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Luther's Theological Method

The Last of Three Public Lectures Delivered at Concordia Seminary,
St. Louis, Mo., April 17, 1942

When Luther began his theological studies at the Augustinian convent in Erfurt in 1505, the teaching of theology in the universities and its practice by the clergy were in a deplorable condition. At that time Luther did not realize this fact, but as he proceeded with his studies, his eyes were opened, and he stood aghast at the havoc that had been wrought on true theology.

Two cancerous growths were eating out the very life of that study of the knowledge unto salvation which God had opened up to men in His Holy Book. One was the dominant, determining influence on theology which had been accorded the teachings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, a pupil of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great. He had lived from 384 to 322 B. C. mostly at Athens, from which he fled when a charge of atheism was preferred against him. He had been a master in the application of human reason to everything known and knowable. In his treatise on logic he has laid down rules of correct thinking that have never been antiquated. He is still rightly studied at our universities.

But Aristotle was a heathen. He had never seen our Bible nor heard of Jesus Christ. To submit the Christian teachings to the decisions of this heathen, seems an abnormal, unnatural undertaking. However, this very thing was done during the dark ages of the Church. All religious teaching became overlaid with Aristotelian ideas. Shields, in his *Final Philosophy*, P. I, p. 33, says: "The doctrines of St. John were sublimated into the abstractions of Plato."

When Luther himself began to teach theology, he felt the unbearable strain which the alliance of Biblical teaching with Aristotelian philosophy must cause any sincere believer. Gradually, as he proceeded with the interpretation of Scripture from Scripture itself, he began to voice his dissent from Aristotle with growing determination. One can feel, when reading his letters, how his spirit groaned within him for having to teach Aristotle, because that was an indispensable requisite for obtaining an academic degree in those days. Finally he could not repress his disgust any longer, and on September 4, 1517, he published ninety-seven theses, in which he called in question the value of Aristotle's works as textbooks in theology. These theses, which antedate the famous ninety-five theses against the sale of indulgences by nearly two months, can be found in the St. Louis edition of Luther's Works in vol. 18, cols. 18-27; in the Weimar edition in vol. 1, pp. 221-228.

The theses proved a sensation in university circles. Luther purposely sent them to Erfurt to test their effect on his old teachers Trutvetter and Usingen, although he surmised their verdict in advance. For these men had grown gray in the scholastic teaching of that age and in their theology had become ossified Aristotelians. Sure enough, the opinion that was expressed about his theses was that Luther was too presumptuous, too haughty and conceited in his assertions, and too ready to condemn the opinions of his betters. But in the circle of younger university men, who had, like Luther, chafed under the Aristotelian yoke, Luther's theses were felt to be a liberating act. In Wittenberg they were applauded from all sides, and Magister Franz Guenther of Nordhausen, who defended the theses September 5 in public disputation for his bachelor degree in theology, was given his promotion with the unanimous consent of all the dons of the university. A former Wittenberg professor by the name of Christoph Scheurl, who had moved to Nuernberg, when reading the theses, sensed in them the coming reformer and the great revolution in the teaching of theology. Instead of the usual form of address he began his letter to Luther of November 4 with the words: "Christi theologiam restaurare!" that is: "Set up again the theology of Christ!" St. L. Ed. 21 a:76.

Regarding the university of Wittenberg Luther had already on May 18 of that year written his friend Lang at Erfurt: "Our theology and St. Augustine prosper and reign here, by God's help. Aristotle is gradually tottering to a fall from which he will hardly rise again, and the lectures on the *Sentences* are wonderfully disrelished. No professor can hope for students unless he offers courses in the new theology, that is, on the Bible, or St. Augustine, or some other ecclesiastical authority." (Quoted in Preserved Smith, *Martin Luther*, p. 26.) The *Sentences* to which Luther refers in this letter was a textbook in dogmatics by the Roman theologian Petrus Lombardus, a native of Italian from Novara in Lombardy, who became the great light of the university of Paris (1107—1160). It was built up entirely on the philosophy of Aristotle. Its study was required as absolutely essential in every university of Europe, and to become a "sententiarius," that is, a lecturer on the Lombard's book, was the cherished hope and ambition of every young theologian.

