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The Martyrs of Christ —

A Sketch of the Thought of Martin Luther on Martyrdom

DOUGLAS C. STANGE

... It is the true, living faith, which understands the words of the Gospel ... that the Father sent Christ, His Son, to save the world from sin, God's wrath, and eternal death through his blood and death.

Therefore all depends on this article about Christ, ... In order to abide by it, the Christians must be engaged in the most strenuous combat and fight continuously.

... Other articles have been attacked, but no one has caused so much bloodshed and produced so many martyrs as this one.

... And it will not cease as long as the world exists. Where this article is proclaimed, there the devil is furious and insane, and the world is aflame with anger and raging.¹

If one wishes to discuss any contribution, rediscovery, or reformation that Luther made in the Christian church, he must recognize the great Reformer's primary concern that faith in Christ be purely preached. For Luther, the church was built on the rock that is Christ, and Christians were to preach the Savior's Evangel to all men. When they went out into all the world to participate in this task, they did so fully realizing that whenever and wherever the preaching of the Gospel flourished, there would be change, hope, and the blessings

of a new life. However, Luther knew, and the preachers from the days of Christ on to this day also knew, that there would inevitably be persecutions, imprisonments, and death—that there would be martyrs for Christ.

Luther's writings frequently contain references to the martyrs of the church. Primarily he was concerned with the martyrs of the Lutheran movement who were being consumed by a world that contested the Gospel purely preached. Among the first martyrs of the Lutheran movement were Hendrik Voes and Johannes van Esschen, two Augustinians who were burned at the stake July 1, 1523, for professing their evangelical faith. About a month later Luther penned an open letter to the Christians in the Netherlands, in which he expressed his praise and thanks to God. There was very little lamentation in his condolences but rather a great ray of hope:

My dear ones, you have ... become the foremost among those who have given us joy and pleasure. For you have been singled out from the world not only to hear the Gospel and to know Christ but also to be the first now to suffer shame and injury, anxiety and want, imprisonment and danger for Christ's sake. ... You have sprinkled and rooted the cause with your very blood, for among you those two precious jewels of Christ, Hendrik and Johannes in Brussels, held their lives sec-

¹ Martin Luther, "Das XVI. Capitel S. Johannis gepredigt und ausgelegt," *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 46 Weimar: (Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1912), 19—20.

ondary in order that Christ and His Word might be praised.²

When Luther referred to the situation in Germany in the same letter, he remarked that he and his countrymen had not yet been "worthy" to become so precious an offering to Christ.³ This is the only reference this writer has discovered that expressly stated that a martyr for Christ was "an offering to Christ," although elsewhere Luther certainly implied this. Luther's words are the more noteworthy in view of the divergent Eucharistic doctrine of the Antwerp martyrs.

In demonstrating his pastoral concern, Luther hastened to offer encouragement and sympathy to those who were suffering under "the enemies of the Gospel."⁴ Constantly stepping into the shadow of martyrdom himself for professing that same Gospel—"the one supreme sacrilege," as he called it—Luther could only feel empathy for the sufferers.⁵ When Heinrich von Zütphen was martyred at Meldorf by a hostile and drunken mob for preaching the Gospel in 1524, the Wittenberg Reformer composed an exposition on Psalm 10, retold the story of the martyrdom, and sent his words to the deceased pastor's flock at Bremen.⁶ Luther spoke of those who en-

dured "the disgrace of the cross of Christ." "Today," he went on to say, "the way of the true Christian life may again be seen, dreadful to the world, since it means suffering and persecution, but precious and priceless in God's eyes."⁷

Frequently, Luther retold the stories of the martyrs of old, in the days when "the pattern of the true Christian life" was in full bloom, during the time of the young virgins, Saints Agnes and Agatha,⁸ of Saints Ignatius,⁹ Anastasia,¹⁰ Maurice, Acacius, Gereon,¹¹ and others. In the testimony of these saints Luther saw the dichotomy between the martyrs and the world, between martyrs and Satan. In one of his frequent paraphrases of Christ's words, Luther wrote:

