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LUTHER'S CONCEPT OF REVELATION

by A. SKEVINGTON WOOD

DR. Skevington Wood, who has written before on Luther and the Bible for *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, delivered this paper at a meeting of the Tyndale Fellowship Church History Group in January, 1962.

ACCORDING to Dr. 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 upon 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 this space-age re-examination of the revelatory aspect of the Christian Gospel we cannot altogether cut ourselves adrift from the past. Whilst we endeavour to learn what the Spirit saith to the churches today, we dare not ignore the lessons of history, and particularly of Christian history. If we are to bear effective witness to the Protestant and Reformed interpretation of this vitally relevant theme, then it is the part of wisdom to ensure that we are aware what in fact it is. In seeking to acquaint ourselves with the position assumed by classic Protestantism we can do no better than return to the pioneer reformer himself, Martin Luther.

We live in a generation when Luther research has boomed into a major theological industry, and writers of every school pay lip homage to his influence. But so fashionable is it nowadays to establish lineal descent from this reconstituted and at length highly respectable progenitor, that Luther is being accommodated to appear in an alarming number of incongruous and incompatible postures. He himself is treated as a nose of wax, to be pulled this way or that according to the whim of his modern examiners, in

¹ J. I. Packer, "Contemporary Views of Revelation" in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. C. F. H. Henry, p. 89.

the same manner as he complained that the Romanists mishandled the Scriptures. The consequence is that Luther finds himself allocated to some strange and contradictory camps. The premier award, in the particular context with which we are occupied in this present article, must undoubtedly be voted to Archdeacon A. L. Lilley who in his Paddock Lectures was blissfully 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 is an interesting and significant feature of current trends that whereas many of the theologians and Biblical critics are attempting to depict Luther as the precursor of 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. *Sola Scriptura* was a slogan popularized by him.

In approaching this topic of Luther's concept of revelation, it must be recognized that what was first declared from Wittenberg blazed a trail for subsequent Protestantism. Professor J. K. S. Reid, who offers in many respects a rather different account of Luther's attitude from ours in his book on *The Authority of Scripture*, nevertheless agrees that "in Luther the pattern of the Protestant view of Scripture is outlined".³ This we take to be axiomatic. As B. A. Gerrish has shown in a discriminating article on "Biblical Authority and the Continental Reformation", Luther, Calvin and the rest of the Protestant leaders were fundamentally at one in their attitude to Scripture.⁴ Nor can we rightly infer that the original reformers adopted a more flexible position which in the later dogmaticians hardened into rigidity. Robert Preus's definitive study has served to substantiate the previous assertion of Dr. Pieper that "the real difference between Luther and the dogmaticians is that the dogmaticians weakly stammer and re-echo what Luther had taught much more strongly about Scripture from Scripture".⁵

Luther's starting-point is the recognition that all knowledge of

² A. L. Lilley, *Religion and Revelation*, p. 79.

³ J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture*, p. 59.

⁴ B. A. Gerrish, "Biblical Authority and the Continental Reformation", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. X, No. 4, p. 356.

⁵ R. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the 17th Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Edinburgh, 1955).

⁶ F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I. p. 277.

God is necessarily dependent upon 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.

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 is compelled to define revelation as determined by the divine sovereignty. 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 regards 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 upon the left hand of God, where He works all unknown to men. He is not only *Deus Revelatus* but also *Deus Absconditus*. And He is so still. What Luther is saying is not that God was once concealed but is now altogether made manifest. It is that the revelation itself is restricted by the divine decree and that God is *Deus Absconditus* even whilst He is *Deus Revelatus*.

It is important to note in what manner God appears as the Unfathomable [comments Gustav Aulén]. 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).⁷

⁷ G. Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, p. 47.

