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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Neglected Reformer: Martin Luther through Anglican Eyes

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This paper is written not from the point of view of an expert in 'Luther Studies', but from that of one who feels himself to have been gripped by an encounter with 'Luther the man'. In describing Luther as 'neglected', however, it is implied that we are missing something of his potential contribution. My contention in presenting this paper is that this neglect applies not just to Anglicans but to Lutherans and indeed to the wider church.

Until fairly recently, Luther had been as shadowy a figure to me as I am sure he is to most English people. When we consider how Luther is viewed 'through Anglican eyes', we must take into account that feature of the English character which subconsciously both cuts us off from, and sets us above, the affairs and peoples of the continent of Europe. Even the massive wave of immigration since the sixties, the rise in popularity of holidays abroad, our membership of the European Community and, let it be said, satellite television, have done little to change this sense that Europe is a place 'somewhere else'. Equally, therefore, the characters of European history belong to *someone else's* heritage – and this is as true of church history as it is of secular.

However, this attitude results not merely from an oddity of the English psyche. The Reformation, in its fullest sense, was essentially a *Continental* event. And England's participation in it was typically *English* – sitting on the sidelines, from where we observed, and sometimes took part in, the general upheaval, before achieving that unique resolution to the crisis which is the Church of England. Subsequent historical revisionism further explains our failure to have much awareness of Luther. Put crudely, the Continental Reformation is perceived as a series of bitter and bloody

struggles, typified by the Thirty Years' War and the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre.¹ The English Reformation, by contrast, is represented by the Elizabethan Settlement – the first, but by no means the last, 'sensible Anglican compromise'. All this is of intense relevance when we consider current issues like the *Porvoo Declaration*. Our beliefs about Luther, Lutheranism and the Reformation are easily as important as the reality, and our attitude to Europe is as crucial as our attitude to theology.

Seen from the perspective of modern Anglicanism, defined by its geography, history and ecclesiology, Martin Luther is a 'half-man' – half mediaeval and half modern, half Protestant and half Catholic, half Reformer and half in need of reform. It is not so much that he is seen as 'sitting on the fence', as that he seems to occupy both sides of the fence at once. Inevitably, therefore, among those who know little more than his name and reputation, he wins much admiration but few friends. Within Anglicanism, he is too Catholic for the reformed Evangelical, and too Protestant for the Anglo-Catholic. Moreover, his ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts. Those who have heard of the 'Ninety-five Theses' find, when and if they read them, not (as they might expect) a revolutionary manifesto for Protestantism, but a series of obscure propositions about obscure issues. The other commonly-known feature of Luther's theology, namely his insistence on a doctrine of the 'real presence' of Christ in the elements at communion, leaves the Anglican Evangelical convinced that Luther went nowhere near far enough in his thinking. This is especially so when the Evangelical is aware that it was precisely because of *this* doctrine that many Protestants, including Archbishop Cranmer, were martyred during the reign of Queen Mary. Those who attempt to discover more by dipping into Luther's writings find his thoughts impenetrable and his manner of expression disreputable.

My own estimation would therefore be that, among Anglican Evangelicals, Luther is acknowledged as the 'father' of the Reformation, but not its 'guardian'. That honour goes to Cranmer on English soil and to Calvin on the Continent. Luther, like the booster stage of the space shuttle, is recognized as launching the Reformation, but he himself falls away, pulled back to earth by the shortcomings of his own theology and the limitations imposed by his historical and ecclesiological background. Meanwhile, for the non-Evangelical and the Anglo-Catholic, it is probably true that the less said about Martin Luther the better.

Before my 'encounter with Luther', my own view would have matched the typical view of an Anglican Evangelical suggested above. However, in

¹ The precise sequence of historical events, or their exact relationship to Luther, is inconsequential. What matters to the English is the associations they evoke in the English mind.

1993 I was introduced to, and more importantly guided through, the thoughts of Martin Luther by Dr Robert Doyle of Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia. As with all good guides, it was largely his infectious enthusiasm which engaged my interest in the subject. Yet reading for the sake of coursework is one thing. What has kept me reading Luther since then is not merely his theology, but his character. A personal maxim, which I urge on those ignorant of his work, is that 'If you want to get it right, read Calvin. If you want to be entertained, read Luther'. I am personally persuaded that Calvin's theology is more fully developed, and in places better, than Luther's. But the fact remains that nobody reads Calvin for the jokes. And the fundamental reason for both the content and style of Luther's work is, I would argue, that his theology was born in the fires of his own hell, with the result that theological opinion is never separated from personal feeling.