[Christ] says: "Because I chose you out of the world, the world hates you. I am He whom the world cannot stand and who is the cause of such hatred and persecution. And therefore I chose you that you might not be of the world, that is, that you might not be involved in the accursed devil's hatred and envy. Even if you fare as I do, submit to this. Disdain the suffering and rely confidently on Me. Then you will remain contented and courageous, and the world will become furious and mad."¹²

Hence Christians are set apart from the

² WA 12, 77—78. The full English translation of Luther's ballad commemorating the occasion is printed in *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1942), No. 259.

³ WA 12, 78.

⁴ WA 42, 213.

⁵ WA 14, 498.

⁶ WA 18, 224—240. For references by Luther to other contemporary martyrs, cf. WA 42, 212—213 (Leonard Kaiser and Henry von Zütphen [The reference to "Antonius Anglius," Robert Barnes, is probably an addition by Dic-

trich, since Barnes was not martyred till 1540]); 14, 498 (Henry Vos and John von den Eschen); 18, 224—225 (Casper Tauber and George [or John] Buchföhrer).

⁷ WA 18, 224.

⁸ WA 45, 568—569, 639, 713—714; 46, 109—110.

⁹ WA 45, 639.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 713—714.

¹¹ WA 11, 257.

¹² WA 45, 714.

world. "There will never be any peace or appeasement between the world and Christendom," Luther taught, "just as there never will be between Christ and the devil."¹³ However, he admitted that each time the world makes an all-out attack on Christendom, it fails, and he pointed to the activity of the Roman Empire, which had withstood Christendom with deadly seriousness in the hope of toppling Christ from His throne. It appeared to succeed, but the confidence and courage in the hearts of men who believed in Christ and His kingdom were more than the empire could overcome. In the end it could not dethrone the "Sovereign of the world."¹⁴ Although Satan was an enraged enemy, the martyrs proved to be too strong for him, Luther taught, because Christ abode in them.¹⁵

Satan was most active, Luther believed, and the world was most critical of Christians, whenever the teaching of the Gospel flourished in the church. Then there were always persecutions, for "the sons according to the flesh" continually sought to persecute "the sons according to the promise."¹⁶ Men become martyrs because of their confession of God's Word,¹⁷ but they need not seek out martyrdom, it comes to them if God so wills. In the absence of an emergency they must remain in their places and with their families, continuing at their labors. But Luther admonished that if the alternative ever did confront them, they must each declare: "Rather than to deny Christ, I will sacrifice everything"¹⁸ Con-

sequently they were not to forsake life and family, unless God Himself separates them from their loved ones, only then was it "proper." Luther used as an analogy here an incident from the life of Christ:

Christ could have gone into Judea immediately, rather than a short time later. But . . . He remained in Galilee. He would not expose himself to danger and tempt God until the time came when He felt obliged to go and his divine office demanded it. . . . Christ here is an example to us. We should not enter into temptation and danger under our own volition when we know it is a prince's or lord's purpose to murder us. No, I must not expose myself to peril. However, if I must face danger and find myself in the midst of it, then I must be bold, suffer, and be ready to give up my life, but I cannot be blamed for what happens.¹⁹

Nevertheless, when God does demand the supreme sacrifice from Christians, they "follow gladly" in the martyr's footsteps.²⁰ And they do so without fear because of the promises of Christ. Our Lord, Luther wrote, "liberates us from every fear" because He has told us, "I have overcome the world."²¹ Hence, we encounter martyrdom with faith in Christ, which averts our eyes from the physical weaknesses of the flesh and directs them upward to the life hereafter;²² we trust in the Lord that He will "defend us spiritually";²³ we are sure "God is merciful and favors us because we believe in his Son" and conclude that our torture is caused by the devil, and thus we

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ WA 41, 140.

