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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

LUTHER THE EXPOSITOR

(A Review *)

The volume to be reviewed here intends to provide students with the insights they need to read Luther's exegetical writings intelligently, by reciting the principles that guided Luther in his exposition of Scripture and demonstrating how he applied these principles in his exegesis. It is divided into two parts; the first presenting the principles, the second demonstrating how Luther applied these principles in interpreting various texts concerning the Lord's Supper.

Chapter One, with its interesting thesis that "the history of theology is the record of how the church has interpreted the Scriptures" (page 5), provides the proper setting for a study of Luther's exegesis by placing it in the context of the history of exegesis. The author does not provide a consecutive history of interpretation before Luther, but he does indicate certain hermeneutical currents which contributed to Luther's exegesis, and he capably exemplifies his thesis, by demonstrating how the interpretation of the Scriptures has influenced theology and how theological whims have closed the minds of theologians to the meaning of the Scriptures.

Chapter Two begins by declaring that a study of Luther's exegesis is sure to figure prominently in any study of the history of exegesis, because Luther was predominantly an exegete and his theology, which has played such a decisive role in shaping Protestant thought, is the result of his exegetical pursuits. It continues to express the opinion that a study of Luther's exegesis can make a significant contribution to the study of Biblical hermeneutics, which is receiving

so much attention today. It also suggests that a study of Luther's exegesis may provide the clue to the dissolution of those current theories that overemphasize the differences between the "young" and the "polemical" Luther. Thus the author suggests that it is on the basis of Luther's interpretation that he deserves to be interpreted, because he conceived of himself primarily as an interpreter of the Scriptures. In this way Dr. Pelikan posits two propositions: first, that Luther's exegesis is important in a total study of the history of exegesis, which is important in the study of historical theology; second, the study of Luther's exegesis is imperative in any serious study of Luther.

Having thus stated the importance of a study of Luther's exegesis, the author continues in the next four chapters to delineate the principles that molded and produced this exegesis. In the third chapter the author adroitly leads the reader through the labyrinth of Luther's rather complex theology of the Word of God to the final conclusion that the Bible was the Word of God for Luther. However, it was the Word of God because it was the record of God's redemptive acts, particularly God's acts in Jesus Christ, and because it served as the source of the church's proclamation of the deeds of God, thus guarding this proclamation from error. In the following chapter the author synthesizes Luther's seemingly contradictory attitudes toward tradition by proposing that Luther attempted to remain loyal to tradition; but at the same time to extricate the Scriptures from tradition, by viewing the words of the church fathers as they themselves regarded them, namely, as expositions of the Word and not as extensions of divine revelation. In this way Luther could be loyal to tradition when it was a proper exposition of the Word, and could speak against it and condemn it when it was not. In Chapter Five, Luther's definite

* *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Companion volume. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959. xiii + 286 pages. Cloth. \$4.00.

break with the allegorical and insistence on the historical method of interpretation is discussed under the title "The History of the People of God." By demonstrating that he viewed the Scriptures as the "History of God's People," the author shows how Luther could insist on a historical interpretation and, at the same time, could produce a "spiritual" exposition consonant with the traditional interpretation of a passage. In the final chapter of this first section of the book the author describes how the various theological controversies in which Luther engaged contributed to a clearer definition of his theology, and demonstrates that it was in these controversies that some of Luther's hermeneutical principles were most clearly exhibited. Some of the attitudes toward the Scriptures that Luther exhibited were: the aim to accord more importance to the clear intent of the Scriptures than to what the fathers had said about such passages; the idea of illuminating a text by throwing the light of other Scriptures on it; the insistence that one must build his theology on the clear and proper meaning of the clear passages that deal with a given subject; the axiom that one may interpret the Scriptures as they read and must experience the meaning of a text before he can correctly understand it.

