

9-1-1961

Luther as Exegete

Douglas Carter

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Recommended Citation

Carter, Douglas (1961) "Luther as Exegete," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 32, Article 51.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol32/iss1/51>

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Carter: Luther as Exegete

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Volume XXXII

September 1961

Number 9

Published by

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Edited by

THE FACULTY OF CONCORDIA SEMINARY

SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE

SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY is published monthly by Concordia Publishing House, 3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis 18, Mo., to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. \$3.50 per annum, anywhere in the world, payable in advance. Second-class postage paid at St. Louis, Mo.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

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*Address all communications to the Editorial Committee in care of
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CONCORDIA
THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Luther As Exegete¹

By DOUGLAS CARTER

IN the era of the 16th-century Reformation it was given to Martin Luther to fill a role unique in its range. He was a controversialist who joined issue with the regnant theology of his day; a reformer who brought about such a renewal of the church as many of his contemporaries and predecessors had dreamed of; the reorganizer who changed the ecclesiastical map of Europe; a pastoral administrator; a spiritual director; and a writer of great versatility whose published works run to more than 50,000 pages in the Erlangen edition. His own church he gave not only a translation of the Bible, but also its catechism, its first vernacular liturgy, and the beginning of its hymnody, and through his sermons—read far and wide in churches and households—its distinctive piety and ethos. When towards the end of his life he let slip the remark that God had led him like a blind mule, he was without doubt disclosing his own astonishment that he had been guided into such unpremeditated paths. For at the beginning of his career, when many voices were calling for a removal of abuses in the church, the only reform that Luther foresaw as desirable was a reform of theological education based on the Bible, and liberated from the heavy hand of the scholastic theologians, whom he considered to be deeply infected with

philosophy, rationalism, and moralism. In short, he hoped for a revival of Biblical theology. From the age of 29 he held the chair of Biblical exegesis in the University of Wittenberg, and from time to time he shared the preaching duties at the town church (where there was a sermon each weekday and three times on Sunday). The interpretation and application of Scripture was therefore his constant daily occupation. In this paper we shall attempt to examine what is distinctive in his approach to it.

We must begin by taking stock of the background.

1. The 15th century was an age when the Scriptures were read. On entering the monastery of the Augustinian friars at Erfurt, Luther was given a Bible and told that the statutes of the order required its members "eagerly to read, devoutly to hear, and zealously to learn" the Scriptures. Throughout Germany translations abounded and were freely circulated, 18 editions of a complete German Bible being published between 1466 and 1521. The study of the Bible amongst the laity, more common during the Middle Ages than Protestants have sometimes cared to admit,² had been greatly encouraged as the influence of the Brethren of the

¹ ED. NOTE: This article was presented as "The Reformation Lecture" in Luther-Tyndale Memorial Church, London, England. The author, a clergyman of the Church of England, is gaining increasing renown as a Luther scholar.

² Official prohibitions of Bible reading by the laity belong mainly to the first half of the 13th century as emergency countermeasures against the Cathari and Waldenses. Even so, in a letter of 1237 to Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople, Pope Gregory IX writes that "it is expedient that all should read or hear" the Scriptures.

Common Life made itself felt through northern Europe³ and the theological curriculum of the University of Paris shows how large a part the Scriptures played in the education of the clergy.⁴ The spread of the new learning had given fresh impetus to Biblical studies by restoring to honor the philological study of the text in the original languages, while at the same time indirectly encouraging them by its criticisms of scholastic theology. Luther's contemporaries included Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (1455—1536), humanist, exegete, and Pauline scholar; John Reuchlin, the Hebraist (1455—1522); and Johannes Trithemius (1462—1516), Abbot of Sponheim, whose exertions made his Rhineland monastery illustrious as a center of Biblical learning.

2. In the theological schools, Scripture was recognized, at least in theory, as the unique authority in matters of doctrine.⁵

³ Cp. Gerhard Zerbolt of Deventer, *De utilitate lectionis sacrarum litterarum in lingua vulgari*. They made a long-lasting impression on the popular spirituality of the Netherlands. Dutch Catholic devotional literature up to the end of the 17th century is so full of Biblical allusions as to have been all but incomprehensible to anyone unfamiliar with the Scriptures.

