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Notes on Luther's Conception of the Word of God as the Means of Grace

By JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

Largely perhaps through Karl Barth's emphasis on the *Wort Gottes*, and especially through his admonition to theologians to return to the theology of the Reformation, the doctrine of the Word of God, particularly of the Word of God as it was conceived by Luther, has once more become the special object of theological interest. What Barthian and non-Barthian theologians have written on the point has not always been in accordance with traditional orthodox theology, but the study of Luther in recent years has no doubt contributed much valuable information toward clarifying most historical points and has led many toward a new orientation to conservative Christian belief. In Sweden the Lundensian school of theology has become widely known for its diligent Luther research, and though its viewpoints often are one-sided and miss the real scope of Luther's theology, it is refreshing for the Lutheran theologian to note that it has once more placed into the center of theological discussion forgotten fundamentals of the Reformation, as for example, the *sola gratia*.¹

Today the student of Luther finds a large library of works on Luther from which he can gain valuable information on the subject in question. We mention only a few of the many older and more recent books that treat of Luther's relation and attitude to God's Word. Outstanding perhaps are such works as Bornkamm, H., *Das Wort Gottes bei Luther*, 1933; Holl, K., *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 1923; Noesgen, E. F., *Die lutherische Lehre von der Inspiration nach ihrer geschichtlichen Gestalt*, 1909; Preiss, H., *Die Entwicklung des Schriftprinzips bei Luther bis zur Leipziger Disputation*, 1901; Scheel, Otto, *Luthers Stellung zur heiligen Schrift*, 1902; Seeberg, R., *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, especially Vol. IV, 1, 1933, which in a pre-eminent way treats Luther's theology; Walther, W., *Lehrbuch der Symbolik*, 1924; Reu, M., *Luther and the Scriptures*, 1943. This list might be greatly enlarged, but the books listed are

¹ Cf. *The Faith of the Christian Church* by Gustaf Aulen. Engl. Tr., Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, Pa., 1948.

sufficient to show how in recent times theologians again have become vitally interested in what Luther thought and taught concerning the Word of God.

There are, of course, still *lacunae*, and so there remains considerable work for Luther scholars to do in the future. One matter, for example, that deserves more careful attention than it has received is the Reformer's conception of the Word of God as the means of grace. In this article we shall treat this subject chiefly for the benefit of our pastors in their practical work, not in all its ramifications, but simply by pointing out through plain, though not always accessible quotations in English, the great Reformer's basic doctrine of the Word of God and its place in the salvation of sinful man.

1

A primary question confronting us in our study is: *What did Luther regard as the Word of God?* It is the merit of Dr. M. Reu that he proved conclusively that while Romanism added to the Bible and Enthusiasm conceived of the Word of God as being independent and beyond the Holy Scriptures, Luther very definitely identified the Word of God with the Sacred Scriptures.² Dr. Reu does this in two chapters of his fine book just named: "Scriptures Become the Sole Authority of Luther" (pp. 13 ff.) and: "Scripture Remained Luther's Sole Authority Until the End of His Life" (pp. 49 ff.).

Dr. Reu, for example, quotes such words from Luther as: "Free, free, free would we and should we be in all things that are outside the Scripture. Defiance to him who would stop us." To this Dr. Reu adds in his conclusion of the chapter: "But in all other things his 'conscience is bound by God's Word.'" ³

Professor Reu introduces the fourth chapter of his book with the words: "And now just a few examples to prove that subsequently the Scriptures were still binding for Luther." On page 55 Dr. Reu writes: "As late as 1544 he (Luther) wrote his *Kurzes Bekenntnis vom heiligen Sacrament*: 'It is not* certain that he who does not or will not believe one article

² Reu, M., *Luther and the Scriptures*, Columbus, Ohio. The Wartburg Press, 1943.

³ Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 37. W. E. 2, 253.

* [Sic Reu. According to the original, "not" should be omitted. — Ed.]

correctly [after he has been taught and admonished] does not believe any sincerely and with the right faith. And whoever is so bold that he ventures to accuse God of fraud and deception in a single word and does so willfully again and again after he has been warned and instructed once or twice will likewise certainly venture to accuse God of fraud and deception in all of His words. Therefore it is true, absolutely and without exception, that everything is *believed or nothing is believed*. The Holy Ghost does not suffer Himself to be separated or divided so that He should teach and cause to be believed one doctrine rightly and another falsely." ⁴ In a note to this quotation, on page 148, Dr. Reu cites Luther to this effect: "For all heretics are of this kind: At first they deny only one article, but afterward all must be denied. It is as with a ring; if it has only one defect, it can no longer be used; and if a bell crack in only one place it does not any longer sound, and is useless."

On page 63 Dr. Reu quotes Luther as follows: "Here (II Samuel 23, 2, 'The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue') it becomes too marvelous and soars too high for me. God grant that I may at least partially attain to it, for he (David) here begins to speak of the Holy Triune essence of the divine Godhead. First, he mentions the Holy Ghost; to Him he ascribes all that the prophets foretell. It is these and similar statements to which St. Peter refers in the II Epistle 1, 21, 'For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, etc. . . .' Therefore we sing in the Creed, concerning the Holy Ghost, 'Who spake by the Prophets.' *So we refer all of Scripture to the Holy Ghost.*" — In the same way he [Luther] refers to Dan. 7: 13-14: "So it is the Spirit who speaks through Daniel, for such secret things no one could know if the Holy Ghost had not revealed it through the prophets as we have frequently said before, that *Holy Scripture has been spoken by the Holy Ghost.*" ⁵

One must study Dr. Reu's entire monograph to appreciate fully the argument which he makes, namely, that Luther identifies the Holy Scriptures with the Word of God. When Luther speaks in his absolute way of *das Wort Gottes*, he does not mean any word that the Holy Spirit, according to the asser-

⁴ W. 54, 158, 21 ff.

