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Luther's World of Thought

A Review

By PAUL M. BRETSCHER

THIS is the title of a 315-page book written in German (*Luthers geistige Welt*, 2d ed., 1953) by the Heidelberg church historian Heinrich Bornkamm, translated into English by Martin Bertram (professor of German at Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne, Ind.), and published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis. Before analyzing the content of this volume the question why Bornkamm's book was made available to American readers deserves some consideration.

There is a likelihood that some who will see this book advertised will say to themselves: What! another book on Luther? Do we not know by now what that man thought and taught? And if we do not know, are there not other recently published books on Luther available to us? Who will attempt to outdo Roland Bainton? And why publish *Luther's Works* if people are nevertheless expected to buy and read also interpretations of his work? And do we not have innumerable biographies, compends of Luther's theology, and endless monographs dealing with specific facets of Luther's thought, such as Luther as a reformer, Luther's social ethics, Luther as a preacher, Luther as a teacher, Luther as a translator, Luther as a poet, Luther as a compiler of proverbs, Luther as a musician, Luther's liturgical reforms, Luther as a husband and father, Luther as a political thinker, Luther as the chief contributor to the evolution of the High German language, and others? And if books on this or that aspect of Luther's world of thought have not appeared in print, are there not typewritten Ph. D. dissertations which have uncovered every neglected or forgotten particular in Luther's world of thought?

Well, that's right. But the point is, whether we like it or not, publishers will continue to print books dealing with Luther because they know that such books will continue to be in demand. Why? Because Luther refuses to die. What Karl Holl said on October 31, 1917: "We are not conducting a funeral service when we commemorate Luther; we are in contact with a living

person," is true also today. Luther is living in the hearts and minds of more than 70 million followers and in the minds also of many more millions who, though not sharing his name, are closely related to his ways of thinking. Philosophically speaking, Luther enjoys at present a kind of religious, moral, political, and social immortality second to no one born in these past 475 years. Therefore Concordia Publishing House did not perform an act of supererogation when it published an English translation of Bornkamm's book on Luther. It rather took seriously the hint thrown out by Bornkamm on page 57: "We are prompted also to confer with Luther because this mighty thinker and man of God has surprises in store of which too few evangelical Christians are aware."

Bornkamm's book, also in its English dress, is an exciting book. It is devoid of clichés. Its explanation of troublesome Latin and German terms is singularly clear. It never loses sight of the center of Luther's most basic concerns, but from that center it reaches out into areas of Luther's thought which have seldom, if ever, been dealt with in English studies of Luther's complex of ideas. Even the translation breathes the energy, vitality, courage, determination, faith, love, and hope of that man of God — Martin Luther.

But is not Bornkamm's book another labored effort to systematize Luther's wealth of ideas in a neat and colorful mosaic? Is it not just another volume in which the historian Bornkamm, to use Friedrich Schlegel's famous phrase, is a "prophet surveying the past" rather than the future in search of the secret of Luther's success? Is it not another volume in which the author finds in the religious, political, and social world surrounding the "young Luther" the key to an understanding of Luther's world of thought? No. Bornkamm does only what he promises to do in the preface: "Luther was a man of wide and varied interests and a thinker whose mind encompassed many fields. Therefore it may be permissible to present his world of thought, not in a compact theological system but in a free and easy choice of some of the most significant themes. In this way it may be possible to move some of Luther's less known ideas into clearer focus and to demonstrate how these bridge the years and are ever live and relevant."

Bornkamm discusses the following themes in Luther's world of thought: the world significance of the *95 Theses*; the hidden and the revealed God; faith; the sacraments; living and dying; what is the church; God's grace or man's expiation; the picture of nature; God and history; the nation (*das Volk*); the state; the Gospel and the social world; Luther's translation of the New Testament; Luther's death and legacy.

A biography of Luther's life precedes the discussion of the above themes. But this biography is not an encyclopedic sketch of Luther's life and work. It rather attempts to highlight those events and experiences in Luther's life which are most relevant to the substance of the themes. This biography itself of only 35 pages reveals that Bornkamm is one of the best-informed students of Luther in our day. To appreciate Bornkamm's own place in the tradition of interpreters of Luther, one must familiarize himself with some such work as Ernst Walter Zeeden's *Martin Luther und die Reformation im Urteil des deutschen Luthertums* or with Heinrich Bornkamm's *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte*. But this is not the place to discuss this historical question. It should be noted, however, that Bornkamm, who lives in the Evangelical tradition, does not question the thesis that Luther's deepest concern was one of a religious and theological nature. He writes (p. 136): "When we attempt to understand any part of Luther's theology, it is always advisable to proceed from its very core, his view of the Word of God, of revelation."