Five years later, in 1522, soon after his return from his Wartburg exile, Luther reviewed his efforts to put the reigning scholastic theology with its Aristotelian veneer out of the Church. The occasion was this: A collection of minor writings by John Pupper von Goch, the pious prior of the Augustinian convent Thabor, near Malines, had been published at Zwolle. Luther issued a congratulatory epistle about this event, in which he recorded with

joy that similar writings of Tauler and Wessel, and especially the treatise *Deutsche Theologie*, German Theology, had been published previously and that the writers of all these books had been fellow soldiers with him, fighting for the honor of sacred theology, that is, the Sacred Scriptures, against the scholastic theologians and the bellweather of this herd, Aristotle. The fighting, Luther says, had been sharp: many had thought it too sharp; but this festering boil on the body of Christianity had to be cut with a sharp scalpel. Now let all his polemical writings perish and their place be taken by the fine writings of these German, and german, theologians! Weimar, 10, II, 329 f.

The other evil which Luther had to combat very early in his career was the opposition of what he calls "the theologians of glory" to the real theologians, whom he calls "the theologians of the cross." He refers to them in these terms in theses which he debated in a public discussion at Heidelberg April 16, 1518. In Theses 19 to 21 he contended for the following points: Thesis 19: "Not he will be rightly called a theologian who regards the invisible things of God as comprehended in that which is made." In the disputation Luther elaborated this thesis thus: "This is plain from what the apostle says about them that were such in Rom. 1:22, where he calls them fools. Moreover, the invisible things of God are virtue, deity, wisdom, righteousness, goodness, etc. The knowledge of all these matters, however, makes a person neither worthy nor wise." Thesis 20 reads: "But he who comprehends the visible and minor things of God as he perceives them by means of the cross and suffering." In the disputation Luther elaborated this thesis as follows: "The minor and visible things of God, viz., what is human weakness and foolishness, are placed over against divine matters; as Paul does in 1 Cor. 1:25, where he calls them the weakness and foolishness of God. For since men misused the knowledge derived from His works, God in turn desired to be known through suffering and rejected that wisdom of invisible things; in order that in this manner those who do not worship God as He is revealed in His works, should worship Him as He is hidden in sufferings, as we read 1 Cor. 1:21: 'For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.' Hence it is no longer sufficient for any one, and, moreover, it is useless, to know God in His glory and majesty, if he does not recognize Him in the humiliation and shame of the cross. Thus He puts to shame the wisdom of the wise, as Isaiah says, ch. 45:15: 'Verily, Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior.'

"Likewise, when Philip according to the theology of glory said:

'Lord, show us the Father,' Jesus promptly drew back Philip's flighty thought, trying to look for God elsewhere, and directed him to Himself, saying: 'Philip, he that hath seen Me, hath seen the Father,' John 14:8, 9. Therefore, the true theology and knowledge of God is in Christ crucified, even as He says, John 14:6: 'No one cometh unto the Father, but by Me,' and John 10:9: 'I am the Door.'" Lastly, Thesis 21 reads: "A theologian of glory calls good what is evil, and evil what is good; a theologian of the cross names things as they are," which Luther elaborated thus during the debate: "This is evident; for if he does not know Christ, he does not know the God that is hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers his pious works to suffering, the glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to foolishness, and, in general, what seems good to him to what seems evil. Of this kind are those whom the apostle calls "enemies of the cross of Christ," Phil. 3:18, especially because they hate the cross and suffering and love their works and the glory which they gain thereby; and thus they call the good of the cross evil, and the evil of their works good. However, that God cannot be found except in the cross and affliction has already been stated. Therefore, the friends of the cross say, that the cross is good and men's works evil. For by the cross men's works are destroyed, the old Adam crucified, who is rather exalted by men's works. For it is impossible that a person should not become puffed up over his good works, who has not first been humbled and crushed by the cross and endurance of evil; until he knows that he is worth nothing and the true works are not his, but God's." St. L. Ed., 18:50 f., Weimar, 1, 361 f.

What Luther chastised in this debate at Heidelberg was the utter worldliness, the deep-rooted externalism of the Church, calculated to elevate its clergy in the eyes of the unthinking multitudes by a great holy show, which pervades Romanism. There was the stupid mechanical religiousness by means of prescribed prayers, fasts, observance of saints' days and holidays and superstitious rites, coupled with the striving for outward pomp by imposing ceremonies, the insatiate lusting for worldly distinction, prerogative, and power of a proud clergy, from its lowest to its highest rank in the hierarchy, including the Pope. The self-indulgence and laziness of the monks was proverbial; their intemperance and their voluptuous living, their unchastity as well as that of parish priests, bishops, cardinals, and the Popes themselves, together with their flagrant greed and arrogance were openly acknowledged vices of the priesthood, while the contemplative musings of a few mystics in their comfortable seclusion were worthless contributions to true theology. The spirit of the

meek and lowly Christ was utterly foreign to this type of theologians.