⁵ Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 63. W. 54 (48), 20 ff.

tions of the Enthusiasts, reveals to them outside and beyond the Holy Scripture, but the very Word of the canonical books of the Old and the New Testament. Nor does he mean any word of which the Holy Spirit convinces the individual subjectively as the Word of God when he studies the Scriptures, but for Luther the whole Bible is objectively God's Word.

Paul Althaus, therefore, does not voice the doctrine of Luther when he says: "The doctrine of inspiration, no matter of what kind it may be, is an expression ossified into a quiescent theory for the pneumatic experience of faith in the Scriptures," but he sets forth a teaching diametrically opposed to Luther's conception of the Bible as the Word of God.⁶

Dr. Reu, of course, could have quoted other passages from Luther which still more conclusively prove the promise that Luther identified God's Word with the Holy Scriptures.

In his exposition of Gal. 1:9 Luther, for example, writes: "No other doctrine should be set forth and heard in the Church than the pure Word of God, that is, the Holy Scripture; otherwise teachers and hearers should be anathema with their doctrine."⁷

In his exposition of 1 Pet. 3:15 Luther writes: "If people do not want to believe [viz., that the Bible is God's Word], you should be silent; for you do not owe it to them to force them that they regard the Bible as God's Book or Word. It is sufficient that you give them your reason for this."⁸

In his exposition of Ps. 22:7 Luther writes: "Holy Scripture is God's Word, written and (that I may so speak) lettered and [that is] formed in letters, just as Christ is the eternal Word of God, veiled in humanity. And just as Christ is regarded and treated in the world, so it has also happened to the written Word of God. It is a worm and no book compared to other books [that is, as unbelievers compare it to other learned books]. For it is not honored by studying, reading, meditation, memorizing, and using, as other writings of men are. If it fares well, it is thrown under the bench, etc. Others tear it up, crucify it, scourge it, and torment it with all sorts of tortures, [while] they explain and twist it to suit their heresy, opinion, and malice, and at last they even destroy it,

⁶ *Theologische Aufsätze*, p. 111; C. Bertelsmann in Guetersloh, 1920.

⁷ St. Louis Ed., IX: 87; Erl., Gal. 1, 90-92; Walch VIII, 1660-1663.

⁸ St. Louis Ed., IX: 1071; Erl. 51, 449-451; Walch IV, 777-780.

kill and bury it, so that it is cast out of the world and forgotten."⁹

In his exposition of Ps. 40:7 Luther writes: "This is the Book of the Holy Ghost, namely, Holy Scripture, in which we must seek and find Christ. . . . In sum, outside this Book you do not find Christ, may it be as good as it would."¹⁰

In his exposition of 2 Tim. 3:16-17 Luther writes: "Although there are many books which are profitable and can produce fine, skillful, learned people . . . none can make anyone a man of God. . . . This alone Scripture must do, [which is] inspired and taught by God Himself."¹¹

Any student of Luther who takes the time to study his works on this point will easily find many more such expressions in his writings. It would only be carrying coals to Newcastle to illustrate his doctrine concerning the Word of God by more citations. According to Luther, the Word of God is *die Heilige Schrift*, Holy Scripture, that is, the canonical books of the Old and the New Testament. And this Word of God, set forth in Holy Scripture, Luther regarded very highly as God's own precious truth; in fact, to him it was the only divine means of grace.

2

Luther's high regard for the Word of God as the only means of grace, that is, as the only means or instrument by which God wishes to deal with sinful man in behalf of his salvation, is proved in practically all his writings.

There is really no need to remind our readers how earnestly and consistently Luther taught that God does not wish to deal with sinful men except through His Word and the Sacraments.

In his Smalcald Articles he writes: "Therefore, we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as 'Spirit' without the Word and Sacrament."¹²

Luther thus recognizes no divine operation in the heart

⁹ St. Louis Ed., IX:1770; Erl. 52, 298—301; Walch IX, 1358—1360.

¹⁰ St. Louis Ed., IX:1775; Erl. 52, 303—305; Walch IX, 1363—1365.

¹¹ St. Louis Ed., IX:1852; Erl. 52, 389—391; Walch IX, 1455—1457.

¹² Smalcald Articles, III, 10; *Concordia Triglot*, p. 497; St. Louis Ed. XVI:1945; Walch XVI, 2359—2362; Erl. (2) 25, 198—200.

of man other than that which takes place through the Word. Luther teaches this both negatively and positively; negatively, by showing what great spiritual perdition prevails wherever God's Word is not in use; positively, by exalting the power and blessings of the divine Word.

Luther in his writings bestows considerable attention on the wretched conditions which are found wherever God's Word is not known and not active in men.