In the closing paragraph of his biographical sketch of Luther, Bornkamm brings into focus the basic ideas developed in the essays. We quote what to us are the most significant statements:

Luther was a great teacher and educator in the subject of reality. Pressed hard by the reality of God, he unmasked the reality of man without reserve and assigned to man his place in the world of reality. . . . For Luther good works were attempts at insurance which do not stand the test of God's penetrating power. . . . Luther arrived at the vital laws for state and economy not by a study of natural law or of any theories cherished by the church but by sober observation of their real and enduring powers. . . . In the political realm he considered a well-articulated public opinion to be the greatest power. . . .

Many a point in his program of social welfare may be termed conservative and patriarchal; but it must be borne in mind that it was not his purpose to set up a program for all time to come. His suggestions sprang from the conviction that reform can grow out of a wise improvement of existing conditions. . . . Decisions dictated by conscience and stern, sober reasoning . . . must also be based on a greater power, namely, on the gentle, clearly heard command of love, which alone can restore to the world here and there some of the beautiful harmony it has lost. . . . The true world of God was divined by Luther also in nature, which is completely pervaded by God. But in order to recognize it amid all the flaws and defects of the real nature, it is necessary to have learned at the cross of Christ to peer through darkness and gloom into the very heart of God and there to behold the true, hidden reality of God. This is the alpha and omega of Luther's thinking. From this his work has its life. (Pages 34, 35)

We now proceed to call attention to some of the thoughts in those essays which, in our opinion, are of special interest. We begin with the *95 Theses*. Most Lutherans know that in these famous theses Luther inveighed against the sale of indulgences. But precisely what was it in these theses which so rocked Europe that to this day we do not hesitate to say that the Reformation began in Wittenberg, Germany, October 31, 1517? Bornkamm provides the answer to this question by sketching effectively the views of the medieval church regarding the sacrament of penance and by clearly analyzing such concepts as sacrament, venial and mortal sins, public and private confession, contrition, absolution, temporal penalties, and the meaning of indulgences. From the theses he lifts out those which signalize Luther's understanding of repentance, the Gospel, God's forgiving grace, and Christian love. When one has digested this chapter in Bornkamm's book, he understands, if he has not understood fully before, why, as a consequence of these theses, an eruption took place in Europe affecting practically every phase of living. One understands also why, in the wake of these theses, Luther became almost overnight the enemy most feared by the church, and the champion of freedom for all who had found themselves chained by the religious controls of the church. Bornkamm writes:

Thus the gigantic system of the Catholic Church extends from heaven to earth and below the earth. It holds the individual so firmly in its grasp that he cannot escape with as much as an impulse. The priest sits in the council of God. God has placed a limit on His own forgiving grace in favor of the church. He has assigned to her an indispensable role in the remission of man's sins. The church holds men firmly in her power because the keys of heaven have been given to her. God has yielded to her the right to impose expiatory deeds on earth and in purgatory for the cancellation of the temporal penalties not remitted by the sacrament. He Himself imposes these temporal penalties through the agency of the Catholic Church. (Page 42)

We quote four basic thoughts, which Bornkamm thinks lie at the heart of the *95 Theses*:

1. God demands the whole man; He cannot be put off with a few occasional penitential acts. . . . Penitence is again the internal repentance, which dare not desert man for a moment and, therefore, must show itself in moral conduct and discipline. . . . The Christian . . . uncomplainingly prefers the difficult path of penitence and suffering to the easier one of indulgences;

2. Any and every deed of love transcends all that man may do for himself, no matter how pious the motive; for all that man does for himself necessarily implies a claim before God and the wish to make an impression, as it were, on Him;

3. The church is not an institution of salvation in the sense that she possesses absolute power over the keys to the gates of eternity. She is no religious insurance company in which works of indulgence or penitential deeds can purchase a policy. But she is the communion of believers, all of whom stand before God naked, poor, and insecure. . . .

