate Word, not as the Queen of Heaven.<sup>41</sup> She has her *sanctitas a puero*, and not the reverse. He warned against honoring Mary too much and noted that there is nothing in the Bible about her birth. Mary is, above all, a good example of God's grace and of faith.

The selection of a mere handmaiden in lowly estate as the chosen vessel of the Lord is proof positive for Luther that God works in history *a contrario*. He often works behind masks and disguises! In Christ born of Mary He began His spiritual reign. Amid all the pomp and circumstances of mighty kingdoms, God uses lowly

<sup>40</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 141 ff.

<sup>41</sup> Walther von Loewenich, *Luther als Ausleger der Synoptiker*, pp. 255 ff., has an excellent summary discussion of Luther's attitude toward Mary. He observes that there is room for a more detailed study of the problem.



instruments. Empires rise and fall in succession, God's kingdom moves forward until the end of time. The prince must serve the poor. "The learned and saintly hypocrites, the great lords, and the rich are the devil's own tidbits," whereas "those whom the world rejects, the poor, lowly, simplehearted, and despised, God has chosen," Luther comforted God's people.<sup>42</sup>

Herder once hailed Luther as the man who "awakened and loosed the German language, a sleeping giant; overturned the money tables of scholastic word trading; and through his Reformation stirred up a whole nation to thought and feeling."<sup>43</sup> Some of his power is inevitably lost in translation. But so much comes through that his work remains a dynamo of strength and inspiration. To those who have read more about Luther than the works of Luther himself, he might well echo Dante's words: "Open your eyes, and see me as I am!" Yes, Luther knew the Synoptic Gospels well. He lived with them for decades. This intimate knowledge coupled with Luther's flair for colorful rhetoric makes his commentaries good reading, especially for homiletical pump priming. Hear him advise against "tightening the text too much." Note his concrete historical allusions, his exploitation of the fathers. Catch his candid expressions, brilliant illustrations, clever turns, and folksy sayings. See him wrestle with "cases," mixed marriages, divorce, and pastoral problems. Smile at his amusing stories, as his congregation must have smiled. Learn from him to search deeply and with feeling for the meaning of the text. For Luther's friend and table companion, Hieronymus Weller, rightly said:

Whomever Luther pleases exceedingly, he can know for sure that he has made progress in the Holy Scriptures.

Vienna, Austria

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. H. W. Beyer, *Gott und die Geschichte nach Luthers Auslegung des Magnificat*, *Lutherjhrbuch*, 1939.

<sup>43</sup> *Sämtliche Werke*, Suphan ed., I, 372, cited in Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte*, p. 123.