In the second half of the book, Dr. Pelikan demonstrates how Luther applied these principles by discussing Luther's exegesis of various texts relating to the Sacrament of the Altar. In the exegesis of "This is My body," Luther most clearly applied the principle of deriving his teaching from the particular statements of Scriptures. Thus he constantly affirmed that the fathers, who disregarded this statement or rationalized it into a doctrine of transubstantiation, as well as his contemporaries, who denied the possibility of what it clearly stated on rationalistic grounds, were incorrect in their interpretation. In his interpretation of "For the forgiveness of sins" and "If anyone eats of this

bread, he will live forever," Luther demonstrated the principle of letting other Scriptures illuminate a particular text. For all that the Scriptures say about God's free and sovereign grace, as well as all they say about God's placing on man the responsibility of receiving the benefits of that grace (i. e., the forgiveness of sins) through the channels God has ordained, was important in the understanding of the relationship between the Lord's Supper and the forgiveness of sins. Likewise, all that the Gospels say about Christ's life, death, and resurrection must be associated with this sacrament which commemorates these events and communicates their benefits to Christ's people. In his interpretation of "Participation in the body of Christ" and "Do this in remembrance of Me," Luther applied the principle of viewing the Scriptures as the history of God's people. Hence without denying the intimate participation of Christian believers in one another, he emphasized that the *κοινωνία* of the Lord's Supper was the peculiar province of the Holy Spirit, who first united believers with Christ, then with one another through the means by which God's grace was communicated to them. And in interpreting the kind of "remembrance," of which the latter text speaks, Luther drew not only upon the various memorial acts and rituals of Israel but also insisted that the historical acts of Jesus, which were pregnant with future meaning and hope for the people of God, were the major subjects of remembrance. In his interpretation of "You proclaim the Lord's death" Luther applied the insight, derived from his complicated theology concerning the Word of God, that the Word of God is the proclamation of the mighty acts of God. Since, according to this text, it was also true that the Sacrament proclaimed the mighty act of Christ, Word and Sacrament should be regarded as co-ordinate with one another. Thus his exegesis led him to condemn both the subordination of the Word to the Sacrament

and the subordination of the Sacrament to the Word and kept him from falling into the errors of his contemporaries. In his interpretation of "Once for all the sacrifice of Himself," Luther exhibited most clearly his principle of denying the validity of tradition when it was not in accord with clear Scripture, and yet retaining its valid contributions. Here, while insisting that Christ's sacrifice was an unrepeatable event, in contrast to tradition, he also insisted that the church's worship (including the Sacrament) was a "sacrifice of thanksgiving," as tradition and the Scriptures taught.

In the concluding chapter the author, while acknowledging Luther's stature as a Biblical interpreter, raises the question of the relevance of the application of Luther's exegetical principles to contemporary exegesis, by posing several questions which Lutheran theologians will need to answer before one will be able to determine whether Luther is merely a great exegete of the past or a significant contributor to Biblical hermeneutics in the 20th century.

The value of this volume should be clearly evident to the readers of this review. However, it may be worthwhile to enumerate some areas where it should, in the opinion of this reviewer, make a significant contribution.

It adequately fulfills the purpose for which it was written, namely, to provide the student with the tool he needs to read and understand Luther's exegetical works. One cannot read these works without noticing seeming contradictions and one-sided arguments, which are often not consistent with what we know of Luther as a Biblical exegete. (Since he translated the entire Bible, we expect him to know it all.) This book demonstrates that Luther's theological system was a synthesis of the major emphases of both the Old and New Testaments, as he understood them, and exhibits his ability to simultaneously emphasize two facts which theologians both before and after him have considered contradictory.

So because this volume helps us to understand Luther's exegesis by placing it against the background of his theology, it will soon prove its worth as a companion volume to Luther's exegetical writings.

In his insistence that there is a demonstrable continuity in Luther's exegetical writings and an unchanging characteristic in the application of his principles of interpretation the author has made a significant contribution to the discussion of the "young" and the "polemical" Luther, which has, at least for this reviewer, complicated rather than clarified our understanding of Luther in the past decade. We hope that the ideas, expressed in nucleus here, will be developed in future studies concerning Luther.

For the Lutheran student and pastor, to whom Luther is something of an ideal, perhaps the greatest value of this volume is its demonstration of its last statement. "For in his exegesis . . . the Reformer represented himself as a son of the church and as a witness to the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ and documented in the Sacred Scriptures. To that church, to that Word, to that Christ, to those Scriptures, Luther the expositor pointed. He still does." If this volume will help all Lutheran exegetes to pattern their interpretation after Luther's in this regard, it will offer a most beneficial service.

Physically the volume has the excellent typography and binding one has come to expect from its publisher. A defect in the volume was the editorial decision to combine index and bibliography, entering books under title rather than under author. There are almost two columns of entries under "Die . . .", for example. The result is that it is almost impossible for the bibliographically ignorant to learn anything from the book, not even the works of Luther on which the author based his research. It is hoped future volumes in the series will list authors and titles together in the index or in a separate bibliography.

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