The 'fundamental' Luther is not a systematic theologian, but a saved soul. My first awareness of Luther as more than an academic subject to be mastered resulted from encountering his concept of *Anfechtung* – a word almost untranslatable into English, which tempts us to fall back on that other Germanic term, *Angst*. 'Spiritual struggle' conveys the sense of what is meant, but it is a struggle characterized by *doubt and temptation*. In my early days of reading Luther, one sentence of his struck me so forcibly that I copied it out and stuck it to my study door:

Living, or rather dying and being damned, make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating.

Significantly, these words drew positive comments from my fellow students, and the reason is not hard to discern. In the context of a theological college where a great premium was placed precisely on 'understanding', 'reading' (in vast quantities) and 'speculating' (even over lunch), they not only cut through to the *purpose* of our studies but also spoke encouragingly to those who, in the midst of these studies, sometimes struggled with their own, un-named, experiences of dying and damnation. Moreover, they spoke so powerfully precisely because they came from a man who, I was discovering, was himself a theologian of vast stature.

My studies in Luther's theology required that I begin by reading the 'pre-Reformation' Luther without, at that stage, knowing where the journey would finish. The Luther of the *Lectures on the Psalms* was, as I half-expected, both confused and confusing. There was certainly nothing here that would attract a modern evangelical publisher, much less revolutionize Europe. Even the hermeneutical method required additional reading so that I could understand (if only briefly) the distinction between the allegorical, the anagogical and the tropological senses of Scripture.

Only as I read from his *Lectures on Romans* did the familiar outlines of an evangelical theology began to emerge. Yet it was this exercise of following through from the monk to the Reformer which first made me realize the magnitude of Luther's achievement, for here was a man who had *revolutionized his own world view from within*.

Most of us appreciate that it is difficult enough to revise our opinions using the apparatus of contemporary understanding. Luther, however, not only revised his opinion but revised the very means by which opinions were to be reached. For Luther to understand that justification was 'by faith alone' required a new way of reading the words of Scripture in which this idea was expressed. No longer, in the pattern of the *lectio divina*, was the Bible student to be driven to his knees to seek an encounter with God via meditation on the spiritual message in the text. Rather, the value of (for example) St Paul was to be discovered by 'beating importunately upon Paul'. And the means Luther advocated for this was 'by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them'.²

Though it remained to Calvin to develop a fully modern approach to writing commentaries, Luther's insight finally put an end to the four-fold exegetical method of the mediaeval period. Equally importantly, it undermined the mysticism that relied on this method. Luther's great realization was that the spiritual benefit of reading Scripture lay in understanding the text itself by means of the normal tools of textual comprehension. It is therefore alarming to find modern English Evangelicals recommending a return to the *lectio divina*:

Read the chosen passage slowly, several times, aloud if desired, allowing the words and phrases to linger within you as you read. [...] Stay with the words or phrases that catch your attention. [...] Allow your prayers ... to form out of your meditation. Finally, rest in the presence of God. Wait quietly and simply be present to God for 10 to 15 minutes.³

No beating on Paul here! The goal is quite clearly not textual comprehension but a mystical encounter with the divine. Thus we begin to suspect that the modern neglect of Luther is not merely of his historical person but of the battles he fought and the victories he gained.

2 *The American Edition of Luther's Works* (hereafter LW) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press) 34.286

3 Wendy Miller 'Rhythm of the Saints' *Alpha* September 1995 p 15. Miller commends the *lectio divina* as a 'discipline' to 'assist us in becoming receptive to God's presence and making a response to the one who is always present for us'.

Such an encounter with the divine would be familiar to Luther's predecessors, such as Bernard of Clairvaux or Gabriel Biel. It was, however, through his new understanding of Scripture that Luther found what his monastic disciplines had failed to provide, namely an assurance of his acceptability to the holy God whose 'righteousness' had previously threatened only judgment and condemnation. If we see this insight as Luther's 'Damascus Road' experience, then it is not surprising that the doctrine of the *word* of God is as central to his theology as the doctrine of the *grace* of God is to Paul's. For Luther, the word of God is both that *through* which God acts and that *on* which faith seizes. The word *is* the power of God. However, it is a power which is available to *every* Christian.

