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What Luther Says

A Review

By THEODORE HOYER

THE last 80 years have seen a great revival of interest in Reformation history and as a result an ever-increasing research in the facts of those times. Its beginning came with the preparations for the celebration of the 400th anniversary of Luther's birth in 1883. More especially, however, this new Luther and Reformation research was launched by those who were opposed to Luther and to Protestantism in general. They knew what this celebration would initiate: literature describing, defending, promoting Protestant interests. In order to meet and to stop this, they did—the very best they could to promote it! A veritable flood of slanderous publications by anti-Lutheran writers deluged Germany (see J. M. Reu, *Thirty-five Years of Luther Research*, 1917), beginning with Johannes Janssen's *Geschichte des deutschen Volkes seit dem Ausgang des Mittelalters* (1876), a mosaic of more or less factual statements so patched together as to give a distortion of the Reformation. This encouraged many others (17 by 1884) to follow on the same line. The climax was reached in 1890, when P. Majunke, in his *Luthers Lebensende*, pronounced Luther a suicide and Pater Heinrich Denifle published his two-volume work *Luther und Luthertum*, which rehashed all the slanders against Luther from Cochlaeus down to that time. It should be noted that not only Protestant but many Roman Catholic historians protested against these fraudulent publications.

It has been rightly said that Lutherans really owe a vote of thanks to these critics of Luther and the Reformation. They forced Lutheran scholars to investigate thoroughly where the truth lay and to abandon the old Herodotus method of writing history—simply to repeat what others have said, adding perhaps a few new nice legends. Leopold von Ranke's new method of recording *wie es wirklich gewesen und geworden* was adopted. Many names now became well known as torchbearers in this new campaign: Th. Kolde, K. Bennrath, P. Kalkoff, W. Kawerau, E. Brandenburg,

A. Lang, W. Koehler, G. Buchwald, E. Rietschel, and others. Already in 1882 the *Verein für Reformationsgeschichte* was organized, and up to World War I it had published 160 monographs. After the wars the *Verein* again resumed work and is now associated with our "American Society for Reformation Research." Results of investigations are now published in the *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*.

Along with the efforts to establish the actual facts of Luther's life and work (which naturally had to be carried on mainly in the lands where it had all happened) went the desire to establish and to spread Luther's teaching and for that purpose to make his writings accessible to all. In this latter endeavor our fathers here in America — we say it with a feeling of thankfulness and appreciation — took front rank. In 1879 the Pastoral Conference of the Western District of the German Ev. Luth. Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States considered the question whether a new edition of Luther's works, one like the old edition of Dr. J. G. Walch, was not needed in the interest of Synod, since extant copies of the old editions were becoming rare. With the consent of the Board of Directors of Synod and of the synodical Publishing House the men appointed by said conference as editors of the new edition, Pastor George Stoeckhardt and E. W. Kaehler, with Dr. C. F. W. Walther as adviser, went to work, and in 1880 the first volume of what has become known as the St. Louis edition appeared. It was a courageous undertaking. Concordia Publishing House was by no means the vast establishment it is today, and the expected clientele of buyers was relatively small. Yet the undertaking was a real success.

And then another change became obvious. The German language, against the hopes of many of the fathers, ceased to be the language of Lutherans in America and became, so far as the general public is concerned, a dead language. With commendable foresight Lutheran writers realized this fact. Treatises, pamphlets, books, and more books, on Lutheran history and doctrine in the language of our country began to appear — and continue to roll off the presses today. It is a rare year when a number of books of this type is not printed. Which is all to the good — but rightly one of these authors said: Luther can be properly known and

estimated only when he is allowed to speak for himself. He should be seen not through the eyes of others but through our own. As long as an author can be read only in the languages in which he wrote, this necessary closer contact with his personality can be enjoyed only by a very limited circle of advanced scholars. But many of these will be grateful for a translation into their vernacular for more rapid reading. So translations of some of Luther's sermons and other writings appeared; and when the approaching jubilee of the Reformation in 1917 called renewed attention to the author of these writings, the Philadelphia, or Holman, edition of the works of Martin Luther was issued in six volumes by the Muhlenberg Press. And in 1955 there began to appear the volumes of Luther's works issued by Concordia Publishing House of St. Louis and the Muhlenberg Press of Philadelphia.

