

CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

*Martin Luther: Doctor of
Sacred Scripture*

by

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*"I am bound by the Scriptures . . .
and my conscience is captive
to the Word of God".*

Martin Luther



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LUTHER AND THE REVELATION OF SCRIPTURE

ACCORDING TO JAMES I. PACKER, "THE QUESTION of revelation is at the very heart of the modern theological debate."¹ And in the stimulating contribution he makes to the symposium *Revelation and the Bible*, he explains that, since Christianity claims to be a revealed religion the real subject under discussion is the essential nature of the faith. Its content and character are derived from the revelation on which it rests: hence the outcome of the contemporary debate could well determine the prevalent overall conception of Christianity for many years to come.

In his time, Luther wrestled with this problem too. His conclusions may still provide guidelines for the Church today. We must take care, however, to discover what in fact Luther had to say on this subject. There have been some strange though unconfirmed reports which need to be corrected by reference to the reformer himself. In his Paddock Lectures, Alfred L. Lilley was apparently content to rest on the assumption that "no Christian doctor of the front rank ever disparaged the revelational role of the Scripture more constantly than the great reformer".² It would be difficult to miss the mark more comprehensively than that. It is an interesting and significant feature of current trends that, whereas some of the more extreme biblical critics and radical theologians are attempting to depict Luther as the precursor of modern liberalism (by a translation as remarkable as that of Bottom, though we would prefer to regard it as being in reverse), the Church historians, by and large, are increasingly recognizing his decisive influence in establishing the *Schriftprinzip* of the Reformation.³

Luther's starting-point in his account of revelation was the premise that all knowledge of God is necessarily dependent on His own self-disclosure. Revelation is thus active, not merely passive. It represents a positive and continuous self-communication. God is essentially the God who speaks and who makes Himself known. Did He not, we should remain in utter ignorance. Behind all revelation we must discern God's gracious will to reveal.

¹ James I. Packer, "Contemporary Views of Revelation", *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (1959), p. 89.

² Alfred L. Lilley, *Religion and Revelation* (1931), p. 79.

³ Cf. A. Skevington Wood, "Luther's Concept of Revelation", *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXV (1963), p. 150. The article runs from pp. 149-59, and much of it is reproduced in this Chapter by kind permission of the Editor, Professor F. F. Bruce.

This involves a parallel recognition of the divine reticence. Not all is made known. Revelation is limited and prescribed according to the inscrutable purpose of God. In his debate with Erasmus, Luther was compelled to define revelation as determined by the divine sovereignty.¹ The very fact that God chooses to lift some portion of the covering which hides His presence reminds us that there is much that He refrains from disclosing. This proviso Luther regarded as a safeguard against the implication that the Church could achieve a kind of mastery over God as it manipulated the means of revelation – an implication underlying the Romanist distortion which Luther was raised up to resist.

This led Luther to his distinctively firm and discerning emphasis on the left hand of God, where He works all unknown to men. He is not only *Deus Revelatus* but also *Deus Absconditus*. Luther discussed this hidden God – the expression is scriptural and comes from Isaiah 45:15 – early in his reforming career, as, for instance, when he developed his theology of the cross in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518.² But it must be understood, as Althaus reminds us, that there the concept had quite a different meaning from that which appears in *The Bondage of the Will*.³ God is hidden in His revelation and is revealed to us not directly but paradoxically in the cross and in suffering. “For this reason true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ, as it is also stated in John 10 (:9).”⁴ Luther had in mind the story in Exodus 33, where Moses asked: “Show me thy glory” and God answered: “You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.” (Ex. 33:18, 20). Instead, God placed Moses in the cleft of the rock and held His hand before him whilst His glory passed by. When the divine hand was removed, Moses saw God’s back but not His face. It is only as He is so concealed that God can reveal Himself to sinful men.⁵