In his sermon on Luke 5:1-11, delivered in 1534 at his home on the fifth Sunday after Trinity, Luther writes: "Wherever God's Word is not found, there is no true blessing, but there only (God's) curse and disfavor must be found and a troubled conscience."¹³

In his sermon on Matt. 2:1-12, preached in 1532 on Epiphany Sunday, Luther says: "Every work which Christ does is comprehended in the Word; and in the Word and through the Word He wants to give us everything, and without the Word He does not desire to give us anything."¹⁴ A few lines farther, he says: "But where we discard the Word and speculate without and outside the Word, reason is a very uncertain, slippery thing."

This thought runs through all popular and learned works of the Reformer and is the foundation of his *sola fide*. Luther admits that without the revealed Word there, indeed, exists to some extent a *iustitia civilis*, for there God rules men through the Law inscribed in the human heart at creation, though he admits that not even in civil affairs man's (moral) powers have remained uninjured, a fact that is proved by the general contempt of man for law and order.¹⁵ In spiritual matters, however, things are much worse; for spiritually, because of original corruption, man by nature is dead in trespasses and sins and so eternally lost unless God approaches him by His Word and rescues him from his state of blindness, spiritual death, and eternal damnation.¹⁶

Positively, Luther almost goes to extremes in describing

¹³ St. Louis Ed., XIIIa:756; Erl. 2, 430-432; Walch XIII, 168, 301-686.

¹⁴ St. Louis Ed., XIIIb:1556; Erl. 4, 205-207; Walch XIII, 312-314.

¹⁵ St. Louis Ed., V:481; Erl. 19, 16-18; Walch V, 685-688.

¹⁶ Whatever Luther has taught on this score is well summed up in his fine explanations of the Second and the Third Article in the Small Catechism.

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the wonderful deeds of salvation which God works through the Word. This is a theme which Luther exalts in all his writings, so that his whole theology becomes an unqualified "Theology of the Word," not indeed in a Barthian sense, which Luther certainly would have rejected as *Schwaermerei*, but in its true Biblical and Christian sense.

Luther, for example, writes in his sermon on John 3:16-21, preached in 1532 on Pentecost Monday: "In this world we do not see Him, but we must hear Him in the Word. The Word, which is being preached concerning Him, that must do these things [that is, give us God's Son as our Present and Gift]. This we must heed against the Anabaptists and Enthusiasts, who despise the Word."¹⁷ Just before this Luther said: "The only begotten Son of God is preached (to us) through the Word as our Present and Gift."

In a sermon on Mark 7:31-37, delivered in his house in 1533, Luther writes: "For this reason let everyone take heed that he might let himself be found [by Christ] in this way and (so) hear God's Word gladly. For God does not want to reveal Himself in your heart without the Word. Would you see and know Him, it must be done alone through the Word and the external Sacraments; otherwise, the Holy Spirit does not desire to do His work (in you)."¹⁸

In his "Table Talk" Luther states very emphatically: "I want no vision; I admit no miracle; I would not believe an angel who teaches me anything else than God's Word. . . . I want the Word! I want no miracles! Erasmus, on the other hand, desired miracles, because he did not keep the Word, although he had the Word."¹⁹

In a sermon on John 20:19-31, delivered in his house in 1534, Luther says: "God's Word is the true sanctuary, by which the Christian Church and all Christians and saints of God are sanctified. The sanctuary at Jerusalem, and wherever else one might be in the world, is nothing but mere dirt compared to this sanctuary."²⁰

In another sermon on John 20:19-31 Luther says: "It is not without a reason that I urge the Word at all times. For it is

¹⁷ St. Louis Ed., XIII:2091; Erl. 5, 217-219; Walch XIII, 1476-1479.

¹⁸ St. Louis Ed., XIIIb:2321; Erl. 5, 445-447; Walch XIII, 1902-1905.

¹⁹ St. Louis Ed., XXII:32.

²⁰ St. Louis Ed., XIIIb:1942; Erl. 5, 73-75; Walch XIII, 1208-1210.

sure [Luther: *beschlossen*] that by no work, penance, confession, satisfaction we can overcome sin; but all we can do, even though we should torture ourselves to death, is vain and unavailing."²¹

In his "Preface to the First Part of His German Books," written in 1539, Luther writes: "So you see in this Psalm [119], how David always boasts that he wants to read, compose, speak, sing, hear, read, day and night and always, but nothing than alone of God's Word and His commandments. For God does not want to give you His Spirit without the external Word. Be guided by that, for He did not command it, in vain, externally [Luther's antithesis here is the internal word of the Enthusiasts] to write, preach, read, hear, sing, say, etc."²²

In his exposition of Zech. 14:14-19 Luther says: "For indeed there is no greater grace on earth than where God's Word is being preached. Again, there is no greater misery than where God's Word is not being preached. . . . For where God's Word does not pour down [Luther: *regnet*], there can be no good thing, neither thought, word, nor work, and all work and labor is lost."²³

There are many other expressions of Luther that might be quoted in this connection, because they prove how highly Luther regarded the Word of God as the bearer and means of divine blessing or, as we usually say, as God's means of grace. But this raises another question, and one that is of the greatest importance. It may be well for us to give it due consideration in a special paragraph.