Thus, unlike many modern Anglicans, for Luther the doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' was not merely a negative stance over against Catholic sacerdotalism. Rather, being based on his belief in the power of God's word empowering the believer, it redefined the theological centre of the doctrine of ministry and issued in a radical freedom for every Christian to minister in God's name. Coupled with a conviction that the Bible recognized only two orders of ministry – 'bishop-presbyters' and 'deacons' – rather than three, this allowed Luther to sit very light to the ecclesiastical structures of his day. Since the minister was only a temporarily authorised layman,⁴ no different in his 'priesthood' from any other layman, his appointment was not necessarily a matter for a 'higher' authority such as a bishop. Indeed, Luther referred to the latter as 'pseudo-ordainers' who 'blaspheme and err in holding that their anointing and ordinations are so necessary that without them no one can be a priest, however holy he be'.⁵ His general opinion of bishops seems to have been that whilst they were in a position to do much good, they not only usually wasted the opportunity on trivial activities (such as 'baptizing bells'), but all too often stood in the way of gospel ministry. His response to this was again characteristically bold. Where a bishop would not appoint a suitable minister to a congregation, the congregation could appoint someone for themselves:

... if papal bishops are unwilling to bestow the ministry of the Word ... then it but remains either to let the [local] church perish ... or to let those who come together cast their ballots and elect one or as many as are needed of those who are capable. By prayer and the laying on of hands let them commend and certify these to the whole assembly, and recognize and honor them as lawful bishops and ministers of the Word, believing beyond a shadow of doubt that this has been done and accomplished by God.⁶

4 Luther rejected the concept of an 'indelible' character of 'priesthood'. The minister could return to a 'secular' trade no less honourable than the 'sacred'.

5 *Concerning the Ministry* LW 40.19

6 LW 40.37. Note how Luther contrasts 'papal bishops', referring to the diocesan, with 'bishops ... of the Word', meaning the local presbyter.

It is hard to imagine Luther tolerating the present deference of Anglicans to bishops who leave congregations without ministers for months on end or who appoint to them clergy who do not exercise a gospel ministry.

Luther's conviction that the power of God's Word was the source of Christian ministry also controlled his view of women in ministry. And here, I believe he has the better of Calvin in allowing women to baptize infants. Calvin's *a priori* opposition to women's ministry lacks Luther's recognition (shared by the Anglican *Articles of Religion*) that the effectiveness of a sacrament depends on the power of God's word, not the person ministering:

To baptize is incomparably greater than to consecrate bread and wine, for it is the greatest office in the church – the proclamation of the Word of God. So when women baptize, they exercise the function of priesthood legitimately, and do it not as a private act, but as a part of the public ministry of the church ...⁷

Luther was not generally in favour of ordaining women. Nevertheless, this owed more to his view of women than it did to his view of ordination. In an emergency even a woman could perform *all* the functions of a priest. Indeed, Luther's radicalism in regard to women's ministry would set him in opposition to many today who regard themselves as his spiritual heirs, but it perhaps also suggests avenues for further exploration of the issues involved.

Unfortunately Luther's commitment to the word of God which allowed him to take risks also undoubtedly led to him making mistakes. His approval of the bigamous marriage of Philip of Hesse, which continues to scandalize many, was a result of his willingness to reconsider traditional assumptions in the light of how the word of God applied to human need. Indeed, in the area of marriage and sexuality Luther was very much a revolutionary in his own age. Not only did he strongly advocate the marriage of clergy and ex-members of religious communities, he would permit divorce and remarriage on the grounds of desertion and even of male impotence. Whether we would agree with his conclusions in every respect is less important than whether we share his boldness and confidence in God's word. Too often we have tried to eliminate the element of risk Luther entertained and yet hoped to duplicate his effectiveness in producing change. Yet, four hundred and fifty years on, we should surely have developed enough safeguards to allow us to exercise at least a portion of the Reformer's boldness whilst avoiding some of his mistakes.

7 *Concerning the Ministry* LW 40.23

However, Luther's boldness was ultimately rooted not in the Bible itself but in the God whom the Bible revealed and, specifically, in the God revealed in the biblical Christ. Perhaps Luther's most neglected contribution to theology is his profound insight into the relationship between the *deus absconditus* of human experience and the *deus revelatus* of Christ on the Cross. Luther's 'theology of contraries', whereby God's true qualities are revealed in the opposites of those qualities, both reflected and elucidated his own experience as a convicted sinner. Terrified at the prospect of seeing the face of God turned towards him in judgment, he found instead, through a proper study of the Scriptures, divine forgiveness in the face of the crucified Christ – hence his dictum, *CRUX sola est nostra theologia* (THE CROSS alone is our theology).⁸