But when Luther spoke of hiddenness in *The Bondage of the Will* he was not alluding to the coincidence of revelation and concealment, but rather to “God’s hiddenness behind and beyond revelation in the mystery which forms the background of His almighty double-willing and double-working of salvation and damnation. ‘God Himself’ is to be found behind and beyond the word and not in it.”⁶ Luther also based this distinction between the hidden and revealed God on the verse in II Thessalonians 2:4 where Paul described the Antichrist as the one who sets himself above everything “that is preached and honoured as God”.⁷ Luther saw a differentiation here between the revealed God who was preached and worshipped, and the hidden God who was altogether invulnerable.⁸

¹ BW. 66.

² LW. 31. 53.

³ Althaus, op. cit., p. 277.

⁴ LW. 31. 53. Luther also quoted John 14:6.

⁵ LW. 26. 29; LW. 31. 52. Cf. Edgar M. Carlson, *The Reinterpretation of Luther* (1948), pp. 146-8; Althaus, op. cit., p. 25.

⁶ Althaus, op. cit., p. 277. ⁷ BW. 171-2.

⁸ Ibid., 172.

What Luther intended to convey was not simply that God was once concealed but is now made manifest. It is rather that the revelation itself is restricted by the divine decree and that God is *Deus Absconditus* even whilst he is *Deus Revelatus*. And this is a matter not merely of parallelism but even of sharp antipathy. It is not that God is in part revealed and in part concealed in his Word, but that behind and beyond the Word itself there stands an incomprehensible mystery. It is this that colours and conditions all that is made known. The known only serves to underline the unknown. Gustaf Aulén has expounded this theme in a manner which reflects Luther's outlook. "It is important to note in what manner God appears as the Unfathomable. It does not mean simply that there are certain limits to revelation, and that beyond these limits there exists a hidden territory which would grow less and less in the measure that revelation increases. Nor does it mean merely that under these earthly circumstances there always will remain questions which cannot be answered and riddles which cannot be solved: or that the Christian faith cannot become a rational world-view to which the divine government of the world would be transparently clear. It means rather that the nature of divine revelation appears to faith as an impenetrable mystery. Since the very centre of this revelation is divine love which gives itself in order to establish fellowship with sinners, that love itself appears inscrutable and impenetrable. Faith beholds the revealed God as the Unfathomable, the 'hidden' God. In fact, we may even agree to this proposition: the more God reveals Himself, and the deeper faith looks into the mystery of His divine heart, the more He appears as the Unfathomable. Thus the apostle writes, 'Let a man so account of us . . . as stewards of the mysteries of God' (1 Cor. 4:1)."¹

Luther charged Erasmus with failure to distinguish between "God preached and God hidden".² Behind His proffered mercy lies His hidden and fearful will, which "is not to be curiously inquired into, but to be adored with reverence as the most profound secret of His divine majesty, which He reserves to Himself and keeps hidden from us, and that much more religiously than the mention of ten thousand Corycian caverns".³ Even the Antichrist cannot challenge the unrevealed God. He can only oppose and exalt himself "above all that is God as preached and worshipped": that is, according to Luther, "above the word and worship of God, by which He is known to us and has intercourse with us. But above God not worshipped and preached, that is, as He is in His own nature and majesty, nothing can be exalted, but all things are under His powerful hand".⁴ Even if we disagree with Luther's exegesis on the ground that the

¹ Gustaf Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church* (1954), p. 47.

² BW, 172.

³ *Ibid.*, 171. The Corycian cave in Mount Parnassus derived its name from a nymph who by Apollo became the mother of Lyconus (Pausanias, 10. 6. 2; 10. 32. 2).

⁴ BW, 172; cf. 2 Thess. 2:4.

verse from II Thessalonians alludes to so-called gods and objects of worship, as the Revised Standard Version makes clear, the point he stressed is nevertheless valid apart from its accompanying proof-text.