3

The question is: *What Word of God did Luther properly regard as the means of grace?* Already in some of the quotations that we considered above the answer to this question is partly suggested. Luther indeed had a high regard for the Law of God. While John Brenz in his Catechism followed this order: Baptism, Creed, Law, Prayer, Lord's Prayer, an order that became well established in Wuerttemberg, as we are informed, Luther adhered to the traditional order: Law, Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Lord's Supper. Luther, as is well known, was by no means a legalist. His very work as a Re-

²¹ St. Louis Ed., XIIIb:1956; Erl. 5, 88-90; Walch XIII, 1197-1201.

²² St. Louis Ed., XIV:435; Erl. 63, 403-405; Walch XIV, 422-425.

²³ St. Louis Ed., XIV:1973; Erl. 42, 357-360; Walch VI, 3580-3582.

former, witnessing against Rome's disastrous nomism, made it necessary for him in his whole teaching and preaching to place the emphasis on the Gospel. Otherwise there could not have been the Lutheran *sola fide*. But Luther by no means desired to have the Law abolished. In fact, the antinomian aberrations, championed by eminent theologians, such as Agricola and others, forced him to defend the Law in the Church on Scriptural grounds and to assign to it its true place and function in the Church.²⁴

However, when Luther properly speaks of the divine Word as the means of grace, he properly has not in mind the Law, but the Gospel. It is true that since the expression "means of grace" is an ecclesiastical term, it may be applied in a wider sense to both Law and Gospel, since the Law is the divine Word through which the Holy Ghost prepares the human heart for the reception of the Gospel, not indeed positively, but negatively, by His working in man the knowledge of sin and contrition. In a strict sense, however, the expression "means of grace" denotes the conferring or giving means (*medium δοτικόν*) by which the Holy Spirit offers, imparts, and seals to sinners the forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation. Thus understood, only the Gospel is the means of grace; and so Luther understood and used it.

That Luther, properly speaking, regarded the Gospel as the only means of grace, is asserted by him in many clear statements.

In his sermon on Luke 18:31-43, preached in 1534 in his house, Luther says: "Wherever there is God's Word, no matter whether it is in Baptism, in Absolution, in the Sacrament [Lord's Supper] there God Himself speaks to us. In Absolution He Himself absolves us from [our] sins. In the Sacrament or the Lord's Supper Christ Himself feeds us with His body and blood. We thus have God's Word in the church, indeed, in the home. Whenever the pastor speaks to us in the church or the father in the house, then God Himself speaks to us."²⁵

The very words which Luther here uses show that he has in mind the Gospel which forgives our sins and feeds us spiritually unto life everlasting. In other words, Luther speaks

²⁴ Cf. Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books. The Antinomistic Controversy; in *Concordia Triglotta*, pp. 161 ff.

²⁵ St. Louis Ed., XIII b:1679; Erl. 4, 323-325; Walch XIII, 532-535.

of the Word that gives or imparts grace, and not of the Word which demands, threatens, and condemns, that is, the divine Law.

In his sermon on Matt. 9:1-8, preached in 1533 in his house, Luther says by way of conclusion: "Learn that forgiveness of sins is found nowhere else than where the Word is. Such Word, however, is in Baptism, in the Lord's Supper, in Absolution, and in the sermon [the word proclaimed]. For this reason also there is forgiveness of sin despite the fact that someone may make a declaration to the contrary. But wherever the Word is, there also faith should be. . . . We know that the Holy Spirit will not execute His work without the Word and Sacrament. We, therefore, dare not despise the Word and Sacrament, but we should and must regard it as great and [indeed] as the most precious treasure."²⁶

In Luther's monograph "Against the Heavenly Prophets Concerning the Pictures and the Sacrament," which he published between 1524 and 1525, he writes very emphatically: "So, then, since God has sent forth His holy Gospel, He deals with us in a twofold manner: first, externally; then inwardly. He deals with us externally through the oral Word of the Gospel and through bodily [visible] signs, as, for instance, Baptism and the Sacrament [the Lord's Supper]. Inwardly He deals with us through the Holy Ghost and faith, together with other gifts. But all this in such a way and order that the external thing [Luther: *Stuecke*] should and must precede, and the inward come later and through the external . . . for He does not want to give the Spirit and faith without the external Word and the sign which He has instituted for this purpose."²⁷

Since sometimes the term "Gospel" is used in a wider sense, Luther, when necessary, carefully defines what he means by this expression. In his monograph "Concerning the Mass," or, as the title appeared in its German form, "Concerning the Abuse of the Mass," which Luther wrote in November, 1521, and published in January, 1522, he writes: "But if you ask: 'What is the Gospel?' then you can give no better answer than these words of the New Testament, namely, that 'Christ

²⁶ St. Louis Ed., XIII b: 2445; Erl. 6, 121—122; Walch XIII, 2087—2089; 2100.

²⁷ St. Louis Ed., XX: 202; Erl. 29, 208—210; Walch XX, 271—273.