The best commentary on Luther's denunciation of the theologians of glory appeared three years later. It grew out of the criticism of Luther which we have just heard. It is that famous series of twenty-six cartoons by the Wittenberg artist Lucas Kranach, for which Luther wrote an introduction, explanatory footnotes, and a conclusion. They were published about the middle of May, 1521, after Luther had made his defense before Emperor Charles V at Worms. They show in striking contrast the spirit of Christ, the theologian of the cross, and the spirit of Antichrist, the theologian of glory. You will find them in the St. Louis Edition, Vol. 14, 198—249; in the Weimar Edition, Vol. 9, 701—715. You will enjoy them, as did the people all over Europe, who saw them when they first came out. They were republished in a new edition by the artist Hofmann during the Kulturkampf, the political conflict of the German government with the Vatican, and Emperor William I sent a copy to the Pope.

Seven years before Luther's death the first volume of his collected German writings was published at Wittenberg in 1539. Luther wrote a preface to this volume, in which he deposited the experience of his life, which was then drawing to its close, on the study of theology. He says: "I want to show you a correct method for studying theology, in which I have trained myself. If you adopt it, you will become so learned that, if it were necessary, you yourself would be qualified to produce books just as good as those of the Fathers and the church councils. Even as I dare to be so bold in God as to pride myself, without arrogance or lies, as not being greatly behind some of the Fathers in the matter of making books. I cannot by a long shot make the same boast as regards my life.

"Now, the method to which I referred is the one which the pious King David teaches in the 119th Psalm; and which, no doubt, was practiced by all the patriarchs and prophets. In the 119th Psalm you will find three rules, which are abundantly expounded throughout the Psalm. They are called: *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*; Prayer, Meditation (Study), Trials.

"In the first place, you must understand that Holy Scripture is a book such as will make the wisdom of all other books appear as foolishness, because none of them teach anything concerning life everlasting except this one alone. Therefore you must simply despair of your own mind and intellect; for by their means you will not achieve Scriptural theology, but by such presumption you will thrust yourself and others with you out of heaven into the abyss of hell, as happened to Lucifer. But this is what you

must do: Kneel down in your closet and pray God in true humility and earnestness to give you His Holy Spirit, who is to enlighten, guide, and give you understanding.

"Even as you observe that David in the Psalm aforementioned continually prays: Lord, teach me, instruct me, guide me, show me, and in many more terms of this kind. And this he does in spite of the fact that he well knew the text of Moses and of many other books, and heard and read them daily. Still he wants to have the real Master of the Scriptures at his side, so as not by any means to plunge into them with his reason and become master himself. For that is what turns men into unruly fanatics, who imagine that the Scriptures are subject to them and their meaning easily attained by their reason; as if they were books like that of Marcolfus, or Aesop's Fables, for the understanding of which the Holy Ghost and prayer are not necessary.

"In the second place, you are to meditate, and that not only in the heart alone but also externally, by turning over and over again orally the discourse and the words in the Book, letter by letter, reading and rereading with diligent attention and reflection as to what may be the meaning of the Holy Spirit. And have a care, lest you become surfeited with reading or imagine you have read, heard, recited a text once or twice and that's enough and that you have a thorough understanding of it. For in that manner a person never will become much of a theologian. He will be like sickly fruit that drops from the tree before it is half ripe.

"That is why you notice that David in this Psalm continually glories in the fact that he will speak, compose, recite, hear, read, day and night, and continuously, however nothing but the Word and commandments of God alone. For God will not give you His Holy Spirit except through the external Word; don't forget that! For He has not commanded in vain to put things down in writing, to preach, read, hear, sing, recite, etc.

"In the third place, there is *Tentatio*, affliction: that is the proving, or test stone, which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience, how right, how true, how sweet, how delightful, how powerful, how comforting the Word of God is, Wisdom above all wisdom.

"That is why you observe how David in the aforementioned Psalm so often complains about all sorts of enemies, about reckless rulers and tyrants, about false spirits and unruly fanatics, who afflict him for the reason that he is in all kinds of ways engaged upon the Word of God, as afore stated. For as soon as the Word of God gets a start through your labors, the devil will visit you, to make you a genuine doctor, and by tribulations teach you to seek and to love God's Word. For, if I may mingle my worthless

self with the precious experience of others (Luther says: "Wenn ich Mäusedreck unter den Pfeffer mengen darf"), I may say that I am greatly indebted to my papists, because through the raging of the devil they have so thoroughly thrashed and straitened and frightened me that they have made a fairly good theologian out of me, which I would not have become without them. On the other hand, what they have gained from me, they are heartily welcome to all the honors, victories, and triumphs they have achieved; for that's what they wanted.