4. With his *95 Theses* Luther removed the priest and gave Christendom the pastor (*Pfarrer*). . . . The true pastor . . . as the preacher of the Word . . . offers up intercessory prayer for his congregation and comforts the conscience with Jesus' assurance that God Himself forgives sin. (Pages 51, 52)

Bornkamm concludes this brilliant essay with the following observation:

When Jesus said: "Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" the first of these two turning points [in history] was

ushered in. Luther initiated the second with the first of his 95 *Theses*: "Our Lord Jesus Christ in saying: Repent ye! intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence." No ruler, statesman, general, philosopher, or minister of culture has influenced the course of history as much as these two Christian proclamations. Not only the inner life of Christians but also the political and cultural structure of the West have been more profoundly changed by these proclamations than by any other historical happening. (Page 53)

In his essay "The Hidden and the Revealed God," Bornkamm deals with one of the most difficult themes in Luther's theology. For Luther God is not an abstraction. He does not speak of Him as Providence, Fate, Higher Power, Divinity. The basic question for Luther is not: What is God? but rather: Where can I find God, and what is His relation to me? Luther declares: God is hidden. And yet, so Luther writes: "God is a supernatural, inscrutable Being who resides simultaneously and entirely in every kernel of grain and still is in all and above all and outside all creatures" (quoted p. 58). But Luther finds God also in history. Interpreting Luther's view of history, Bornkamm writes: "History is not only God's playground or arena, where all takes its course in accordance with His will, but in all its varied phases and forms He Himself is hidden as behind a mask" (p. 60). Yes, Luther finds God in life itself. In Luther's way of thinking "we sense the working of God in all life; we know that He is the cause and the pulse beat of the world." (Page 62)

But Luther tells us: If I knew God only in this way, if I were to discover God in all creation and in all processes of history, I would discover only His mask, I would not discover God. To discover God for what He truly is, I do not ask for a philosophic definition of God. I rather inquire: Do I really believe in Him? Do I regard Him to be *my* God? Do I rely on Him and His will in all experiences of life? Do I conceive of God as a personal being, a Thou who speaks to me and with whom I can converse? Do I see God mirrored in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God? Do I see in Jesus Christ a revelation of a merciful God, a God merciful to me a sinner? In his *Lecture on Genesis* Luther says: "If you believe in the revealed God and accept His Word, then

He will also gradually reveal the hidden God to you." (Quoted p. 73)

In his essay "Faith," Bornkamm attempts to define Luther's faith in its broadest sense. This approach enables him to expose features in Luther's Christian character sometimes overlooked. Since Luther's faith was not hedged in by conditions and tactical considerations, he executed what he regarded as God's will and order with unflinching steadfastness (p. 80). Luther's faith was a belief in reality, the first and chief reality being God. Compared with this reality, all else was trivial to Luther: emperor and diet, pope and universities, friend and foe (p. 82). Therefore he believed also with all his heart in the reality of sin, of misery, of death. None of these are illusions. Neither is the state an illusion. It, too, is a reality, a miraculous institution established by God. (Page 85)

But Luther's faith was also a daring faith, a venture to recognize this vile world as God's creation despite its depravity, a venture to believe in God's merciful, forgiving love in spite of man's enslavement in sin, a venture to comfort ourselves with the hope of life eternal in spite of death and the grief of parting (p. 89). Only one thing sustains us in this leap from life's safe shore into the abyss: over this abyss God has erected the sign of the cross (p. 87). Finally, Luther's faith is life that proceeds from the strength of Christ (p. 90). Therefore it produces good works. Bornkamm says it this way: "Both, faith and works, are therefore equally necessary in a Christian's life, but both in their correct relationship: faith must be directed toward God, good works toward one's neighbor. Only when the two are joined does a Christian live his life in the spirit of Christ." (Page 91)

Two of the profoundest chapters in Bornkamm's book are those on the sacraments and the church. Even 400 years after Luther's death it seems difficult to understand how Luther could have arrived at his interpretation of a sacrament which differed so radically from that current in his day. But to understand Luther's interpretation of a sacrament, one must bear in mind Luther's implicit trust in the power of the Word of God and in the salvation which that Word promises, gives, and seals. Bornkamm is right in his conclusion: "For Luther the sacraments were only another and special instance of the Word; they have no other contents than the Scrip-

tures do" (p.100). But if the power of God lies wholly in the Word, faith is not of the essence of the sacraments. What makes Baptism and Holy Communion sacraments is God's command and God's promise of forgiveness and salvation. Therefore infants should be brought to Baptism, for it is not their faith which makes Baptism. Therefore unbelievers receive Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion, for faith is not of the essence of Holy Communion.

