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Luther and the English Reformation

(1959 Reformation Lecture delivered at Luther-Tyndale Memorial Church,
London, on 31 October 1959)

By E. GEORGE PEARCE

MARTIN LUTHER never came to England. So far as I know, he was never invited. Melancthon was—many times, sometimes by King Henry himself, very often by the Archbishop of Canterbury,¹ but he always found reason to decline. Martin Luther never set foot on the realms of Henry VIII. What, then, is the connection between Luther and the English Reformation? There are serious scholars² who maintain that the Reformation in England got its impetus not from Luther but from England's own John Wycliffe and was bound to come, Luther or no Luther. Are Lutherans, especially we Lutherans in England, guilty of introducing wishful thinking into our reading of the events that took place here 400 years ago?

It is the burden of this 1959 Reformation lecture to show that there were points of contact between Luther and the English Reformers and that through these contacts the theology of Luther was given a permanent place in the faith and worship of English Protestantism. So there are two questions: How did the doctrine of Luther get into England? Where are the proofs of his influence in English religious life today?

¹ "I am now sending a third letter to Melanc[h]thon in which I exhort him to come to us." Cranmer's letter to John Lasco, *Original Letters 1537—58*, p. 17.

² Pollard, *Cambridge Modern History* II, 478.

I

POINTS OF CONTACT

Just before Christmas in 1525 King Henry VIII received a letter, postmarked Bordeaux, from Dr. Edward Lee, his almoner, which said:

Please it your highness to understand that I am certainly informed, as I passed in this country, that an Englishman, your subject, at the solicitation and instance of Luther, with whom he is, hath translated the New Testament into English and within a few days intendeth to arrive with the same imprinted in England. I need not to advertize your grace what infection and danger may ensue hereby if it be not withstanded. This is the way to fill your realm with Lutherans.

And the letter goes on,

For all Luther's opinions be grounded upon bare words of Scripture. . . . All our forefathers, governors of the Church of England, have with all diligence forbade and eschewed publication of English Bibles. . . . The integrity of the Christian faith within your realm cannot long endure if these books may come in.³

Luther's Books

And come in they did. Of Tyndale's Bible, referred to in the letter, we shall speak later. Books were the first means by which Luther's theology influenced the English Reformation. There was an eager de-

³ Froude, *History of England* II, 31.

mand in Britain for the writings of Luther. Men wanted to read what this monk, who dared to defy Rome, had to say. As early as 1520, only three years after the posting of the 95 Theses, Luther's great tracts, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *Address to the Christian Nobility*, were selling in England.⁴ In 1521, Cardinal Wolsey ordered his books to be burned. By 1529 his tract *The Liberty of the Christian Man*, his catechism in Latin, and his earlier *Commentary on Galatians* had been added to the books the reading of which was forbidden. Two years later the charge that he sold Luther's books brought the first of many, Richard Bayfield, monk of Bury St. Edmunds, to the stake of Smithfield. But enterprising merchants, as always, found ways to supply the demand despite the ban. Shippers in Antwerp smuggled the contraband books into East Coast ports in bales of cloth and in bags of flax. In 1536 Henry suddenly swung around and ordered Melancthon's books to be included in the course of studies at Cambridge.

Luther's writings, a recent Roman Catholic historian says, "were the first 'best sellers' the book trade ever knew."⁵ Sir Thomas More, whose special license it was to read and answer such books, wearily confessed, "The bare names of those books were almost enough to make a book."⁶

One may overestimate the penetration of Lutheran ideas through printed books into the lives of the common people, but the effect upon budding theologians at the two universities is hard to exaggerate. At Oxford, already in 1521, there were enough "young scholars suspected" to provoke the

chancellor to recommend vigorous action: "that no man, without express license, have, keep, or read any of the same books under pain of excommunication."⁷

White Horse Inn

At Cambridge there was the White Horse Inn,⁸ a notable center of Lutheran activity. At this public house, with its easy and discreet access from the backs of Kings and Queens Colleges, there gathered, from about 1521, a group of scholars to read, discuss, and circulate the writings of Luther. Headed by Robert Barnes, this 16th-century "Luther Society" had an enormous influence on the subsequent changes in the English Church. Among the thirty or more men, most of them in their early twenties, whose theology was shaped in these clandestine discussions were the leading English Reformers, like Tyndale and Coverdale, the Bible translators, Cranmer and Parker, archbishops of Canterbury, and Latimer and Ridley, popular preachers.