Now, argued Luther, as Christians we have only to do with God as He reveals Himself, "as far as He is clothed in and delivered to us by His Word: for in that He presents Himself to us, and that is His beauty and glory, in which the Psalmist celebrates Him as being clothed. Wherefore we say that the righteous God does not 'deplore that death of His people which He Himself works in them'; but He deplores that death which He finds in His people, and which He desires to remove from them. For God preached desires this: that, our sin and death being taken away, we might be saved. 'He sent forth His word and healed them' (Ps. 107: 20). But God hidden in majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life and death in all things; nor has He, in this character, defined himself in His Word, but has reserved to Himself a free power over all things."¹ Elsewhere Luther further distinguished between God's presence everywhere though concealed, and His presence "for us".² In this careful manner Luther related divine revelation to divine volition and upheld the irrefragable sovereignty of God.

In a passage which Conrad Bergendorff commends as containing "as profound words as Luther ever wrote", which "carry us into the very heart of his theology", Luther took Erasmus to task for overlooking this crucial factor.³ "God does many things which He does not make known to us in His Word: He also wills many things which He does not in His Word make known to us that He wills. Thus, He does not 'will the death of a sinner', that is in His Word; but He wills it by that will inscrutable. But in the present case we are to consider His Word only, and to leave that will inscrutable; seeing that it is by His Word, and not by that will inscrutable that we are to be guided; for who can direct himself according to a will inscrutable and incomprehensible? It is enough to know only that there is in God a certain will inscrutable: but what, why and how far that will wills it is not lawful to inquire, to wish to know, to be concerned about, or to reach unto - it is only to be feared and adored!"⁴

Despite the impression created by current misconceptions of his teaching, Luther quite certainly recognized a twofold knowledge of God: general and particular. The first is the natural possession of all men as God's creatures: the second is the spiritual possession of believers as God's children. "It is hardly too much to say," wrote Philip Watson, "that the problem of reconciling the contents of these two kinds of knowledge sets

¹ BW. 172; cf. 2 Cor. 2:16.

² Cf. WA. 39. i. 245.

³ Conrad Bergendorff, "The Revelation and the Ministry of Grace", *World Lutheranism Today: A Tribute to Anders Nygren* (1950), p. 24.

⁴ BW. 173.

its mark, in one way or another, on the whole of Luther's thought."¹ Although there are apparent contradictions and even occasional inconsistencies in Luther's numerous allusions to this dual knowledge, it is nevertheless sufficiently clear that he regarded the one as at best partial and imperfect – and indeed positively misleading if not allowed to introduce the other, which for him is final and determinative. "All men have the general knowledge," he explained (expounding Galatians 4:8), "namely, that God is, that He has created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punishes the wicked, etc. But what God thinks of us, what He wants to give and to do to deliver us from sin and death and to save us – which is the particular and the true knowledge of God – this men do not know."² And then Luther introduced a most effective simile: "Thus it can happen that someone's face may be familiar to me but I do not really know him, because I do not know what he has in his mind. So it is that men know naturally that there is a God, but they do not know what He wants and what He does not want. For it is written (Rom. 3:11), 'No one understands God'; and elsewhere (Jn. 1:18), 'No one has ever seen God,' that is, no one knows what the will of God is. Now what good does it do you to know that God exists if you do not know what His will is toward you?"³ Such natural knowledge of God, if it is not permitted to bring man to the proper knowledge in Christ, will instead lead him into superstition and idolatry.

Luther insisted that this general knowledge of God is a revelation to man and not a discovery by him. It is not something he attains by reaching up towards God: it is something given from above. Here Luther parted company from Thomas Aquinas and the Schoolmen who spoke of an ascent by the light of reason through created things to the knowledge of God, and regarded the special revelation only as a downward movement from God. There was for Luther no unmediated relationship between God and man.⁴ He maintained the scriptural principle that man cannot see God in His transcendence and live.⁵ In all His dealing with men, God assumes a mask (*larva*) or veil (*involutum*). This is true even of His special revelation to believers, so that Luther could speak of Christ Himself in such terms.⁶ To the natural man, the created world is the appointed medium through which God addresses him, that he may be without excuse. This conception extends beyond the animal kingdom to include the several orders of men. "The magistrate, the emperor, the king, the

¹ Watson, op. cit., p. 73. Watson's treatment of the subject in his chapter on "The Revelation of God" is most enlightening, pp. 73-96.