In the meantime another problem was recognized. In August 1828 the first real Luther concordance or anthology appeared. The title page read: *Geist aus Luthers Schriften, oder Concordanz der Ansichten und Urtheile des groszen Reformators über die wichtigsten Gegenstände des Glaubens, der Wissenschaft und des Lebens.* The chief compiler of the anthology, Dr. Ernst Zimmermann, in the introduction to the four-volume work, outlines what moved him and his four associates to issue the concordance and in that connection speaks of various matters which are, in my opinion, worth repeating at the present time. The object of these men had been to restore the treasures of Christian wisdom contained in Luther's writings from the undeserved oblivion into which they had fallen at that time. What would be the best way to do that? A new edition of Luther's works would not answer their purpose. It would be too expensive to produce. The price would keep many from acquiring it. Moreover, the very size of it would discourage many from making use of it, all the more since the parts useful for them would often be hidden among much that would be of no practical interest to them. How many pastors — not to speak at all of laymen — would have the time and the courage to plough through the 24 quarto volumes of the Walch edition or the 50 to 60 octavo volumes of the Erlangen edition just being printed at that time and so find what they wanted to learn? Again, a reprint of various selected works of Luther would not answer the pastors'

purpose. These works would never contain all that was required. The only solution was the publication of a collection of Luther's sayings topically arranged. They had in mind not merely the learned theologian — though even he would welcome it — but the practical evangelical pastor, usually overworked, as well as the educated layman.

Basically, all this applies to the present work, *What Luther Says*, by Ewald M. Plass (3 vols., published by Concordia Publishing House). It is not, of course, a mere translation of the *Geist aus Luthers Schriften*; the selections are new, not necessarily all different, but made specially for this book. The object, too, is distinctly practical — "in the spirit of Luther . . . to instruct and to inspire," not "to present a critical discussion and evaluation of moot questions," as the author says in the introduction. Even the good Luther student will find use for this concordance. The "good Luther student" is not one who "knows it all"; he knows best of all that there are ever new riches in Luther's offerings. But he will welcome the help this work offers in locating "what Luther says" on a certain topic. He would, no doubt, have in mind what Luther's stated conviction was; but would anyone be able to say, on the spur of the moment, where in Luther's works you will find what Luther had to say on, e. g., "Baptism for Human Beings Only"? Here he will find it.

Chiefly, however, the compilers of the old as well as the new anthology have in mind pastors and teachers and other church officials preparing for sermons or lectures, for debates and discussions, and anxious to find the opinion of this great teacher of the church, for their own information and for the instruction of others. Nor should it be overlooked that Christian laymen in business and social life come in contact with non-Christian or pseudo-Christian people who pose puzzling questions, intricate problems, with the desire, at times, to put Christians to shame and ridicule because they do not know the answer, but at times with the sincere desire for information. Christians would not, and should not, sidestep such a wish for instruction; and if they can give the smart propositioner a crushing answer — well done! And no one can supply them with better answers, in both cases, than Luther! And there are not many questions that did not confront him and for which

he did not offer an answer. Nor will he fail to point out that the first and final answer will be the Bible.—But where, in his voluminous writings, will they find the answer? Here is where the Plass anthology will serve best.

For the first time anywhere in the English-speaking world more than 5,100 choice selections on 200 subjects of abiding and practical concern—Luther's actual statements, not what somebody thinks he said—are offered in a new arrangement made for quick and easy reference. As in the old anthologies, all selections are topically arranged, the topics alphabetically. But this is new: Each topic is followed by a number of headings under which related subjects may be found. Subtopics, besides being numbered, are printed in black type, making the arrangement clear, each topic easily located. Each subtopic is introduced by a statement of when, where, under which circumstances, for what purpose, etc., Luther said or wrote the cited words, showing that statements are not wrested out of context and leading over from one topic to the other, so that the whole discussion forms one continuous story.

More than 10 years of work lie behind these 3 volumes; and it is a good job, well done. And—to speak again with Dr. Zimmermann—since those who worked on this production are not publishing something of their own creation, modesty need not restrain them; they can freely say that they expect general, even though not universal, applause. They know, of course, better than anyone else, that their work, though not perfect, is nevertheless creditable. Men who have not totally forgotten their gratitude for God's greatest blessing will acknowledge that. They also know that this open confession will not prevent the malice of faultfinding (*bä-mische Tadelsucht*), perhaps even provoke it; yet they were convinced this should not keep them from stating their conviction. Attention is called to the fact that actually collections of Luther's mistakes were published, even though these passages usually refer to matters which later on, when he came to the conviction of the full truth, he himself tried to eradicate.