English Reformers Visit Luther

A more direct influence upon the direction of the English Reformation came through the personal contact which leading English Reformers had with Luther while they were in exile on the Continent.

Robert Barnes

Of Robert Barnes, "restorer of letters"⁹ to his eager Cambridge students, ambassador and chaplain to Henry VIII, and

⁷ J. H. Blunt, *The Reformation of the Church of England* (London, 1897), p. 76. Blunt quotes from Ellis, *Original Letters* III, i, 239.

⁸ The White Horse Inn stood in Trumpington Street, opposite Bennet Street, and was razed to allow the improvement of Kings College.

⁹ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* V, 415.

⁴ Hardwick, *Reformation*, p. 168 n.

⁵ Hughes, *Reformation in England*, p. 134.

⁶ Gasquet, *Eve of the Reformation*, p. 195.

"the holy martyr St. Robert" to his friend, Martin Luther, I need not say much to church members who own him as the first English Lutheran pastor or to clergy who call their pastoral conferences after his name.

Robert Barnes spent several years in Germany, first as a fugitive from Henry's wrath and then as Henry's ambassador and theological adviser. His personal contact with Luther was repeated and close. Luther called him "our good pious table companion and guest of our house." At Wittenberg he published, under the name of Antonius Anglus, a treatise of 19 articles.¹⁰ They reveal a full grasp and a complete acceptance of distinctive Lutheran tenets. When Henry needed Lutheran allies, he recalled Barnes and from 1534 to 1539 used him to negotiate alliances with the King of Denmark and with the Smalcaldic League, headed by the Elector of Saxony. It was Barnes, the king's chaplain, as the letter of introduction called him, who arranged the important series of Anglo-Lutheran theological meetings which took place at King Henry's request from 1535 to 1539 and of which we shall hear more shortly.

Robert Barnes yearned and strove to make the English Church Lutheran. But he died at the stake at the age of 45 in 1540—too soon to take an important part in the reforming of his church. His influence was, nonetheless, significant for his own day—and far beyond it. As leader of the White Horse Inn group at Cambridge his fiery espousal of Lutheran principles was a major influence in moulding

fledgling reformers. His own persistent efforts, as of the only convinced Lutheran on the English side in the Anglo-Lutheran discussions of 1535 to 1539, succeeded, as we shall see, in the ultimate incorporation of large sections of Lutheran belief into the doctrine of the Church of England.

William Tyndale

William Tyndale was another maker of English Protestantism whose theology and work were deeply influenced by personal contact with Luther in Wittenberg.

Tyndale was probably an early member of the White Horse Inn fraternity; at any rate he was at Cambridge University during the years that Robert Barnes and other Reformers were there.¹¹ His determination to cause every ploughboy in England to know the Scriptures in his own tongue¹² lost him his first parish at Little Sodbury in the Cotswolds. But even in London and under the protection of a generous merchant, Humphrey Monmouth, he "understood," he said, "at last not only that there was no room in my lord of London's palace to translate the New Testament, but also that there was no place to do it in all England."¹³

In Germany he stayed for a time at Wittenberg,¹⁴ where, Foxe says, "he had here conference with Luther and other learned men." Sir Thomas More states that Tyndale "got him to Luther straight" and that "at the time of his translation of the New Testament was with Luther in Wittenberg."¹⁵ Tyndale's Bible translation, which

¹¹ Mozley, *William Tyndale*, p. 20; see also Hughes, *Reformation in England*, p. 133 n.

¹² Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, p. xix.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

¹⁴ Mozley, *William Tyndale*, pp. 51, 52.

¹⁵ More, *Dialogue* (1557), p. 283, 221.