¹⁵ WA 33, 226.

¹⁶ WA 40 I, 680.

¹⁷ WA 40 I, 682.

¹⁸ WA 33, 320.

¹⁹ WA 33, 324.

²⁰ WA 18, 229.

²¹ WA 40 I, 683.

²² WA 45, 639.

²³ WA 18, 227.

"scoff at Satan";²⁴ and finally, we encounter martyrdom firmly convinced that "He who has honored us with the Word of the cross will at the same time also strengthen us with the Spirit of the cross and will triumph in our flesh";²⁵ and accordingly, we are victorious in martyrdom. "I offer you comfort, strength, and peace," Luther paraphrased Christ as saying, "therefore take these things to heart and remember that I, Jesus Christ, have won the victory."²⁶

Luther often retold the stories of the martyrs who went to their death as if to a wedding or a dance. He frequently mentioned Saints Agnes and Agatha as being "so hopeful and cheerful on their way to prison and death."²⁷ We should not only recall the narratives of these martyrs, Luther believed, but imitate their courage in suffering as well, and he quoted St. Augustine's statement regarding the festivals of martyrs that "we should not hesitate to imitate that which we like to celebrate."²⁸ Luther said this in 1518. The idea of imitation came up again in his lectures on Galatians in 1535, when he quoted Paul's admonition to the Romans that they "imitate the example and virtues of Christ. Do and suffer what He did and suffered."²⁹ However, Luther never thought of *imitatio* as being anything but the work of the Holy Spirit. He taught that for one to suffer cheerfully for Christ and not forsake Him bespeaks a courage that "must be

the work of none other than the Holy Spirit."³⁰

It is evident from what the great Reformer said that Luther, like the universal church, saw in martyrdom an exceptional work of God. He thought that the church was most viable when martyrs were being put to death "every day" and were "judged as sheep for slaughter."³¹ At such a time the church was continually professing its baptism.

We see, then, that for Luther three things occurred whenever a martyrdom in Christ took place. First, martyrdom was a miracle to the men who perceived with their eyes that the impavid courage demonstrated by the martyrs did not "flow from natural or human power or strength." No one could deny that the Holy Spirit's work was confirmed by the "miraculous signs" in the holy martyrs.³²

Second, martyrdom offered a supreme gift, for martyrs by their faith were made "perfect" or "whole" in death.³³ Luther wrote that a martyr had every right to exclaim: "What harm and misery can they cause me? They only guide me quickly from misery here to Christ in heaven."³⁴ Although before the world they die, they know that they really do not die, but live.³⁵ Indeed, when they die they "immediately fly up" to God.³⁶

Finally, martyrdom proclaimed to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord and con-

²⁴ WA 43, 64.

²⁵ WA 14, 498.

²⁶ WA 46, 110.

²⁷ WA 45, 568. Cf. also WA 45, 639 to 640, 713—714; 46, 109—110.

²⁸ WA 1, 607.

²⁹ WA 40, 539—540.

³⁰ WA 45, 568—569.

³¹ WA 6, 535.

³² WA 45, 572. Cf. also 45, 531.

³³ WA 18, 226.

³⁴ WA 45, 639.

³⁵ WA 31 I, 154—155.

³⁶ WA 1, 547.

tributed to the expansion of His kingdom.³⁷ The martyrs by their deaths confirmed that "their teaching is the proper teaching, in which the right Spirit is given,"³⁸ the indomitable truth that God is God and to His people He is true. The martyrs "attached a seal" to the teaching,

³⁷ WA 45, 639.

³⁸ WA 18, 225.

as it were, in giving their lives for it.³⁹ Thus the martyrs, who adorned the church, taught the world by their examples of charity and truth and escaped from the ungodly."⁴⁰ Indeed, the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.

Cambridge, Mass.

³⁹ WA 47, 183.

⁴⁰ WA 5, 66.