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has given His body and has shed His blood for us for the remission of sins.' . . . For this reason these words should be inscribed into and impressed upon the heart of every Christian as a brief definition of the whole Gospel, so that he might consider them always and without ceasing exercise, strengthen, and preserve his faith in Christ by them, and (that especially) when he goes to the Sacrament.' " 28

In his sermon on Luke 10:23-37, preached in 1524, which the St. Louis Edition offers, together with a discourse on the Law and Gospel, delivered perhaps in 1522, Luther has this to say on the Law and the Gospel: "I have often told you, my beloved, that the whole Bible is divided into two parts: in Law and Gospel. . . . The Law shows the disease; the Gospel offers the remedy." 29

These and other clear statements, then, prove that Luther meant by Gospel, used in its proper sense, the good news of God's grace in Christ Jesus. This fact Luther emphasizes, especially whenever, in his sermons or other works, he explains Rom. 1:16, which properly treats of the Gospel. Thus, for example, in a sermon on Matt. 21:1-9, Luther says, after having briefly explained the passage: "Here you see that he [Paul] is speaking of the righteousness of faith, and this he calls the righteousness of God, proclaimed in the Gospel, for the Gospel teaches nothing else than that he who believes, has grace (forgiveness of sins) and is justified before God and will be saved." 30

4

To Luther, then, the Gospel of Christ, in its proper sense, is the means of grace, by which the Holy Ghost is given to men to work faith and regeneration in them, sanctify them, and preserve them unto everlasting life.

But now we must consider another truth, strenuously asserted by Luther, namely, that the Gospel is God's means of grace *in every way it is applied to man*. It is well for us to give this truth conscientious study.

When Luther thinks of the Word of God, or the Gospel, he first and primarily thinks of it as the message of divine grace proclaimed to men. In fact, Luther so greatly stresses the

28 St. Louis Ed., XIX:1125; Erl. 28, 86-88; Walch XIX, 1372-1375.

29 St. Louis Ed., XI:1548; Erl. 14, 14-17; Walch XI, 2081-2083.

30 St. Louis Ed., XI:16; Erl. 10, 20-22; Walch XI, 22-25.

"oral word," or the proclamation of the Gospel, that it might appear as if he meant that the Word only in its oral proclamation is God's appointed means of grace. This, however, is not the case, though certainly he did regard the preached Word as the means of grace.

Let us, then, study a few passages from Luther in which he asserts that the Gospel as a message proclaimed to men is God's means of grace.

In his sermon on John 20:19-31, preached in his house, Luther says: "This is a great and glorious thing that the mouth of every true pastor and preacher is the mouth of Christ and his word and forgiveness Christ's word and forgiveness. If you have [committed] sin and you confess it and believe in Christ, then the pastor and preacher should forgive this sin in Christ's stead, and the words, which he says to you in the name of Christ, you should receive just as if Christ Himself had spoken to you. For this reason you do well that you call the word of the pastor and preacher, which he proclaims, the Word of God. For the office is not that of the pastor or preacher, but that of God; and the Word, which he proclaims, is also not that of the preacher but that of God."³¹

In his "Table Talk" Luther says: "He (Christ) also has servants and officials, 2 Cor. 5:18-20, whom He sends out into all the world, equips them not with earthly [Luther: *leiblichen*] weapons, but He commands them to preach His Word, and enlightens and strengthens them with the Holy Ghost. These [servants] do nothing else than that they proclaim the Word. By that Christ destroys the kingdom of the devil and builds Himself a Church against which the gates of hell cannot prevail, Matt.. 16:18."³²

In his sermon on John 4:9-10, held in 1540, Luther says: "But now you have the Word of God in the Church, in books, in your house; and that surely is God's Word, just as if God Himself would speak."³³

This passage is important, since it places the Word preached by the pastor or minister on the same level as the Word in a book and the Word spoken by parents at home. Luther does not believe that the divine Word is efficacious

³¹ St. Louis Ed., XIII b:1941; Erl. 5, 71-73; Walch XIII, 1205-1208.

³² St. Louis Ed. XXII:312.

³³ St. Louis Ed., VII:2143; Erl. 47, 220-222.

because of the pastor's call or ordination, but the efficacy is inherent in the Word, just because it is God's inspired Word with which the Holy Spirit is indissolubly connected and by which as His means He works His wonders of grace and salvation as He wills. One can well understand why Luther glorified the office of the Christian minister and extolled the proclamation of the divine Word. Against Rome he had to glorify and recommend it in every way possible.

Nevertheless Luther did not hold that the divine Word was less efficacious if it was read privately by clergy or laity. Had he thought this, he certainly would not have spent so much time and labor on the translation of the Bible. There is, however, one passage in Luther's writings which seems to contradict this, namely, his exposition of Malachi 2:7: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they [the people] should seek the Law at his mouth." In explaining these words, Luther writes: "The Word is the channel by which the Holy Spirit is given. This passage serves well against the despisers of the oral Word. The lips [of the ministers] are the public receptacle of the Church, in which alone God's Word is being stored. For if it is not publicly proclaimed, then it is lost; and the more it is preached, the more faithfully it is adhered to. The reading does not profit as much as the hearing. The living voice teaches, admonishes, defends, and resists the spirit of error. The devil does not concern himself very much about the written Word of God; but when the word is spoken, then he flees."³⁴

At first sight it may appear as if Luther here attributes greater efficacy to the spoken Word than to the written Word, as if it were the living voice of the preacher that rendered it more effectual. But this is only seemingly the case. In the first place, Luther's lectures on Malachi were delivered in 1526, but not published until 1552, hence after his death. Luther, therefore, could not edit the work before it went into print. In the second place, Luther himself indicates from what viewpoint he made this statement, when he said: "This passage serves well against the despisers of the oral Word." He emphasized the preaching of the Word over against those who condemned the preaching of the Word by the pastor. Lastly, there is, of course, a certain amount of truth in what Luther

³⁴ St. Louis Ed., XIV: 2172; Erl. XXVIII, 301—303; Walch 3605—3607.

here says; for wherever the divine Word is not preached or taught, there surely it is neglected. The point which Luther here makes is not that the Word read or studied is less efficacious *per se*, but that the living voice of the preacher teaches, exhorts, defends, and resists the spirit of error as this is required under the special prevailing circumstances. For this very reason Christ sent out His Apostles to proclaim His Word: the living divine Word must be applied as it is needed.