¹⁰ *Fürnehmlich Artikel, neulich verteutschet, von Dr. Antonius aus England* (Wittenberg, 1531). Bugenhagen was the translator.

he was still revising at his arrest and martyrdom at Vilvorde in Belgium in 1536, was, in the opinion of a contemporary scholar, far more important in England than any theological tract; it was "the supreme event of the first decade of the English Reformation."¹⁶

Miles Coverdale

Another English Reformer whose Bible work exercised a decisive influence upon the current of English Reformation history was Miles Coverdale. For years Coverdale was a Lutheran pastor near Strasbourg. Also a member of the Cambridge Luther group, he acted as Barnes' secretary at his trial before Wolsey.

It was Coverdale who in 1535 produced the first complete English Bible, a translation from the Latin Vulgate which borrowed heavily from Luther's version and also from Tyndale's. The title page of the Coverdale Bible frankly states: "translated out of the Dutch (German) and Latin into English." His "Goostly Psalmes and Spirituale Songs," the first English Protestant hymnal, included, of a total of 41, 22 by Luther and 12 by other Lutheran hymn writers.

Coverdale was made Bishop of Exeter in 1551, was deposed and imprisoned under Mary, and then escaped to the Continent, where for a time he again served his Lutheran congregation near Strasbourg. Under Elizabeth he returned to England and died at the age of 80.

John Rogers

Tyndale's Bible was incomplete; Coverdale's unauthorized. The first English Bible sanctioned by Church and King was issued

in 1537 by John Rogers as "Matthew's Bible."¹⁷

John Rogers, also a Cambridge man, became a student of Luther at Wittenberg University, matriculating there in 1540. For five years he served a Lutheran congregation in the town of Meldorf. He was the first martyr of the Marian persecution, dying at Smithfield in 1555. "He has been burned alive for being a Lutheran," the French ambassador wrote to a friend, "but he died persisting in his opinion."

Matthew's Bible was not a new translation. It was a composite, with some corrections, of the texts of Tyndale and Coverdale, plus copious prefaces and marginal notes by Rogers, but taken largely from Luther. But this is the Bible which, according to an eminent authority, Westcott, is "the foundation of the text of our present Bible."¹⁸ The Authorized Version, which has exerted such incalculable influence upon the life and literature of England, is thus based ultimately upon the work of three men, all of whom bore the impress of Luther's spirit and method.

Anglo-Lutheran Conferences

In addition to the writings of Luther and to his personal acquaintance with prominent English Reformers, there was a third channel which allowed Lutheran principles to affect the course of the Reformation in England.

This was the series of Anglo-Lutheran theological conferences between 1535 and

¹⁷ Westcott, *History of the English Bible*, p. 68, is uncertain whether Rogers and Matthew are the same man. Most scholars agree with Mozley, *William Tyndale*, p. 179: "Matthew was none other than Rogers."

¹⁸ Westcott, p. 73.

¹⁶ Rupp, *English Protestant Tradition*, p. 48.

1539, initiated by Henry VIII and arranged largely by his Lutheran chaplain, Robert Barnes. Not that the king was interested in theology; his only concern was the safety of his realm.¹⁹ Threatening him during those years was a coalition of the two most powerful men in Europe, Emperor Charles V and Francis I of France. As long as there was danger of invasion by their combined forces, Henry was very willing to be helped by the Smalcaldic League of Lutheran princes and was even prepared to discuss doctrine, as the Lutherans always insisted. But he had no intention of changing the doctrine of his church. This is the key to the amazing changes of policy which Henry exhibited during those years. Yet though the king never intended it, the doctrinal discussions which took place from 1535 to 1539 opened the way for Lutheran tenets to be taken into the official doctrine of the Church of England.

First Series, 1535—36

In 1535, after Robert Barnes had cleared the way with Luther's protector, Elector John Frederick of Saxony, a delegation consisting of Bishop Edward Foxe of Hereford, Dr. Heath, later Archbishop of York, and Barnes met with the Lutheran princes at Smalcald and put forward their king's proposals for a Protestant alliance. To this the Lutherans replied that, of course, Henry would be welcome in the Smalcaldic League, but since the first object of the league was the defense of "the pure doctrine of the Gospel," any new member would first have to subscribe to the Augustana.