⁴ Speaking out of his vast knowledge of medieval spirituality, John Mason Neale describes the first characteristic of medieval sermons as "the immense and almost intuitive knowledge of Scripture which their writers possessed." He takes note that their citations are habitually drawn from every part of the Bible. *Mediaeval Preachers and Mediaeval Preaching* (London, 1856), pp. xxv ff. On the subject in general see B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (2d ed.) (Oxford, 1952).

⁵ Notably by the exponents of the *via moderna*. Cp. Occam: *Christianus de necessitate salutis non tenetur ad credendum nec credere quod nec in Biblia continetur nec ex solis contentis in Biblia potest consequentia necessaria et manifesta inferri*. *Dialogus*, 411.

Although the tendency to elevate tradition to the same level as Scripture, and to condition the interpretation of Scripture by tradition, had been growing throughout the Middle Ages, it was not until 1546 (two months after Luther's death) that the Council of Trent decreed by a significantly small majority that Scripture and tradition are to be received "with an equal affection of piety and reverence." It is true that at the beginning of the 16th century the accepted method of interpretation was to determine the sense of Scripture by what the fathers and other doctors of the church had said. Thus at the Leipzig disputation of 1519 Luther's opponent, Eck, based his argument for the papal supremacy on the text, "The Son can do nothing of Himself but what He seeth the Father do, for whatsoever things He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise" (John 5:19), showing that St. Bernard of Clairvaux had deduced from this passage that there must be a hierarchy of order in the church. Nonetheless when Luther answered Eck by asserting that only the literal meaning of Scripture is adequate as proof in matters of doctrine, and that the comments of the fathers do not determine the sense, he was in fact echoing St. Thomas Aquinas, who says: "Theology uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the church as one that may properly be used, but only as probable. For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there be) made to other doctors."⁶

⁶ *Summa theol.*, I, I, 8. — ED. NOTE: Cf. the recent article in this journal "Scripture and

Luther's championship of the sole authority of Scripture in matters of faith was therefore nothing new, even though in his day it was passing out of fashion. It is, for example, defended very thoroughly in the writings of Gregory of Rimini, a 14th-century professor in the University of Paris, and General of the Augustinian Friars.⁷ He is quoted extensively (and without acknowledgment) by Peter d'Ailly, a writer whom Luther studied closely. Gregory distinguishes between *theological principles* (by which he means truths explicit in Scripture) and *theological theses* (propositions necessarily deduced from Scripture), and concludes that these two make up the proper subject matter of Christian doctrine. In contrast to those theologians who affirmed that there are truths of doctrine which may be discovered by natural reason alone, Gregory excludes all rational proof from the field of theology, maintaining that doctrine is rooted exclusively in the self-revelation of God, who speaks in the Bible. This self-revelation creates faith (not knowledge, which is acquired by the method of demonstration); and such faith excludes all doubt and error. After the Council of Trent, Gregory's work passed into oblivion. But he represents a type of theology studied in the order to which he and Luther belonged, and this goes to explain why Luther was so warmly sup-

ported by his fellow Augustinians in the early stages of his battle for the authority of Scripture. He and they thought the same thoughts and spoke the same language.

3. The age was not wholly insensitive to the critical problems arising from the study of the Biblical texts, nor was Luther. He discusses copyists' errors, takes note of the difficulties of O.T. chronology, and is aware of the synoptic problem and of problems raised by the language and thought forms used by the sacred writers when they speak of the creation of the world and of the last things. He distinguishes between permanent and temporary elements in the Old Testament and urges expositors to make themselves familiar with its historical framework. In his *Preface to the Prophets*, 1532, he underlines the importance of a knowledge of their times.