"Behold, there you have David's rule. If you will study well after his example, you will join him in singing and glorying, as he does in this Psalm, v. 72: 'The Law of Thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver.' Likewise in vv. 98-100: 'Thou through Thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers: for Thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Thy precepts.' And you will find out how stale and sluggish the writings of the Fathers will appear to you. Moreover, you will not only hold the writings of our adversaries in contempt but will in the course of time be less pleased with your own writing and teaching. When you have reached that point, you may confidently hope that you have made a beginning of being a true theologian who is able to teach, not only the young and imperfect Christians, but also those who are advancing toward perfection. For the Church of Christ contains all sorts of Christians: young, old, frail, sick, sound, strong, alert, lazy, silly, wise, etc.

"However, if you feel, or conceive the notion, that you have surely 'become it' and are tickled with your own booklets, your teaching and writing, as if you had produced something very precious and had preached excellently; moreover, if you are pleased when others praise you and are looking for praise, because otherwise you would become despondent and quit working—if you are that kind of a critter, my dear, take hold of yourself by the ears, and if you grab right, you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, rough ass's ears. Then risk the expense and decorate them with little golden bells, so that, wherever you go, people can hear you and point you out, saying: 'There goes the fine beastie that can write such precious books and preach so splendidly.' Then you will be happy and superhappy in your heaven; yea, where the hellish fire is prepared for the devil and his angels.

"To sum up, let us seek honor and be proud where we have a right to be. In this Book all honor belongs to God alone; and it is written: "God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the

humble. To whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." St. L. Ed. 14:434—437; Weimer Ed. 50, 657—661.

That is Luther's theological method in a nutshell. Out of it sprang the maxim by which generations of Missouri Synod pastors, professors, teachers, regulated their theological studies: *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio faciunt theologum*, that is, A theologian becomes such by prayer, meditation, and trials. There was another axiom that we memorized: *Quo propior Luthero, eo melior theologus*, which means: The closer you approach to Luther, the better theologian you are. The Missouri Synod's teachers have been a shining proof of this. May this continue to be their γνώρισμα, the mark by which they are known at home and abroad. God bless our St. Louis Concordia, its faculty, and its students. Amen.

Berkeley, Calif.

W. H. T. DAU

Der 90. Psalm

(Der Pastoralkonferenz des Süd-Wisconsin-Distrikts vorgelegt und auf deren Beschluß eingesandt von Rudolf Schröth)

V. 1: „Ein Gebet Moses, des Mannes Gottes.“ — Die englische Bibel (King James Version; im folgenden bezeichnet mit A. V.) hat diesen Vers als Überschrift: „A prayer of Moses, the man of God.“ Der Psalm ist ein Gebet Moses, משה. Das ה ist das ה auctoris, das den Psalm Mose als Verfasser zuschreibt. Es ist der einzige Psalm, den wir von ihm haben, und zugleich der älteste Psalm. — Mann Gottes, משה-איש. Dieser Gottesname, wohl pluralis majestaticus, bezeichnet Gott als den wahren Gott im Gegensatz zu den nichtigen Götzen, die מילים, Nichtse, heißen. Mann Gottes heißt Moses auch sonst: Deut. 33, 1: „Dies ist der Segen, damit Moses, der Mann Gottes, die Kinder Israel vor seinem Tode segnete.“ Jos. 14, 6 sagt Kaleb zu Josua: „Du weißest, was der Herr zu Moses, dem Mann Gottes, sagte.“ Esra 3, 2 ist die Rede von dem „Gesetz Moses, des Mannes Gottes“. Dieser Titel reißt den Autor des Psalms ein in die Zahl der heiligen Männer, von denen 2 Petr. 1, 21 gilt: „Die heiligen Menschen Gottes haben geredet, getrieben von dem Heiligen Geist.“ Moses redet in diesem Psalm, was Gott ihn gelehrt hat. Und das sind Wahrheiten, die allen Geschlechtern aller Zeiten gelten. — Moses redet im Namen des Volkes Gottes. Ihm legt er seine Worte in den Mund. Mit der Gemeinde und für sie bekennt und betet dieser große Gottesmann.

V. 2a: „Herr Gott, du bist unsere Zuflucht für und für.“ A. V. V. 1: „Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.“ — Der Gottesname יהוה bezeichnet Gott als den Allgewaltigen, den Herrn aller Herren, in dem sich alle Gewalt und Macht