At this the conference adjourned. The

English embassy then moved to Wittenberg for theological discussions with Luther and Melanchthon. What Henry wanted here was endorsement for his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. This, on Scriptural grounds, Luther could not give. What the Wittenberg theologians wanted was unity in doctrine. Discussions began. At length Melanchthon reported: "Of the remaining articles of doctrine we had no light disputation, but nonetheless we agreed over many."²⁰ Out of these discussions evolved the "Wittenberg Articles of 1536," taken largely from the Augustana, upon which Luther and Melanchthon had taken their stand.

As to further negotiations Luther told the Elector he was not averse to verbal changes, but so far as doctrine was concerned, it would be, he said, "great folly to grant concessions to the King of England which had been denied to the Bishop of Rome."²¹

Second Series, 1538—39

The second series of meetings began when Henry, under cross-Channel pressure again, invited a Lutheran delegation, Melanchthon among them if possible, to London to attempt a "concord of doctrine" which would enable the Lutherans to make common cause with him against Rome.

Melanchthon could not come. Instead, Francis Burchardt, Frederick Myconius, and a layman, George Boyneburg, arrived in June 1538 with a letter to the king earnestly requesting him to promote true unity among the delegates. On the English side was a commission headed by the archbishop and including two bishops and

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Rupp, pp. 10 ff.

four doctors, Robert Barnes among them. Discussions went on all summer. One by one they went through the sections of the Augustana. By August they had agreed and compiled a list of 13 articles.

Meanwhile the political situation across the Channel had improved, and the pressure was off Henry again. He took a hand in the proceedings of the theologians. He was not pleased with the Thirteen Articles. He would brook no change whatever in Communion in one kind, clerical celibacy, or private masses. The conference was finished.

Once again the dream of the Lutherans that England might be won for the principles of the Augustana was shattered. Myconius wrote bitterly: "Harry only wants to sit as Antichrist in the temple of God and that Harry should be Pope. The rich treasures, the rich incomes of the church, these are the Gospel According to Harry."²² On Oct. 1 the Lutherans went home, having accomplished nothing.

At least so Henry thought.

II

LUTHER'S IMPRINTS ON THE ENGLISH CHURCH

To this point we have dealt with the question: How did the principles and spirit of Luther get across the Channel and into England? We have seen how through his books, through personal contact, and through official theological discussions he was able to influence the Reformation in England. We must now look at the evidences of such influence in the theology and worship of English Protestantism today.

²² Ibid., p. 117.

The English Bible

The one book which has most affected the life and faith of the English people is the Holy Bible. This is also the book in which, more than in any other, the influence of Luther is seen.

Even before it was off the presses Tyndale's translation was called Luther's New Testament in English. According to the Roman Catholic opponent of Luther, John Cochlaeus, it was all part of a great scheme to convert England to Lutheranism. In a pub in Cologne, Cochlaeus overheard two printers boast "that whether the King and the Cardinal would or not, all England would in a short time become Lutheran."²³ Inviting them to his home and plying them with wine, Cochlaeus learned "the secret by which England was to be drawn over to the party of Luther, namely, that there were at that very time in the press 3,000 copies of the Lutheran New Testament translated into the English language."²⁴

Cochlaeus brands Tyndale's work "Lutheran," of course, for more than one reason. He wants to discredit it and prejudice its reception. But modern scholars, on the basis of sound scientific investigation, agree with him. "To anyone," one scholar says, "who has enjoyed the opportunity of placing side by side the folio of Luther's German Testament printed in September 1522 and the quarto of Tyndale printed in September of 1525, the whole matter is clear at a glance. Tyndale's New Testament is Luther's in miniature. The general appearance of the page is the same; the arrangement of the text is the same;

²³ Quoted from Cochlaeus, *Commentary on the Acts and Writings of Luther*, in Demaus, *William Tyndale*, p. 136.