² LW. 26. 399.

³ Ibid., 399-400.

⁴ Watson, op. cit., p. 78.

⁵ LW. 26. 29.

⁶ LW. 2. 49. "The Incarnate Son of God is, therefore, the covering in which the Divine Majesty presents Himself to us with all His gifts, and does so in such a manner that there is no sinner too wretched to be able to approach Him with the firm assurance of obtaining pardon. This is the one and only view of the Divinity that is available and possible in this life."

prince, the consul, the teacher, the preacher, the pupil, the father, the mother, the children, the master, the servant" – all are God's instruments and outward veils of Himself.¹

But in Luther's view, revelation proper is confined to that particular redemptive knowledge of Himself in Christ which God conveys to the believer or awakened inquirer. As Watson points out, "it is not opposed to general knowledge in itself, but to what men have falsely made of it; and it furnishes the necessary principle for its correct interpretation."² It is in this specific revelation in Christ that Luther saw "a most manifest distinction" between Christianity and all other religions of the world – including the medieval misrepresentation of the gospel.³ This is the saving knowledge of God which alone can rescue man from ignorance and sin. He is an *ens incompletum* and can only find fulfilment in God.

Where is this special revelation to be found? Luther recognized it nowhere save in the Word, in which God "has revealed His will and His divine nature".⁴ "If you want to encounter God, you must first see Him under the mask, in the Word. Then one day you can behold Him also in His majesty. For now God will not present you with anything special apart from and contrary to His command contained in His Word."⁵ Until the ultimate revelation of God's glory at the end of the age, there is still no unmediated disclosure of Himself: not even in Christ.⁶ Luther insisted on a *theologia crucis* as over against the Schoolmen who attempted to climb up into the majesty of God. The Word itself is another *involuturum*: that is no more than a medium of revelation, even though it exactly expresses what God desires to declare with no shadow of inaccuracy. The substance, however, is nothing less than God himself. And yet so realistic is the impact that we may borrow John Baillie's apposite phrase and characterize it as a "mediated immediacy".⁷ The incarnate Christ, according to Luther, is not only a veil, but also a glass or mirror in which we behold the face of God by reflection.⁸

By the Word, then, Luther did not invariably mean Holy Writ, as we have noted. He used the term sometimes with reference to Scripture, sometimes with reference to Christ himself, and sometimes with reference to the content or act of preaching. Yet there was no final cleavage or contradiction in his mind, since for him the Bible was always a living message with Christ at its heart. "Ultimately, then, there was only one 'Word of God', which came in different forms," concludes Jaroslav

¹ LW. 26. 95.

² Watson, op. cit., p. 93.

³ SW. I. 179.

⁴ LW. 22. 17.

⁵ LW. 24. 69.

⁶ LW. 2. 49. "But on the Last Day those who have died in this faith will be so enlightened by heavenly power that they will see even the Divine Majesty itself. Meanwhile we must come to the Father by that which is Christ Himself; He will lead us safely, and we shall not be deceived."

⁷ John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (1939), pp. 178–80, 196.

⁸ LW. 26. 396.

Pelikan.¹ Written Word and Living Word are almost inseparably conjoined, since for Luther Christ is the core of Scripture. He could even suggest that the Bible is Christ's spiritual body by which He is here and now available to believers.² It is "God's Word written, presented in letters, as Christ is the eternal Word presented in human nature".³ Thus, when Luther spoke of particular revelation as confined to the Word of God, he meant that it is conveyed through Scripture and expressed in Christ. And this is proclaimed in preaching, which is basically a setting forth of Christ from Scripture.