4. Luther shared with his contemporaries a belief in the plenary verbal inspiration of Scripture. Both he and they took seriously the affirmation of 1 Cor. 2:13 that there is a state of man radically different from that of the natural man, namely, that of the spiritual man who is led by the Holy Spirit and who "makes known the things that are freely given to us by God . . . not in words which man's wisdom teacheth but which the Spirit teacheth." As Lutheran theology developed after Luther's death, the doctrine of inspiration was highlighted and reflectively elaborated, for the theologians of that period realized that it is not possible to uphold the principle of the sole authority of Scripture if it is not undergirded by the doctrine of plenary inspiration. So did their Roman Catholic opponents, who

Tradition in the Council of Trent," by Richard Baepler, XXXI (June 1960), pp. 341—362. For a presentation of the relation between Scripture and tradition by a modern Roman Catholic scholar see George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, c. 1959).

⁷ See Louis Saint-Blancat, *La théologie de Luther et un nouveau plagiat de Pierre d'Ailly in Positions Luthériennes*, April 1956, pp. 61 ff.

consequently minimized and even denied it. But it is a mistake to suppose that the Lutheran dogmaticians of the age of orthodoxy were responsible for introducing the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration into the Church of the Augsburg Confession and thereby departed from Luther's attitude to Scripture. This doctrine is plainly taught in a Saxon confession published as early as 1549 (three years after Luther's death) by Justus Menius, a close friend of Luther and the translator of his Latin writings. What is more to our point, it is enunciated clearly and copiously by Luther himself. In his *Commentary on Romans*, 1515—16 (one of his earlier works), he says that the Lord wills us to receive and believe every word, since He Himself has said it. In his *Short Confession Concerning the Holy Sacrament*, 1544 (one of his last works), he says of Scripture that "we either believe altogether or not at all. If a bell is cracked only a little, it has lost its ring." These two quotations can be matched by a host of others. The following are typical: —

No one letter in Scripture is without purpose, for Scripture is God's writing and God's Word. (WA 50, 282)

It is very dangerous to speak of divine things in a different way, and in words different from those which God makes use of. (WA 15, 43)

It is our accursed unbelief and carnal mind which hinders us from seeing and appreciating that it is God who speaks with us in Scripture. . . . Instead, we think of it as the word of Isaiah or Paul or some other man. And so it comes about that the Bible is not God's Word to us, and bears no fruit, until we realize that God speaks to us thereby. (WA 48, 102)

This is the speech of St. John, or rather, of the Holy Ghost. (WA 54, 55)

Holy Scripture is God's Word written and, so to speak, lettered and fashioned in form of letters, as Christ the eternal Word is clothed in our humanity. (WA 48, 31, 4)

What Paul declares, the Holy Ghost declares, and what is contrary to Paul's word is contrary to the Holy Ghost. (WA 10, 11, 139)

These are of course chance remarks. We can hardly expect more from him since no one at the time controverted the doctrine of inspiration. Taking them as they stand, and in the context of those traditional beliefs about the divine origin of Scripture which Luther never questioned, they undoubtedly add up to a belief in plenary verbal inspiration. Having said this we must go on to say that his view is free from all mechanical, docetic, or mantic notions, and has no affinities either with the idea, derived by some early Christians from Philo, that the sacred writers were unconscious automata, or with the type of fundamentalism professed by Jehovah's Witnesses. Far from playing down the human element in Scripture, Luther's view exalts it by confessing that God's revelation comes to us precisely through human words. This most characteristic human medium, essentially so fragile and fugitive, has been seized upon by God, so that through a condescension of the divine majesty it has become the fitting mode of His speech with us.

Scripture is therefore the Word of God, though the Word of God is not synonymous with Scripture. At this stage it becomes necessary for us to enquire more closely what Luther means by "the Word of God." He knew that to the Hebrew