Against the Enthusiasts of his day Luther emphasized especially the application of the Gospel in the form of absolution. To the absolute "No" of the Enthusiasts to the perverted absolution of Romanism, Luther responded with a definite "Yes," but rooted it in, and motivated it by, Scripture. Luther taught not the papistic, but the Scriptural absolution, which is nothing else than the application of the Gospel to the penitent sinner. A few passages will suffice to make clear Luther's position on this point. In his sermon on Matt. 9:1-8 Luther says: "You can thus say and instruct others concerning forgiveness of sins [namely], that God in Baptism, in absolution, in the pulpit, and in the Sacrament speaks to us through the ministers of the Church and all other Christians. These we should believe, [and] so we shall find forgiveness of sins. . . . Let this be said of the words which here stand [namely], that God gave to men power on earth to forgive sins."³⁵

In his "Second Sermon" on John 20:19-31 Luther says: "If, then, anyone desire forgiveness of sins, let him go to his pastor or, if he cannot get the pastor, to his brother and fellow Christian, whom he knows to have the Word of God and with whom he can find it. There also he shall surely find forgiveness of sins, if only he believe the Word [of absolution] which the pastor or the brother in the name of Christ addresses to him."³⁶

The Gospel, therefore, according to Luther, is God's means of grace as applied also in absolution, by which God truly forgives the sins of the penitent sinner.

Similarly also, according to Luther, the Gospel is God's appointed means of grace in its symbolical representation. In his "Sixth Sermon" on John 8:20 ff., preached perhaps in 1531, Luther remarks to verse 21: "And it has been a fine custom

³⁵ St. Louis Ed., XIIIa:922; Erl. 3, 124-127; Walch XIII, 2085-2087.

³⁶ St. Louis Ed., XIIIb:1956; Erl. 5, 88-90; Walch XIII, 1197-1201.

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that they used to hold before dying persons a wooden crucifix or [also] put it into their hands, by which they could remember and comfort themselves with the suffering and death of the Lord Christ."³⁷

In a similar way Luther expresses himself in his sermon on Matt. 24:15-28, in which he says: "So we may comfort ourselves concerning those who died in the papacy [namely], that God finally granted them grace, so that they by the remembrance of the crucifix died and passed away in Christ."³⁸

Luther, then, teaches that the Gospel of Christ in every form of its application — in public preaching, in private study, in parental instruction, in absolution, and in Christian symbolism — is God's appointed means of grace. Likewise Luther regarded the Gospel as God's appointed means of grace in its Sacramental use. And this point indeed deserves special consideration in view of the emphasis which Luther placed on the Sacraments.

5

Luther thought very highly of the Sacraments and praised and recommended them incessantly. In his "Sixth Sermon" against Carlstadt, one of eight which he preached against this "Sacramentarian" from March 9 to 16, 1522, he writes: "This bread [in the Sacrament] is a comfort for the distressed, a remedy for the sick, life for the dying, food for the hungry, and a rich treasure for all who are poor and needy."³⁹ Against the Romanists he exalted the oral proclamation as the "greatest divine service." He thus writes in his sermon on 1 Thess. 4:13-18, delivered at Wittenberg in 1532, on the occasion of the burial service of Elector John of Saxony: "You know that the greatest divine service is the sermon, and not only the greatest divine service, but also our best [gift] which we can have in all cases, especially, however, on such important and sad occasions [as the loss of the faithful Elector of Saxony]."⁴⁰ Against the Enthusiasts, on the other hand, he emphasized the glory and value of the Sacrament, which Christ instituted for the strengthening of our faith and our final salvation, since for Luther the Sacrament was not Law, but pure,

³⁷ St. Louis Ed., VIII:183; Erl. 48, 322—324; Walch VII, 2462—2465.

³⁸ St. Louis Ed., XIIIb:2575; Erl. 6, 250—252; Walch XIII, 2312—2315.

³⁹ St. Louis Ed., XX:43; Erl. 28, 242—245; Walch XX, 51—53.

⁴⁰ St. Louis Ed., XII:2073; Erl. 18, 189—192; Walch XII, 2631—2633.

sweet, and comforting Gospel. He, for example, writes in his exposition of Ps. 111:4: "For what else is Christ's suffering other than pure grace and mercy, which through the Sacrament are offered, presented, and communicated to us. . . . All of which He has once earned for us through His suffering, and He daily presents and gives it to us through His memorial or Sacrament."⁴¹

So it is, properly speaking, the Gospel that makes the sacred act a Sacrament, that is, a means of grace, in which Christ offers and imparts to us His gracious forgiveness of sins, secured by His vicarious atonement.