Luther's conception of the place occupied by Scripture in revelation was allied to his unremitting emphasis on what he called its perspicuity. He held that the Bible is luminously clear in its meaning as befits the chosen medium of God's own self-disclosure. He rebuked Erasmus for inclining to "that impudent and blasphemous saying, 'the Scriptures are obscure'".⁴ "They who deny the all-clearness and all-plainness of the Scriptures, leave us nothing else but darkness," he complained. "Moreover I declare against you concerning the whole of the Scripture that I will have no one part of it called obscure," he continued; "and to support me stands that which I have brought forth out of Peter, that the Word of God is to us a "lamp shining in a dark place" (II Peter 1:19). But if any part of this lamp does not shine, it is rather a part of the dark place than the lamp itself. For Christ has not so illuminated us, as to wish that any part of His Word should remain obscure, even while He commands us to attend to it: for if it be not shining plain, His commanding us to attend to it is in vain."⁵

Furthermore, it was Luther's tireless accusation against the papal hierarchy that they clouded the inherent radiance of the Word and kept the people from its unambiguous truth. He objected that they "take from the Scripture its single, simple and stable meaning; they blind our eyes, so that we stagger about and retain no reliable interpretation. We are like men bewitched or tricked while they play with us as gamblers with their dice."⁶ After citing some instances of this malpractice, Luther added: "This is the way human reason works when, without divine illumination, it interferes with God's Word and works and tries to calculate and measure them according to its own power."⁷ It was because the Word is the lucid revelation of God's essential truth that Luther was prepared to take his stand on it in the face of all opponents. "You must plant yourself upon the clear, transparent, strong statements of the Scriptures, by which you will then be enabled to hold your ground."⁸

When Luther thus spoke of Scripture as the medium of revelation, he included its totality. He allowed no licence to select or reject. To dispute

¹ LW. Companion Volume, 70.

³ WA. 48. 31.

⁶ LW. 32. 26.

⁴ BW. 109.

⁷ Ibid., 27.

² LW. 32. 11.

⁵ Ibid., 109-10.

⁸ EA. 28. 223.

any one item is to impugn the whole. "My friend, God's Word is God's Word – this point does not require much haggling! When one blasphemously gives the lie to God in a single word, or says it is a minor matter if God is blasphemed or called a liar, one blasphemes the entire God and makes light of blasphemy. There is only one God who does not permit Himself to be divided, praised at one place and chided at another, glorified in one word and scorned in another. The Jews believe in the Old Testament but because they do not believe Christ, it does them no good. You see, the circumcision of Abraham (Gen. 17:10 ff.) is now an old dead thing and no longer necessary or useful. But if I were to say that God did not command it in its time, it would do me no good even if I believed the gospel. So St. James asserts, 'Whoever offends in one part is guilty in all respects.' He probably heard the apostles say that all the words of God must be believed or none, although he applies their interpretation to the works of the law. Why is it any wonder, then, if fickle fanatics juggle and play and clown with the word of the Supper (the quotation is from Luther's treatise *This is My Body*) according to their fancy, since at this point they are convicted of belittling God's words and concerns and making them secondary human lore? Just as if God must yield to men, and let the authority of the Word depend on whether men are at one or at odds over it."¹

This clarity of revelation, however, is confined to believers. It is not apparent to unaided reason: it commends itself only to faith. The gospel is hidden from those who are lost, in whose case "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God" (II Cor. 4:4). "God's Word has to be the most marvellous thing in heaven and on earth," declared Luther in his *Exhortation to the Knights of the Teutonic Order* (1523). "That is why it must at one and the same time do two opposite things, namely, give perfect light and glory to those who believe it, and bring utter blindness and shame upon those who believe it not. To the former it must be the most certain and best known of all things; to the latter it must be the most unknown and obscure of all things. The former must extol and praise it above all things; the latter must blaspheme and slander it above all things. So does it operate to perfection and achieve in the hearts of men no insignificant works, but strange and terrible works. As St. Paul says in II Corinthians 4(3), 'even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing.'"²

We have noticed how Luther virtually identified the Word with Christ Himself. He recognized a similarly intimate association with the Holy Spirit. For him Word and Spirit belonged together in the sphere of revelation. The Romanists wanted the Word without the Spirit – the

¹ LW. 37. 26-7.