mind a word is action and event and that the most distinctive characteristic of the true God is that He speaks. Through His eternal Word He created the world, thereby setting the pattern for His future dealings with the world. In Jesus Christ the Word was made flesh: In Him God spoke the Word which redeems and creates. This same Word is continually recalled and enunciated in the church's proclamation. Scripture is this same Word in written form, necessary to sustain the oral proclamation and preserve it from error. God's Word comes to us therefore in twofold form, preached and written. The essential unity of these two forms is such that Luther can use the term in both senses almost in the same breath, as in the answer to the question on the first petition of the Lord's Prayer in the Small Catechism: "[God's name is hallowed] *when the Word of God is taught* in its truth and purity and we, as the children of God, also lead a holy life according to it. . . . But he that teaches and lives otherwise than *God's Word teaches*, profanes the name of God among us." Here "the Word of God" is that which is taught, and also that which teaches, i. e., both preaching and Scripture. At times Luther can give the impression of exalting the oral Word over the written. In an Epiphany sermon of 1522 he says that Christ wrote nothing, and the apostles little, and then not until they had first preached and convicted. This proclamation, then and now, is the Epiphany star and the angelic message pointing to the crib and the swaddling clothes. Eventually the N. T. books were written, as a last resort, "in order that some sheep should be saved from the wolves." He concludes: "to have Scripture without

knowledge of Christ is to have no Scripture, and is none other than to let the star shine and yet not perceive it" (WA 10, I, (1), 628). And yet passages such as this are offset by others attaching supreme importance to the written Word. In theological controversy his main argument was always "It is written."

It has, however, been maintained that Luther's attitude to Scripture was in fact very free. Those who assert this point out that he speaks of errors in Hebrews, James, Jude, and the Revelation. His consistently disparaging opinion of James is only too well known. Yet the fact that he never felt obliged to modify his overriding belief in the plenary inspiration of the Bible shows that his criticism of these four books is a criticism of their canonicity, that is, whether they do indeed form part of the N. T. He knew that the fourth-century writer Eusebius had placed them in a class apart from the undisputed N. T. books and that his Catholic contemporaries Erasmus and Cardinal Cajetan also doubted their canonical status. His historical doubts were, moreover, reinforced by his failure to discern in three of these four books the consistent authentic notes of the apostolic testimony to Christ, which is to be found in the undisputed books. Questions of authorship apart, there is the "hard knot" of Heb. 6 and 10, apparently disallowing repentance after Baptism. Luther finds himself obliged to ask whether such passages can be undoubtedly canonical when to all appearances so sharply at strife with the gospels and St. Paul. There is St. James' strange silence about the Passion and Resurrection and the Holy Spirit; his stranger talk about the "law of liberty"

and about Abraham's being justified by his works whereas the apostle teaches that he was justified without works. It is this epistle which moves Luther to exclaim: "Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul taught it; and whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were to do it." His doubts about the canonicity of the Book of Revelation are based on the apparent incongruity of its style with what we are otherwise led to expect from an apostle; "for it befits the apostolic office to speak of Christ and His words without figures or visions." But he makes it clear that this is his personal opinion on a debatable point. Later he was less willing to defend this rather capricious judgment, and in the lengthy preface to Revelation of 1545 he is content to note in passing that Eusebius gives evidence for its nonascription to John the apostle and that he himself regards its canonical status as an open question. As for the Epistle of Jude, he believes it to be a nonapostolic abstract of 2 Peter and therefore it "need not be reckoned amongst the chief books which have to lay the foundation of the faith."

Luther's opinions about the N.T. anti-legomena were neither incorporated into the Lutheran Confessions of faith nor followed unanimously by the theologians of the age of orthodoxy. That they are evidence of his having taken a subjective attitude toward Scripture cannot be admitted, unless it be a sign of subjectivity to raise the problem of the distinction between canonical and deuterocanonical or uncanonical writings and to suggest a solution. But if this be so, the same charge could be laid against Augustine for his

ambiguous attitude to Hebrews, against Origen, who doubted the canonicity of James and Jude, and against Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, and Chrysostom, who doubted the canonicity of the Apocalypse. Luther's view of the canon must therefore be regarded as a critical and historical judgment, in no way modifying his firm belief that all canonical Scripture is inspired.