Luther thus closes his sermon on John 4:47-54, which in 1533 he held in his house, with the words: "In this way the Gospel of Christ and the Christian doctrine accomplishes all things with few words [the reference is to Christ's words: 'Go thy way; thy son liveth']; for it is God's Word. Therefore it has almighty power and there is nothing that it cannot do, as you learn from the son of the nobleman. . . . And so we should learn to hold God's Word in high esteem and believe it. The same Word we have in the proclamation of the Gospel, in Baptism, in the Sacrament, in Absolution. For this reason we should not despise Baptism, the Sacrament, and Absolution, but regard them as very precious and glorious. If we believe the Word, it will happen to us as it happened to the son of the nobleman, namely, we shall obtain what is promised to us in the Word."⁴²

In his work "Concerning Councils and Churches," which he published in 1539, Luther writes: "Just as water becomes a Baptism through the Word of God and a savor unto life eternal, washing away sin and effecting salvation, which is not the nature and power of water; and as bread and wine becomes Christ's body and blood; [and as] through the laying on of hands sins are forgiven according to Christ's institution: so the devil also desires that his jugglery and monkey business [Luther: *Affenspiel*] should be efficacious and accomplish something that is supernatural."⁴³

In the context Luther speaks not of the Law, but of the

⁴¹ St. Louis Ed., V:1808; Erl. 40, 224—226.

⁴² St. Louis Ed., XIII b: 2480 f.; Erl. 6, 157—159; Walch XIII, 2149 to 2152.

⁴³ St. Louis Ed., XVI:2292 f.; Erl. (2) 25, 437—439; Walch XVI, 2807—2810.

Gospel which makes the sacred acts Sacraments; for the Word of God which Luther here has in mind is the Word of grace and promise by which Christ forgives sins. In short, the Sacraments are means of grace because they are "comprehended in God's command and connected with God's Word."

In his exposition of Deut. 4:28 Luther writes: "Just so the Enthusiasts also speak much of God, of forgiveness of sins, and the grace of God, also that Christ died. But how I may obtain Christ and how grace comes to me so that I may secure it [in short], that we come together, there they say: "The Spirit must do it alone . . . the external, oral Word, Baptism, and the Sacrament are of no profit, and yet they preach of grace. That, it seems, means to announce to me the treasure and to talk well about it, but [it means also] to take away the key and the bridge by which I may come to the treasure. Now God has ordained that this treasure [forgiveness of sins] should be presented and granted to us through Baptism, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and the external Word. For these are the means and instruments by which we come to God's grace. This they deny." ⁴⁴

But there is no need for quoting Luther more fully on this point. According to the Reformer, it is the Gospel that makes Baptism and the Lord's Supper Sacraments. Luther, of course, also emphasizes the divine institution of the Sacraments. It is his teaching that the Church has no authority to draw up doctrine outside and beyond Scripture. In his great monograph "Concerning the Babylonian Captivity of the Church," which was published in 1520, Luther writes: "For this reason it is certain that the Church cannot promise grace, because this belongs only to God, and so also it cannot institute Sacraments." ⁴⁵ But what the Church cannot do, God does and it is because of His divine institution that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are Sacraments.

6

Luther time and again speaks of the necessity of the divine institution of a Sacrament, as also of the divine promise [Gospel] by which the Sacrament becomes efficacious, especially when he speaks of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

⁴⁴ St. Louis Ed., III:1693; Erl. 36, 227—229; Walch III, 2500—2503.

⁴⁵ St. Louis Ed., XIX:109; Erl. v. a. 5, 101—103; Walch XIX, 127—129.

In his "Sermon Concerning Holy Baptism," held in 1535, he writes: "Baptism we divide into three distinct parts, which are: water, Word, and God's command or institution. For this reason we must not regard the water alone, as [we do] other water, but we must regard also the Word, namely [Luther: *das heisst*], God's Word, in or with the water. And thirdly [we must regard] God's will and authority, or His command and institution. These are the things which belong to the complete essence and to the right definition of Baptism. . . . For in order that it [a rite] may be and be called a Sacrament, there is necessary, in the first place, an external, tangible sign or thing, by which God deals with us in a visible way, so that we may be sure of Him [of His dealing with us]. For He does not want to work in us without external means, merely through private inspiration or special heavenly revelations. But also the external work and sign alone is not valid and does not accomplish anything, [it is not effective] if His Word is not added to it, by which such a sign becomes efficacious and we understand what God works in us through such signs. But to these there must also come a divine command, by which we are made sure of His will and work in such signs and Word. These three things I, therefore, must show distinctively."⁴⁶

Luther thus distinguishes in Holy Baptism first the sign, or the water; then the Word, or the Gospel, by which the rite becomes efficacious; and thirdly, the divine command, or institution. All three are necessary: the water as the sign; the command as the expressed will of God that Baptism should be a Sacrament; the promise which offers and conveys to us in Baptism the blessings of the Gospel.

In his Large Catechism Luther speaks of the divine promise in Baptism: "Now, they are so made as to separate faith, and that to which faith clings and is bound, though it be something external. Yea, it shall and must be something external that it may be apprehended by the senses and understood and thereby be brought into the heart, as indeed the entire Gospel is external, verbal preaching. In short, what God does and works in us He proposes to work through such external ordinances. Wherever, therefore, He speaks, yea, in whichever direction or by whatever means He speaks, thither faith must look, and to that it must hold. Now here we have the words:

⁴⁶ St. Louis Ed., X: 2059; Erl. 19, 107—109; Walch X, 2517—2519.