Luther charges Erasmus with failure to distinguish "between the proclaimed and the concealed God".⁸ Behind His proffered mercy lies His hidden and fearful will, which "is not to be investigated, but is to be most reverently adored as the most awesome mystery of the divine majesty, reserved only for Himself alone and forbidden to us".⁹ Even the Antichrist cannot challenge the unrevealed God. He can only oppose and exalt himself "above all that is called God, or that is worshipped" (2 Thes. 2: 4); that is, says Luther, "over the Word and worship, whereby God is known to us and stands in fellowship with us. But against the God who is not worshipped, not proclaimed, as He is in His essence and His majesty, nothing can exalt itself, all things are under His powerful hand".¹⁰ Even if we disagree with Luther's exegesis on the ground that the verse from 2 Thessalonians alludes to so-called gods and objects of worship, as the Revised Standard Version makes clear, the point he stresses is nevertheless valid quite apart from its accompanying proof-text.

Now, argues Luther, as Christians we have only to do with God as He reveals Himself, "insofar as He has clothed Himself and made Himself known to us in His Word, wherein He has offered Himself to us But the God who is hidden in His majesty—works life, death, and all in all (1 Cor. 12: 6)—He has not limited Himself by His Word, but has reserved to Himself freedom over all".¹¹ Elsewhere Luther further distinguishes between God's presence everywhere though concealed, and His presence "for us". In this careful manner Luther relates divine revelation to divine volition and upholds 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",¹² Luther takes Erasmus to task for overlooking this crucial factor.

God does much of which He does not tell us in His Word. Also He wills many things which in His Word He does not reveal. According to His Word, He does not wish the death of the sinner. But He does will it according to His unfathomable will. But we must have regard to the Word and leave this unfathomable will, for we must be guided by this Word and not by this unfathomable will. For who indeed could follow a will which is completely unfathomable and unsearchable? It is sufficient to know this much, that there is in God

⁸ M. Luther, *Werke*, Weimarer Auflage (W.A.), Vol. XVIII, p. 685.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 684.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 685.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² C. Bergendorff, "The Revelation and the Ministry of Grace" in *World Lutheranism of Today; A Tribute to Anders Nygren*, p. 24.

an unfathomable will, but what, why, and whither it wills we are not permitted to seek to know, or to wish to know, be anxious about it or to meddle with it, but only to fear and to adore.¹³

Despite the impression created by current misconceptions of his teaching, Luther quite certainly recognizes 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", writes Professor P. S. Watson, "that the problem of reconciling the contents of these two kinds of knowledge sets its mark, in one way or another, on the whole of Luther's thought".¹⁴ 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 regards 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 explains (expounding Galatians 4: 8), "namely, that there is a God, that he created heaven and earth, that he is just, and that he punisheth the wicked. But what God thinketh of us, what his will is towards us, what he will give or what he will do, to the end that we may be delivered from sin and death, and be saved (which is the true knowledge of God indeed), this they know not".¹⁵ And then Luther introduces a most perceptive simile:

As it may be that I know some man by sight, whom yet, indeed, I know not thoroughly, because I understand not what affection he beareth towards me. So men know naturally that there is a God: but what his will is, or what is not his will, they do not know. For it is written, "There is none that understandeth God" (Rom. 3: 11). And in another place, "No man hath seen God" (John 1: 18). That is to say, no man hath known what is the will of God. Now, what doth it avail thee, if thou know that there is a God, and yet art ignorant of his will towards thee?¹⁶

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 insists 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 parts company from Thomas Aquinas and the Schoolmen who spoke of an ascent by the light of reason

¹³ W. A., Vol. XVIII, pp. 685-686.

¹⁴ P. S. Watson, *Let God be God!*, p. 73.

¹⁵ M. Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, E.T., p. 318.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

through created things to the knowledge of God, and regarded the special revelation only as a downward movement from God. There is, however, no unmediated relationship between God and man. Luther maintains the Scriptural principle that man cannot see God in His transcendence and live. In all His dealings with men, God assumes a mask (*larva*) or veil (*involucrum*). This is true even of His special revelation to believers, so that Luther can speak of Christ Himself in such terms. 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 prince, the magistrate, the preacher, the schoolmaster, the scholar, the father, the mother, the children, the master, the servant"—all are God's instruments by which He governs the world and outward veils of Himself.¹⁷

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 enquirer. 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".¹⁸ It is in this specific revelation in Christ that Luther sees "a manifest distinction" between Christianity and all other religions of the world—including the Romanist misrepresentation of the Gospel. 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 recognizes it nowhere save in the Word. "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".¹⁹ 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. Luther insists on a *theologia crucis* as over against the Schoolmen who attempted to climb up into the majesty of God. The Word itself is another *involucrum*: i.e., 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

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

¹⁸ Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

¹⁹ M. Luther, *Works*, E.T., ed. J. Pelikan (P.E.), Vol. XXIV, p. 69.