²⁴ Ibid.

and the appropriation of the margins, the inner one for parallel passages and the outer for glosses, is also the same."²⁵ And in the content itself Tyndale follows Luther most of the time. Gordon Rupp says: "On careful examination, [there are] hardly any points where disagreement between Tyndale and Luther can be found."²⁶ Westcott concedes "the profound influence which Luther exerted,"²⁷ yet says if Tyndale used Luther, "it was with the judgment of a scholar."²⁸ "So skilled in seven languages, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, English, French [and we might add an eighth—German], that, whichever he spoke, you would suppose it his native tongue,"²⁹ a contemporary scholar says of Tyndale. He was no mere copyist but a scholar in his own right. Nonetheless, it is plain that he had Luther's version before him as he prepared, from the original, his own translation.

It is certainly no derogation to Tyndale, nor to Coverdale and Rogers who, even more, borrowed from Luther, to believe that in their close personal contact, either as Luther's guests or as Lutheran pastors, they had come under the influence of the great faith and the great mind of Luther and hence followed in his footsteps as a translator and commentator.

At any rate the same hearty simplicity and the same rhythmic force which inspire Luther's Bible are everywhere in the combined work of the three men from whom, despite many revisions, has come, with but

a few minor changes,³⁰ the book to which all British Christians, Anglican or Free Church, turn today for light, life, and salvation.

The Thirty-Nine Articles

The Thirty-Nine Articles also bear the indelible impress of Luther's theology. These are the statements of doctrine which set forth officially what the Church of England believes and to which every minister of that church is bound not to contradict in his teaching.

We must return now to the 1535—39 discussion between Lutheran and Anglican divines at Wittenberg and London and to the Thirteen Articles which they agreed upon before the king politely sent the Lutherans home. The Thirteen Articles of 1538 were never submitted to Convocation, were never sanctioned, were not even published but were allowed quietly to drop into oblivion. But four reigns later they appeared again and became the basis of the officially accepted Confession of the Church of England. And so those conferences which Henry for his own political ends began and ended as he pleased did accomplish something. In the end it was the theology not of Henry but of Robert Barnes which was to prevail in his realms.

The Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563 are the final product of a whole series of doctrinal statements framed during the reigns of Henry, Edward, and Elizabeth, all of which are based on the Thirteen Articles and borrow thought and language from the Augustana. The Thirteen Articles are "the Anglo-German medium,"³¹ as one

²⁵ Demaus, p. 154.

²⁶ Rupp, p. 50 n.

²⁷ Westcott, p. 146.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 151.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁰ Hughes, p. 146, says, "The Authorized Version is 90% Tyndale without alteration."

³¹ Hardwick, *History of the Articles of Religion*, p. 60.

historian puts it, through which large sections of Lutheran doctrine found a permanent place in official Anglican theology.

It is "most remarkable" that as late as 1563 "the model chosen for the guidance of the compilers [of the Articles] was a Lutheran document."³² By this time Reformed theology was in favor in England, probably because most of the bishops had spent their years in exile among the Reformed and not in the Lutheran churches. The Lutherans had their doubts about preachers who would not accept the Augsburg Confession. At Wesel, Melancthon intervened, saying they were to be "instructed and informed" and not "rudely thrown out from among them."³³

There seems even to have been a group of English Reformers who urged the adoption of the Augustana itself.³⁴ Perhaps, also, the influence of Elizabeth is here. The daughter of Anne Boleyn, whom Shakespeare calls "the spleeny Lutheran," had little liking for Calvin and his reform.

When the Thirty-Nine Articles are placed side by side with the Augsburg Confession, it is immediately apparent that the later document is greatly indebted to the earlier one and that the one was used in the preparation of the other. Five of the Thirty-Nine Articles have language that is identical with that of the Augustana; another eleven are similar in substance, if not in language.

Article XIX (39): Of the Church

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in the which the

pure Word is preached and the Sacraments be duly administered. . . .

Article VII (AC): Of the Church

. . . the church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered. . . .

Article XI (39): Of the Justification of Man

We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith and not for our own works and deservings. . . .

Article IV (AC): Of Justification

". . . men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith. . . .