Luther's well-known saying that the Bible is the Word of God insofar as it impels toward Christ — *soweit Sie Christum treibet*⁸ has been cited as further evidence that he freely discriminated between parts of the Bible to be taken very seriously, and others which are not, because they do not immediately have Christ for their subject. It is true that he singles out some books as specially important; that he esteemed St. John's Gospel chief of the four on the grounds of its being fullest of doctrinal teaching; and that he gave pre-eminence amongst the other N.T. books to the Pauline epistles, especially Romans, and to 1 Peter, because they are "the true kernel and marrow of all the books." This distinction does not, however, arise from a belief in degrees of inspiration, but from a practical recognition that some books are more directly useful than others in setting forth the divine Law and Gospel. And in affirming that Scripture is God's Word insofar as it impels towards Christ, he is laying down a principle of interpretation, not of selection. There is no part of Scripture which does not impel towards Christ.

The whole Scripture exists for the sake of the Son. (WA Tr 5, 5585)

⁸ "*Treiben*" has the same derivation as the English verb "to drive."

For the sake of the Messiah, the Son of God, Holy Scripture was written, and all that came about happened for His sake. (WA 54, 247)

It is beyond question that the whole Scripture points to Christ alone. (WA 10, II, 73)

For this very reason Genesis is God's Word, for as the Christian believer reads that book, the veil is taken away so that God's promises and His covenant and the faith of the patriarchs all become luminous in the light of Christ.

At this point we touch on a distinctive quality of Luther's interpretation of Scripture, and that is its Christological character.⁹ That is not to imply that he alone in his generation sought Christ in the Scriptures. The characteristic spirituality of the time was strongly centered on the person of our Lord, as its devotional literature shows. Throughout Europe the *Vita Christi* of the Carthusian Ludolf of Saxony, first printed in 1474, was widely read,¹⁰ along with Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* and other products of the *devotio moderna*,¹¹ a school of spirituality distinguished by its love of the Bible and its emphasis on our Lord as the Christian's example. But from all this Luther parts company. As early as 1515/16 (Lectures on Romans) he says that the

Gospel is "good news" because it "brings Christ." The same thought is found in *The Liberty of a Christian Man* (1520) and is further elaborated two years later in the introduction to the winter series of the *Kirchenpostille* when he warns against reading the Epistles and Gospels as though they were the books of the Law and interpreting Christ's work as no more than an example (WA 10, I, 8). "Beware of turning Christ into a Moses, as though He had nothing more for us than precept and example, like the saints." He goes on to speak of the two ways of interpreting Christ's work: "first as an example proposed to you for imitation, as St. Peter shows (1 Peter 2:21) — but that is the least important side of the Gospel. . . . You must rise higher than that. This is the chief and fundamental thing in the Gospel, that before you take Christ for Example, you are to recognize and accept Him as God's Gift to you." "For the preaching of the Gospel is nothing else than Christ's coming to you, or your being brought to Him." When this happens, then rises the sun — *die allerliebste Sonne*, "which brings life, joy, activity, and every good thing." In other words, Christ is so to be preached that faith in Him is established. The end of such preaching is that the hearers shall "put on" Christ and thus be born again and become new creations.¹²

How thoroughly and consistently Luther applies this canon of interpretation may be seen from his introduction to Genesis. In this book, he says, there are three kinds of material: (1) the divine proclamation of the Law, the necessary prelude to the

⁹ Christ is the "punctus mathematicus sacrae scripturae," WA Tr 2, 439 (2383).

¹⁰ P. Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality*, London, 1924, II, 311 f. It was the most popular devotional book in the later Middle Ages. Re-issued more than 60 times in many different languages, it deeply impressed Ignatius Loyola and was used by him in the composition of his *Spiritual Exercises*. A modern ed. by L. M. Rigollot, Paris, 1870.

¹¹ See J. Dols, *Bibliograph der Moderna Devotie*, Nijmegen, 1941.