² LW. 45, 156.

Word, as Reid explains, "perverted and exanimated by the influence of canonical law."¹ The Anabaptists and Enthusiasts, on the other hand, wanted the Spirit without the Word. Luther held the two together in vital tension. As the Holy Spirit is the divine author of Scripture, so also He is the divine interpreter. The Bible is the Holy Spirit's Book.² He who inspired its pages in the first place now makes it live again. It is by His operation that the written Word is recreated as a living Word. If God does not bestow the help of His Spirit, the Word will not be "for us."³ Just as Luther described the Scripture as Christ's spiritual body, so he regarded it as the incarnation of the Holy Ghost. He said that it corresponds to the Spirit as the voice to breathing or the rays of the sun to its heat.⁴

Regin Prenter resolves the paradox involved in this double emphasis on Word and Spirit by reference to Luther's Christological presuppositions. "Only in the moment when the Spirit by the outward Word makes Christ truly present are the Word and the Spirit directly one."⁵ Hence "only when the Holy Spirit makes Christ present in the Word does it become God's own living Word. If this does not happen the Word is only a letter, a law, a description of Christ. From the opposite point of view it is true that the Spirit, when it (*sic*) undertakes to make Christ present, is not able to work independently of the Word. For Christ is indeed the incarnate Logos in the person who appeared in history, Jesus of Nazareth, who by the Old and New Testament writings is proclaimed as the Christ. It is therefore only by the Word depending on Scripture that the Spirit can make Jesus present. A spirit who could work independently of this definite outward Word about the incarnate Logos would not be the Spirit of Jesus Christ. We are always referred to this definite Word. But we are not referred to it as our guaranteed possession, but as the place where we expect the Spirit to make Jesus present for us. Without the work of the Spirit the Word may continue to be the Word which speaks of Jesus Christ, but it is not the Word which bestows Christ on us."⁶

This definitive status of the written Word forbade Luther to envisage any further revelation. The Spirit "makes men wise *up to* what is written, but not beyond it", as Joseph Angus observed.⁷ "Now that the apostles have preached the Word and have given their writings, and nothing more than what they have written remains to be revealed," concluded Luther, "no new and special revelation or miracle is necessary."⁸ It is enough now that the Holy Spirit himself is present in the revelation of the Word. Any

¹ John K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture: A Study of the Reformation and Post-Reformation Understanding of the Bible* (1957), pp. 60-61.

² SL. 9. 1775.

⁴ WA. 4. 189; 10. ii. 92; 57. 143.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

⁷ Joseph Angus, *The Bible Hand-Book; An Introduction to the Study of Sacred Scripture*, ed. Samuel G. Green (n.d.), p. 179.

⁸ LW. 24. 367.

³ Cf. WA. 3. 250, 255-6, 261-2, 347-8.

⁵ Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, p. 106.

teaching which does not square with the Scriptures is to be rejected "even if it shows miracles every day".¹ Christians are not to hanker after new signs and disclosures and manifestations. Rather, urged Luther, "let us faithfully adhere to this revelation or proclamation of the Holy Spirit. He alone must tell us what we are to know."² Revelation has been finalized in Christ. The Spirit's function is to evoke from the Word what is already there. There must be no addition to the Book, any more than there should be subtraction from it (Rev. 22:18, 19).

¹ *Ibid.*, 371.

² *Ibid.*