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. To what else do they refer than to Baptism, that is, to the water, comprehended in God's ordinance? Hence it follows that whoever rejects Baptism rejects the Word of God, faith, and Christ, who directs us thither and binds us to Baptism."⁴⁷

As in Baptism, so Luther recognizes also in the Lord's Supper the divine Word, in particular the Gospel, as the special instrument which renders it a true Sacrament or means of grace. This is attested by the quotations which have been offered above. But to these we may add a few more. In his monograph "Against the Heavenly Prophets" (1524—25) Luther writes: "For Christ has laid the strength and power of His suffering into the Sacrament in order that we might find and obtain it there according to the words: 'This is My body, which is given for you, for the remission of sins.'"⁴⁸ This means that the Lord's Supper is an efficacious means of grace on account of the Gospel promise which Christ has put into it.

In his writing "Concerning the Abuse of the Mass" (1522) Luther says: "For the sum of the whole Gospel is comprehended in it [the Sacrament], as Paul says: 'As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come' (1 Cor. 11:27)."⁴⁹

And so, like Baptism, the Lord's Supper is to Luther a means of grace because of the Gospel, which is comprehended in it. By virtue of the Gospel promise in the Sacrament, we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation when we penitently and believingly receive it, trusting in the promise which Christ has placed into it.

Perhaps the clearest expression of Luther on this point is the one in the Small Catechism, where, in reply to the question: "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" he says: "This is shown us by these words: 'Given, and shed for you for the remission of sins'; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us *through these words* [italics our own].

This is all the more important in view of Luther's reply to the question: "How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?" He says: "It is not the eating and drinking, in-

⁴⁷ *De Baptismo*, 30—31. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 739.

⁴⁸ St. Louis Ed., XX:271; Erl. 29, 280—282; Walch XX, 351—360.

⁴⁹ St. Louis Ed., XIX:1125; Erl. 28, 86—88; Walch XIX, 1372—1375.

deed, that does them, but the words here written, 'Given, and shed for you for the remission of sins'; which words, besides the bodily eating and drinking, are as the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins."

And Luther, when he deals with the question: "Who, then, receives such Sacrament worthily?" replies: "Fasting and bodily preparation are indeed a fine outward training; but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.' But he that does not believe these words, or doubts, is unworthy and unprepared; for the words 'for you' require all hearts to believe."

In these words we have Luther's whole theology of the Word in a nutshell. To understand Luther correctly when he speaks of the means of grace, we must observe what he says with regard to Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is the Word, the Gospel, that does everything, nothing else, nothing added by men: the Gospel proclaimed, the Gospel read, the Gospel symbolically represented, the Gospel applied in absolution, the Gospel in Baptism, the Gospel in the Lord's Supper, the Gospel in the "mutual conversation and consolation of brethren" (Smalcald Articles, IV; *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 491). The Gospel always and the Gospel only!

7

There is need why we, who bear Luther's name, should be reminded of this Scriptural Gospel theology of Luther. Ever since Luther restored the Gospel to an erring world, men have turned aside from it either to the Calvinist* or the Romanist view. Both neglect the Gospel as the means of grace by which God works in us faith and sanctification and applies to us all the blessings of His atoning death.

They, of course, do it in different ways, since Calvinism and Romanism mean to be in opposition to each other. But ultimately they arrive at the same result: the rejection of the Gospel as the only means of grace. Reformed theology denies that the Holy Spirit needs an escort or wagon to come into

[* "Calvinism" is here used to denote Zwinglian emphasis on the immediate working of the Spirit, evident today particularly in Arminianism. — Ed.]

the human heart. Romanism has changed the Gospel into a new Law, basing all it teaches on human merit, or work-righteousness. By a strange but fortunate inconsistency both still preach the Gospel, the Calvinists more, the Romanists less. But the errors of both, if consistently applied, make faith and regeneration impossible.

Contrary to conceited human reason, the Holy Spirit has ordained means by which He works in the realm of grace, and He has repudiated work-righteousness as a means by which sinful man can merit salvation. The rejection of Luther's "Theology of the Word" ultimately means eternal hopelessness and damnation.

8

There is also an *usus practicus* of Luther's Word theology. As we see it in its full Scriptural glory, we shall in our whole ministry endeavor to preach the divine Word, and nothing but the Word; the Law for working knowledge of sin; the Gospel, for showing penitent sinners how to obtain remission of sin. We shall become true teachers of the divine Word only as we fully understand Luther's Scriptural theology of the Word.

And as we do so, we shall more fully appreciate Luther's two great teachings: the *sola Scriptura* and the *sola gratia*; the former as the source and norm of the Word of God which we proclaim; the latter as the aim or goal of our whole preaching, namely, that contrite sinners may be saved through faith in Christ.

Luther's Word theology has ever been the object of contention in theological debate. Here men meet as they believe in the Word; here their ways part as the Gospel is foolishness and a stumbling block to them.

But Luther's Word theology has been the greatest blessing that has come to Christendom ever since the days of the blessed Apostles. It assigns to the Law its proper place and to the Gospel its proper place. In its light we understand fully the meaning and function of the Gospel in its proclamation, in its presentation to men in writing, in absolution, in Baptism, in Holy Communion, in symbols, in private fraternal application. Only Luther's Word theology makes understanding, enlightened Christians assured of their salvation; nothing else can do this.

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