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".²⁰ 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.

By the Word, then, Luther does not invariably mean Holy Writ. He uses the term sometimes with reference to Scripture, sometimes with reference to Christ Himself, and sometimes with reference to the content of Christian preaching. Yet there is no final cleavage or contradiction in his mind, since for him the Bible is 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 Pelikan.²¹

Written Word and living Word are almost inseparably conjoined since for Luther Christ is the core of Scripture. He is its sum and truth. He is its constant focus. "In the whole Scripture there is nothing but Christ either in plain words or involved words".²² The content is Christ and the revelation is channelled through Him. "The Bible is God's Word written, presented in letters, as Christ is the eternal Word presented in human nature".²³

Luther can even suggest that the Scripture is Christ's spiritual body by which He is here and now available to believers. Thus, when Luther speaks of particular revelation as confined to the Word of God, he means at once 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 is allied to his unremitting emphasis upon what he calls its perspicuity. He holds that the Bible is luminously clear in its meaning as befits the chosen medium of God's own self-disclosure. He rebukes Erasmus for inclining to "that impudent and blasphemous saying, 'the Scriptures are obscure' ". "They who deny the all-clearness and all-plainness of the Scriptures, leave us nothing else but darkness", he complains. "Moreover", he continues:

I declare against you concerning the whole of Scripture, that I will have no one part of it called obscure: 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" (2 Peter 1: 19). But if any part of this lamp do not shine, it is rather a part of the dark place than of the lamp itself. For Christ has not so illuminated us, as to

²⁰ J. Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, pp. 178-180, 196.

²¹ J. Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, p. 70.

²² W. A., Vol. XI, p. 223.

²³ W. A., Vol. XLVIII, p. 31.

wish that any part of His Word should remain obscure, even while He commands us to attend to it: for if it be not shinning plain, His commanding us to attend to it is in vain.²⁴

Furthermore, it is Luther's tireless accusation against the Romanists that they cloud the inherent radiance of the Word and keep the people from its unambiguous truth. He objects 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".²⁵ After citing some instances of this malpractice, Luther adds: "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".²⁶ It is because the Word is the lucid revelation of God's essential truth that Luther is prepared to take his stand upon it in the face of all opposers. "You must plant yourself upon the clear, transparent, strong statements of the Scriptures, by which you will then be enabled to hold your ground".²⁷

When Luther thus speaks of Scripture, he includes its totality. He allows no licence to select or reject. To dispute the revelation in 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 all 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 words 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

²⁴ M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, E.T., ed. H. Cole, pp. 109-110.

²⁵ P.E., Vol. XXXII, p. 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁷ M. Luther, *Werke*, Erlangen Ed., Vol. XXVIII, p. 223.

secondary to human lore? Just as if God must yield to men, and let the authority of his Word depend on whether men are at one or at odds over it.²⁸

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 whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4: 5). "God's Word must be the most marvellous thing in heaven and on earth", declares Luther in his exhortation to the Knights of the Teutonic Order.