Article XXV (39): Of the Sacraments
Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses and effectual signs of grace and God's will toward us, by the which He doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our faith in Him. . . .

Article XIII (AC): Of the Use of the Sacraments

. . . the Sacraments were ordained, not only to be marks of profession among men, but rather to be signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us, instituted to awaken and confirm faith. . . .

"The Book of Common Prayer"

I turn now to a final evidence of Luther's abiding influence on the Church in England: *The Book of Common Prayer*, the official service book of the Established Church, but used also in the Methodist Church.

³² Hardwick, *Reformation*, p. 213.

³³ Quoted in Smithen, *Continental Protestantism and the English Church*, p. 88.

³⁴ Strype, *Annals of the Reformation* I, 53.

If Tyndale, Coverdale, and Rogers had Luther's Bible before them as they prepared their own, if the composers of the Thirty-Nine Articles drew upon the Augsburg Confession, then certainly Cranmer and his associates made use of Lutheran orders as they compiled *The Book of Common Prayer*, the literary gem of all English rituals. This close affinity is acknowledged in the 1949 brochure published by the Church of England to commemorate the quadricentennial of the *Prayer Book*.³⁵ Sources for much of the reformed liturgy in the *Prayer Book* are Luther himself, Lutheran orders of service, and the church order of the Lutheran Archbishop, Herman of Cologne.

It was Robert Barnes who was "the first to introduce, in 1538, the practise of saying the Mass in English."³⁶ In 1542 King Henry ordered Convocation to reform the various orders of service. The Litany which Cranmer published two years later borrows freely from Luther's Litany of 1529.

The Order of Holy Communion in the *Prayer Book* follows closely the one issued by the Archbishop of Cologne. It is interesting to note that both the Lutheran and the Anglican service required that before Communion men and women separate, "the men on the one syde and the women on the other syde," a practise still observed in parts of the Lutheran Church. The *First Prayer Book* also directed the minister to place the bread not into the hand but into the mouth of the communicant.

The Order of Baptism takes over "directly and almost verbatim"³⁷ the prayer "Almighty and Everlasting God" and the

reading from Mark X from Luther's *Baptism Booklet* (*Taufbuechlein*) and Herman's Order. The Lutheran custom of sponsors, omitted by all other Protestants, is also retained in the *Prayer Book*.

The Anglican Confirmation Service is also largely adapted from the Lutheran form of Archbishop Herman. As in Lutheran orders, so in the English Confirmation Service a public profession of faith at the age of discretion is required which, according to an authority, "finds no counterpart in the ancient rite."³⁸

In the Marriage Service of *The Book of Common Prayer*, the joining of hands with the words "What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" and the Declaration of Marriage beginning "Forasmuch as N. and N. have consented together in holy wedlock" are from Luther's *Marriage Booklet* (*Tranbuechlein*).

An essential part of Protestant worship is the singing of hymns. Here, too, Luther is the benefactor. The first Protestant hymnal ever published appeared in 1524 and contained eight hymns. Four were by Luther. Of the 41 hymns in the first Protestant hymnal in the English language prepared by Miles Coverdale, 22, as we have seen, were from the pen of Luther. It would be hard to find a hymnal in any Protestant church in England today which does not include his greatest hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," the Battle Hymn of the Reformation, which, as a music critic has said, "thunders at the very gate of heaven with its magnificent affirmation of belief."³⁹

³⁵ *Your Prayer Book*, SPCK.

³⁶ Smithen, p. 72.

³⁷ Daniel, *Prayer Book*, p. 416.

³⁸ Gasquet-Bishop, *Edward VI and the Book of Common Prayer*, p. 227.

³⁹ *Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 193.

To sum up, from the facts which this essay has brought together there can be no doubt that the influence of Dr. Martin Luther upon the course of English ecclesiastical history was immense and enduring. The English Reformers borrowed his very language for their Bible, their Confession, their Liturgy, and thus his very accent is still heard in the devotion, in the theology, and in the worship of the English nation even today, 413 years after his living voice has been hushed in death. Such is the debt which the Anglo-Saxon nation owes to the Saxon monk and which we remember this day.

London, England

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