But even as the sacraments are empty rites apart from the Word of God, so also the church cannot be church without the Word of God. This Word begets faith. Thus the church comes into existence and is sustained and perpetuated by the Word of God. Luther says: "The whole life and nature of the church exists in the Word of God" (quoted p.137). According to Luther, the church is the body in which the spirit of Christ lives, the body permeated by His spirit, namely, the believers in all the world (p.142). The church is, therefore, not a visible organization. Yet it is a real communion, which rallies about Christ, its common Head. (Page 143)

Nevertheless Luther, on occasion, enumerates the visible signs of this church: there God's Word is preached and believed purely and ardently; there children are accepted into the kingdom of God through Baptism; there hearts assailed by sin and temptation find solace and strength in Holy Communion; there sinners unburden their conscience in confession; there ministers are commissioned in orderly fashion for preaching the Word, for administering the sacraments, and for other pastoral ministrations; there a prayerful Christian people offers God praise and thanks in public worship; there people are opposed and persecuted for the sake of Christ, and there they must bear the cross of their Master (p.145). All these external signs and activities betoken the presence of the church. But Luther also says in summary fashion: "Where God's Word is, there the church must be; therefore, where Baptism and Holy Communion are, there God's people must be." (Quoted p.146)

According to Luther, there is something wonderful about the church. It cannot be exterminated (p.146). It is part of God's

hidden glory (p. 147). And so Bornkamm does full justice to Luther in the words:

Whoever wishes to behold some of the church's beauty must not fix his gaze on ceremonial pomp or on any visible display of power but on the unpretentious but revolutionizing miracles which God works quietly in the human heart through the Word and the service of the church. And since self-renunciation and self-denial, which run counter to human nature, are requisites for membership, it is apparent that the church, taken in the profoundest sense, will always be confined to small numbers and that it will often seem lost and smothered by the large number of mere camp followers or even enemies. (Pages 147, 148)

The above are some of the basic thoughts in Luther's doctrine of the church as articulated by Bornkamm. The author discusses many others such as: Luther's understanding of the true nature of a sacrament, of local congregations and state churches, the church as a growing organism (*sie steht nicht im Gewordensein, sondern im Werden*, p. 149), Melancthon's view of the church, the concept of church adopted by Lutheran orthodoxy, apostolic succession and resultant hierarchy, the government's responsibility in relation to the church, and the relation of church administration to civil government. Bornkamm closes his moving description of Luther's views regarding the church with the observation: "This is Luther's broad and sweeping picture of the church. It traces its origin entirely from the heart of God, from the body of Christ, from the Word, and thereby it places us squarely into the world and before life's tasks. It is a safe lodestar which will illumine the way for the evangelical church in all vicissitudes of history." (Page 155)

The author titles one chapter "Living and Dying." In this chapter he discourses on Luther's frequent references to death and the meaning of death. Luther still knew the *ars moriendi*. He can speak of the skill of dying. Luther knows and stresses again and again that death is more than the inevitable end of life, that it is rather the result of God's wrath over man's sin. And yet Luther does not indulge in morose discussions of death, nor does he, as do some modern existentialists, dignify death as being worthy, like anxiety, of philosophic contemplation. There is indeed a loneliness that confronts Christians in the hour of death. Each must die for

himself. And yet Luther thinks that man is not deserted in his dying hour. "No Christian," so Luther writes, "should doubt at his end that he is not alone when dying, but he should be confident that very many eyes are looking at him" (quoted p. 128). The eyes of God and of Christ, the eyes of the angels, the eyes of the deceased and the living Christians rest on him in the moment of death (p. 128). The natural life of Christians extends into life eternal. Therefore, so Luther puts it, we should "view this temporal life only through a painted glass and, as it were, blinkingly, but yonder eternal life with clear, open eyes." (Quoted p. 133)

In the chapter "God's Grace or Man's Expiation?" with its subtitle "Luther's Reply to the Question of Conscience Posed by the Various Religions," Bornkamm discusses the heart and center of Luther's theology. Luther's insistence on God's exclusive grace is the theme dearest to Lutherans. The fact is, had Luther not discovered the meaning of God's righteousness in the New Testament and in passages of the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, there would not have been a Reformation in the sense in which the Lutheran Church understands it. But what makes Bornkamm's treatment of this theme so fascinating is his way of delineating with bold strokes the teaching of the medieval church regarding expiation and forgiveness. We cannot but quote Bornkamm at greater length at this point:

Both Augustine and Anselm had stopped short of abolishing the entire system of work-righteousness in the Catholic Church. They permitted the Catholic Church's practical religion of expiation to exist side by side with their doctrine of grace. And thus this system of half-truths, of internal contradiction between grace and expiation, because of which Luther almost bled to death, was perpetuated. Luther alone broke through and found the way back to the unqualified and absolute Gospel. "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28). He put the whole ardor of his life into the word "without." (Page 165)

Are works, then, of no significance in the life of Christians? Bornkamm, speaking for Luther, answers this question in this striking way: "Faith means health through God. And then an active life, a life of good works, follows as self-evidently as a healthy person moves his limbs." (Page 171)

In the last chapters of his book, Bornkamm analyzes Luther's views of nature and history and Luther's social ethics. Here is an accumulation and interpretation of ideas in Luther which is truly breath-taking in scope and depth. One is thrilled at Luther's insights into, and interest in, the ordinary phenomena of nature. One might regard his philosophy of history, if that term be allowed, too naive and unsophisticated. One may find fault with him, as he has often been found fault with, for his supreme loyalty to the emperor and for his steadfast opposition to revolt and rebellion. But one cannot, when reading these chapters, escape the impact of Luther's versatile mind, his healthy view of the world about him, his alertness to opportunities for service, his never-failing readiness to help, his love of his dear Germans, which never was a sentimental love, but one combined with misgivings, warnings, and threats.

The final essay in Bornkamm's *Luther's World of Thought* carries the somber title "Luther's Death and Legacy." For this reviewer this is the prize essay. Bornkamm notes in Luther's final days on earth and in his death three legacies which Luther left behind. The first of these legacies has to do with Luther's last act on earth. That act was a political act, Luther's successful effort to end the quarrel among the Mansfeld counts. Why did he, ill as he had been for years, engage in this trying task? There is only one reason: his conscience prevailed on him to perform civic duties when called upon to do so. Luther firmly believed that a Christian must lend an active hand in the upbuilding of human society as reason and love, not canonical law, prompt him to do. (Page 288)

A further legacy which Luther left to the world just before he died was his recognition, scribbled on a scrap of paper two days before his death, of the limitations of the human intellect, closing with the words: "We are beggars. This is true" (*Wir sind Bettler. Hoc est verum*). At this point we must let Bornkamm speak:

Luther never presumed to be able to expound the Scriptures fully and completely, nor did he arrogate to himself the right to force the content of the Scriptures into formulas. . . . He never lost his sense of venerating awe before the riches of God's Word. His whole theology presents one long, never-ending grappling with the Bible's superior might. Again and again he sank a new shaft into

a different side of this mighty mountain and unearthed treasures as no exegete before or after him. Until his last breath he regarded himself as a poor beggar before God's Word. (Page 293)

The third legacy, which Luther left to the world, is the manner of his death. We again quote Bornkamm: "It was without sacerdotal aid, without viaticum, without an appeal to the saints, without rosary or other consecrated objects; it was without monk's cowl, which some laymen were wont to wear in death in order to step before God's judgment seat under the meritorious protection of a monastic order." (Pages 299, 300.) Rather, as Luther had lived in Christ and for Christ, so he chose to die in Christ and to be with Christ. Bornkamm puts it this way: "Luther entered his heavenly home in accord with the prophetic annotation (alluding to John 8:51: 'If a man keep My saying, he shall never see death'), made in his Bible ten days before his death: 'Never see death.' How incredible these words are and how contradictory to public and daily experience! And yet they are true. If a man earnestly ponders God's Word in his heart, believes it, and falls asleep or dies over it, he sinks away and journeys forth before he is aware of death; he has surely departed blissfully in the Word thus believed and considered." (Pages 302, 303)

We have said above that this is an exciting book. But it is more than that. For the budding theologian as well as for the theologian who has experienced Satan's onslaughts (*Anfechtungen*) this is an eminently useful book. And it may be had for only three dollars. He who has read it thoughtfully will at least have learned what it means to see life as a whole; as it appears in nature, in history, in society, in the church, in the pulsating *pneuma* which everywhere surrounds man, and above all, in God's revelation of Himself in Holy Scripture as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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