That is why it must at one and the same time do the two opposite works, give perfect light and glory to those who believe, and bring utter blindness and shame upon those who do not believe it. 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 most hidden of all things. The latter must blaspheme and slander it above all things, in order that in this way it may have its perfect course and accomplish no small works, but strange, terrible work in the hearts of men.²⁹

We have already noticed how Luther virtually identifies the Word with Christ Himself. He recognizes a similarly intimate association with the Holy Spirit. For him Word and Spirit belong together. The Romanists wanted the Word without the Spirit—the Word, as Professor Reid explains, "perverted and exanimated by the influence of canonical law".³⁰ The Anabaptists and Enthusiasts, on the other hand, wanted the Spirit without the Word. Luther holds the two together in vital tension. As the Holy Spirit is the divine Author of Scripture so also He is the divine interpreter. Scripture is "a book of the Holy Ghost".³¹ He who inspired its pages now makes it live. 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". Just as Luther describes the Scripture as Christ's spiritual body, so he regards it as the incarnation of the Spirit. He says that it corresponds to the Spirit as the voice to breathing or the rays of the sun to its heat. Prenter resolves the paradox involved in this double emphasis upon 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

²⁸ P.E., Vol. XXXVII, pp. 26-27.

²⁹ M. Luther, *Works*, E. T., Holman Ed., Vol. III, p. 416.

³⁰ Reid, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61.

³¹ M. Luther, *Works*, E.T., St. Louis Ed., Vol. IX, p. 1775.

Word and the Spirit directly one". 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 incarnated 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 Christ 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 Christ present for us.³²

This definitive status of the written Word forbids Luther to envisage any further revelation. The Spirit "makes men wise up to what is written, but not beyond it", as Joseph Angus observed.³³ "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", concludes Luther, "no new and special revelation or miracle is necessary".³⁴

It will have been apparent throughout this unavoidably superficial and fragmentary enquiry into Luther's concept of revelation that whilst the propositional element is by no means dismissed or underestimated, it is realized nevertheless that truth is primarily imparted through the encounter of personality. Luther has no notion of abstract truth: revelation is essentially God addressing man. It is a disclosure of the Father in the Son by the Holy Spirit. This may take the form of a propositional statement, but it is invariably addressed to a recipient. It is in this personalistic emphasis that Luther shows himself to be surprisingly in advance of his time and for this reason his contribution may provide a useful launching pad for future theological discussion.

In his arresting *Introduction to Christianity* Paul Hessert reflects this approach.

The real meaning of revelation can best be seen in the relationship of persons to each other. We may know about a person in the sense of knowing certain facts about his life, facts which we have learned either for ourselves or from a third party. This type of information can be obtained from an encyclopedia article or a biography and may be very general or quite detailed. To know a person, however, one must have knowledge of a different sort altogether. It

³² R. Prenter, *Creator Spiritus*, pp. 106-107.

³³ J. Angus, *The Bible Handbook*, p. 179.

³⁴ P.E., Vol. XXIV, p. 367.

cannot be had at secondhand, but only in personal encounter. It does not add to our factual knowledge at all ; for when we know a person, we find it exceedingly difficult to say what it is we know and how we have come to know it. And we cannot know a person unless he is willing that we should know him, unless he "reveals" himself to us. Our response to such self-giving is our giving ourselves in return. To know a person is, by its very nature, a mutual relationship. We can know only as we are known. And, finally, this self-giving is complete. A symbol of it is the sharing of secrets which has little to do with an increase of factual knowledge but has much to do in putting each person in the other's power.

Revelation is akin to the self-giving of a friend who is willing to be known. In the same way, it involves the response of faith in wholehearted personal involvement or commitment. It does not necessarily increase our factual knowledge, although—just as in friendship—we may make statements on the basis of this mutual relationship that at best are always incomplete because they refer to living persons rather than to things. Revelation, in short, is God's disclosing of Himself that elicits our response of faith, the whole-person response which is of the essence of religion.³⁵

Now, without endorsing all that Hessert would draw from this simile, it may be said that it represents a slant on revelation which Luther pioneered. Indeed, it will be recalled that Luther actually uses the simile in a passage quoted above from his commentary on Galatians. Nor will it escape our notice that the response of faith which Professor Hessert regards as the correlative of revelation is central in Luther's teaching and indeed in the total message of the Reformation. It is this existential quality in Luther's approach which distinguishes it from the medieval past and links it so strikingly with the thought of today.

York.

³⁵ P. Hessert, *Introduction to Christianity*, pp. 50-51.