¹² WA 40, I, 540, 7 and 17 (on Gal. 3:27).

good news of salvation; (2) the predictions and promises of God concerning the Savior — "this is by far the best thing in the book"; and (3) the examples of faith, love, and the cross in the holy fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and so on, "by whose examples we learn to trust and love God," and also examples of the unbelief of ungodly men and of the wrath of God. We are shown how God does not overlook unbelief but punishes Cain, Ishmael, Esau, and the whole world in the Deluge; and these examples too are needful for us. Luther is here using in part the traditional scheme of exegesis, interpreting the narrative "literally," as it applies to Christ, and "tropologically," as it applies to the believer and his response to God. What is most noticeably new in his use of this old method is the firmness with which he binds the two together. This brings us to a second characteristic of his hermeneutical method, his insight into the proper dependence of faith on the person and work of Christ so that whatever the Bible has to say about saving faith is always to be referred to faith in Christ. This leads him to say, in a sermon on Gen. 3:15 (the seed of the woman) that Adam was already a Christian before Christ was born. He had exactly the faith that we have, for time makes no difference. "Faith is the same from the beginning of the world to the end: therefore he received by faith what I have received. He no more saw Christ with his eyes than we have done, but he had Him in the Word, and so also we have Him. The only difference is that *then* it should happen, *now* it has happened. The faith is all the same. So all the fathers were justified by the Word and

faith, as we are, and also died therein" (WA 24, 99, 31). And in a sermon for the first Sunday in Advent 1522 on the text from the liturgical Epistle, "Now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed," he says that these words have reference to the promise made to Adam. This promise was urged by the prophets, all of whom have written of the Redeemer's coming, His grace, His Gospel. Through this promise the O. T. saints had faith in Christ. *We* believe, though we were not alive at the time of His coming, and so *they* believed, though not alive at Christ's time. Elsewhere in the same sermon, referring to the liturgical Gospel for the day (the Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem), he adds in the same vein: "The children who go before the Lord sing Hosanna like the patriarchs. We follow and sing the same song. There is no difference between us, except that they precede and we follow after." (WA 10, I (2), 21 ff.)

In these passages Luther is speaking of *faith* in the light of what the N. T. has to say about it, employing a further principle of exegesis, very fundamental to his method, the principle of the *analogy of faith*.¹³ It was his conviction that the form of Scripture is such that the whole of the Christian faith is revealed in passages which call for no explanation, and that the dark places of Scripture are to be interpreted in the light of these clear passages.¹⁴ If there were times when he discovered that this exegetical key did not

¹³ Rom. 12:6 "(let us prophesy) in agreement with the faith: κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως."

¹⁴ Cp. WA 33, 20 f.: John 6:27 is to govern the interpretation of Luke 6:37, 38 and Luke

open the door, he drew the conclusion that God wished the door to remain closed. Such, for example, is the case with the doctrine of predestination. He is convinced that Scripture teaches universal grace on the one hand and particular election on the other; that God wills the salvation of all; that Christ died for all; that God elects only those who are eventually saved; that it is not in man to determine his own salvation; and that God predestines no one to reprobation. Therefore the solution of this problem belongs to the light of glory. At other times his key opened doors long closed. It helped him to lift the doctrine of creation from the level of natural theology. Viewing creation in the light of Christ, "by whom all things were made" (John 1:3), he was led to reaffirm that it is "through faith that we understand that the worlds were framed by the Word of God" (Heb. 11:3) and that Christ is the Key to creation, who, being Himself both Creator and creature, reveals the Creator to the creature and the creature to itself. Similarly his treatment of the doctrine of man is il-

16:9. Rather than do violence to this "clear, plain text," Luther professes his inability to account for Dan. 4:27.

luminated and controlled by the Pauline passages which speak of the "flesh," a word which he rightly understands to denote the whole man: body, soul, reason, and will.

When Johannes Bugenhagen preached Luther's funeral sermon he applied to him the description of the angel messenger in the Apocalypse, flying in mid-heaven, having the eternal Gospel to proclaim, and calling on all to fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment is come. Judgment and grace, Law and Gospel — these, said the preacher, were the two themes of Dr. Martin Luther's teaching, whereby the whole of Scripture is opened out, and Christ is made known to us as our Righteousness and eternal Life. As a general rule, funeral panegyrics are a safer guide to the literary fashions of the age than to the character of the deceased. But this tribute, coming from one who stood so close to Luther, has an authentic ring, and its claims can be verified. Luther would have reckoned it the acme of praise, knowing that God commits no higher task to any of His messengers, angelic or mortal, than to display His Word and to make Christ known.

Hull, England