Luther foresaw that there would be such criticism of his work, in fact, of all work in the church. He once said (SL VIII 497): "Heretics must proceed from the church, from Christendom, not

that the church is heretical or that there is false doctrine in Scripture, but Scripture fares like the beautiful rose from which the spider sucks nothing but poison. Not that there is poison in the rose (a bee sucks nothing but honey from the rose); it is the spider's fault. She spoils and turns to poison all that she touches, even though it is nothing but sugar and honey."

We know that this new effort, too, will meet its critics; in fact, they are here now; and some criticism should be rejected and some misapprehensions removed at once.

Here is one who does not like the publication of such an anthology at all: 3 volumes are no adequate substitute for 55 or more; and the Committee on Scholarly Research did not render a notable service when it approved the publication of this project. — Now we won't have to read Luther after all, says another; here is the predigested Luther for the busy pastor; and Concordia Publishing House is really interfering with the sale of its new American edition of Luther's works. — Well, I suppose every one of us has the right to his own opinion. I have on my desk a review of the new Arndt-Gingrich *Lexicon of the New Testament*. The writer says that one may have his doubts whether the publication of such a translation should be greeted as a joyful event and not rather as a symptom of a regrettable decline of the knowledge of foreign languages, even among scholars. — Would it not be nice if there were no "busy pastors" who have no time to read 55 volumes of Luther? — I doubt it, definitely. God has not made us all alike; He could have, but He didn't. He has endowed the workers in His kingdom with different gifts. Some are by choice and endowment students, scholars who help to carry out God's work on earth by the results of their studies; others are, again by choice and endowment, practical workers — thank God for that! Where, humanly speaking, would the church be today without the labors of our pioneer pastors and missionaries! And let us not forget that there are people today who are actually so occupied with work — work for the Kingdom — that they have little time to read except for their immediate needs. If they use these excerpts in their sermons — they could do very much worse — as so many are doing today! The majority of our church members by their daily labors, and many of our pastors going through monotonous

and repetitious work, make it possible for some of us to sit in our warm (or air-conditioned) rooms and study and read and write for the welfare of the church. It seems rather small-minded for us to look down on them because they have not read so much Luther as we have and to accuse them of laziness!

Nor is the fear justified that the use of such an anthology of Luther's words will displace the Bible. Everyone who has read much of Luther and does not disregard what he reads must know that all his arguments are based on Scripture and Bible passages are always quoted as proofs. — Nor is the argument better that these citations may be used to prove that Luther contradicted himself. When, since the 1500s, have the opponents of Luther ever ceased, with or without anthologies, to raise this accusation? What's more: *They are right!* In his writings Luther does contradict himself! When such citations are offered, you must always ask: *When* did Luther write that? Many of his earlier statements he later recalled and changed as his convictions of God's truth were perfected; and a good anthology will furnish the right answer to this objection too.

But enough of this! I refer only to one more remark of a reviewer: These citations may whet the appetite for reading Luther in context. For the last time let me cite Dr. Zimmermann, who was induced, against his will, to begin reading Luther's writings. Soon some of the beams of the great mind that had shaken the 16th-century world began to penetrate his antagonism, and in the end he was filled with awe and admiration — and at the same time with sadness because so much that was wonderful and elevating was inaccessible to contemporaries. He realized that the worth of Luther's writings does not lie in this, that a dogmatician or a church historian may find a proof in his pages; Luther was a man of the people and reaches his full value only when people use his writings. — Rightly the editor of the *Lutheraner* concludes his review: "The appetite will come with the eating!"

The editor of the last (XXIII) volume of the St. Louis edition concludes his introduction: "All that remains to do is that we do not forget Almighty God but thank and praise Him for His manifold and great mercy bestowed on us in the hard task of

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preparing this complete edition of Luther's works in the German language. At the same time we pray our dear Lord to bless this work that the volumes may not only be bought but used diligently so that the true Lutheran doctrine may be preserved and established, spread far and wide for the salvation of many for Jesus Christ, our Savior's sake. Amen."

May we conclude this discussion with the same wish and prayer.
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