This insight, which reached fruition through his study of Romans, continued to inform his subsequent understanding of the experiential relationship between God and the believer. It also led to his distinction between the true and the false theologian. Thesis 20 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* states:

He deserves to be called a theologian ... who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.⁹

Significantly, Luther quotes in support 'Truly, thou art a God who *hides* thyself' (Is 45:15). By contrast:

He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil.¹⁰

The 'theologian of glory' therefore wishes to see God revealed in present circumstances of well-being and blessing. Yet this inevitably leads to destruction:

Because men do not know the cross and hate it, they necessarily love the opposite, namely, wisdom, glory, power, and so on. Therefore they become increasingly blinded and hardened by such love ...¹¹

The 'theologian of suffering', on the other hand, realizes that God is only seen, and can only be found, in the experience of *Anfechtung*

8 Quoted in A McGrath *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell 1985) p 152. The capitals are in the original.

9 LW 31. 52

10 Thesis 21

11 Thesis 22

exemplified by Christ on the Cross. The crucial point is that *both* theologians can share similar beliefs about God. Yet only for the theologian of suffering is theology made a living and *life-giving* resource as a result of *Anfechtungen*, 'for without them no man can understand Scripture, faith, the fear or the love of God'.¹²

And here again we see how far the modern Christian mindset has wandered from that of Luther. The modern Christian may share his language about weakness and the Cross. We may even have a rational acceptance of God's sovereign use of suffering. Yet few would embrace Luther's *Anfechtungen* as the *necessary means* to Christian growth. However, we may contrast Luther's bold acceptance of personal sinfulness, implicit in the concept of *Anfechtung*, with the anxiety of the modern Christian concerning his status before God. The modern Christian frequently deals with awareness of his own sin by self-condemnation or denial – either being paralysed by hopelessness or pretending to have conquered the flesh in its entirety. Luther's tactic was different, siding *with* his Accuser in accepting honestly his sinfulness, but then appealing confidently to his Saviour and pointing the Accuser to *him*:

When I go to bed the Devil is always waiting for me. If ... he brings out a catalog of sins I say, 'Yes, old fellow, I know all about it. And I know some more you have overlooked. Here are a few extra. Put them down.' If he still won't quit ... I scorn him and say, 'St Satan, pray for me ... Go to God and get grace for yourself.'¹³

His boldness about his salvation is no doubt the reason why, in spite of his attitude to sin and *Anfechtung*, Luther had such a robust, almost embarrassing, enjoyment of life. His remedy for depression, and even for sin, was the company of friends, and not merely friends to pray with but friends with whom to sing, play cards and drink.

In this, and other respects, Luther is an enigma to the modern Christian. He is painfully conscious of a powerful Devil who targets him personally. He experiences life as a constant struggle, a series of *Anfechtungen*. And yet he is careless of his own piety and quite simply *enjoys* himself. The secret lies in a confidence in God which is shocking to those who misunderstand its grounds: 'Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly'.¹⁴ But, again by contrast with the modern Christian, it is a confidence which is *driven theologically* since, for Luther, theology was not an academic examination of God but the means

12 Quoted in R Bainton *Here I Stand* (Oxford: Lion Publishing 1978) p 361

13 Quoted in Bainton p 362

14 Luther's remark to Melancthon, quoted from LW 48.282 in G Bray 'Justification: The Reformers and Recent New Testament Scholarship' *Churchman* 109.2 1995 pp 102-126

through which God was encountered. The disciplines necessary to a good grasp of theology were therefore also the disciplines necessary to an effective pastoral ministry. Hence another quotation which I have urged on others:

There is a vast difference ... between a simple preacher of the faith and a person who expounds Scripture. [...] A simple preacher (it is true) has so many clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without languages [ie biblical Greek and Hebrew]. [...] Therefore, although faith and the gospel may indeed be proclaimed by simple preachers without a knowledge of languages, such preaching is flat and tame; people finally become weary and bored with it, and it falls to the ground. But where the preacher is versed in the languages, there is a freshness and vigor in his preaching, Scripture is treated in its entirety, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and illustrations.¹⁵

I am constantly frustrated by the attitude which prevails even amongst leading evangelical Anglicans that a ministry of the word of God can be sustained by the enthusiasm of people but halfly trained in the theological disciplines. Luther recognized that our understanding of doctrine governs the nature of our encounter with God and determines the extent to which we benefit from it. The breakthrough which revealed to him the gospel was a *theological* breakthrough. His argument with the papacy was an argument over *doctrine*, not persons or behaviours: 'I have no quarrel with any man concerning his morals but only concerning the word of truth'.¹⁶ His approach to the issues, circumstances and trials of life was governed theologically. Hence the Christian *is* a theologian, and his success as a Christian depends on his success in mastering theology:

I know full well that while it is the Spirit alone who accomplishes everything, I would surely have never flushed a covey if the languages had not helped me and given me a sure and certain knowledge of Scripture.¹⁷

Perhaps this is seen most clearly in Luther's attitude to predestination,

15 *To the Councilmen of Germany* LW 45.363-5

16 'An Open Letter to Pope Leo X' in M Luther *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1970) p 268

17 *To the Councilmen of Germany* LW 45.366. Luther uses an obscure hunting metaphor to refer to his 'flushing out' Satan.

for in this respect he was undoubtedly a 'Calvinist', and therefore virtually a heretic by today's standards. *On the Bondage of the Will* is as robust an argument as one will find for the absolute sovereignty of God in election and salvation. Luther sweeps away any suggestion that 'free will', in the terms set out by Erasmus, has any useful role to play in salvation. We are all in bondage, either to Satan or to God, as a mule is controlled by its rider. Salvation therefore depends on God's sovereign action alone and all attempts to represent election as mere 'foreknowledge' are decisively rejected for:

... unless you allow [the foreknowledge of God] to carry with it the *necessary occurrence* of the thing foreknown, you take away the faith and the fear of God, make havoc of all the divine promises and threatenings, and thus deny his very divinity.¹⁸

Hence individual salvation depends not on free choice but on the attitude of God towards the individual:

... because God's love toward men is eternal and immutable, and his hatred is eternal, being prior to the creation of the world, and not only to the merit and work of free choice; and everything takes place by necessity in us, according as he either loves or does not love us from all eternity ...¹⁹

Luther's position in this respect is, of course, entirely consistent with that expressed in the Anglican articles:

Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour.²⁰

However, we must note at this stage that this same opinion sits very awkwardly with modern Lutheranism, for although there are other aspects of Luther's theology we could usefully highlight, the fact is that many of its key features were actually rejected after his death. As Alister McGrath writes:

18 *On the Bondage of the Will* in G E Rupp & P S Watson *Library of Christian Classics – Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1969) p 241 emphasis added

19 Rupp & Watson p 252

20 Article XVII *Of Predestination and Election*

... the Formula of Concord [1577] marked not only the ending of an important series of controversies in the Lutheran church immediately after Luther's death; it also marked the victory and consolidation of the critique of Luther from within Lutheranism itself. Luther's concept of justification, his concept of the presence of Christ within the believer, his doctrine of double predestination, his doctrine of *servum arbitrium* – all were rejected or radically modified by those who followed him.²¹

This is important because when we consider the extent to which Luther is 'neglected' we must recognize that his unconscious neglect by Anglicans must be set alongside his conscious neglect by orthodox Lutheranism. This also affects the way we view future 'Anglican-Lutheran' dialogue, since there is potential for a dialogue with Luther on both sides. Specifically, a document like the *Porvoo Declaration* is possible only between two communions one of which has forgotten Luther and the other of which has deliberately set him aside.

The *Porvoo Declaration* rests on a number of theological compromises. In particular, on the Anglican side there has been an acceptance of the doctrine of the 'real presence' and, on the Lutheran side, the acceptance of 'episcopal succession'. And yet, at least from the Anglican side, this is both unnecessary and dishonest.

To begin with, Anglican doctrine allows for variations in practice between churches in different countries:

Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.²²

Underlying this statement is the presupposition that whilst uniformity may be insisted upon within national boundaries, it is not to be expected where there are 'diversities of countries, times, and men's manners' - provided that 'nothing be ordained against God's word'.²³ As regards episcopal succession, the Church of England has, in the last few years, seen an informal but effective endorsement of this doctrine through constant repetition, especially in official reports. Nevertheless, even the bishops' own report on bishops states that 'the Church of England as a whole has never committed itself to the view that the episcopate is of the

21 A E McGrath *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: CUP 1986) vol 2 p 32

22 Article XXXIV *Of the Traditions of the Church*. This statement seems to be based not so much on a denominational as a socio-political concept of a 'distinct' church. The term 'national' seems to be exegetical of 'particular'.

23 Article XXXIV *Of the Traditions of the Church*

esse of the Church'.²⁴ It therefore follows that 'particular or national' churches have the authority to reject the Anglican practice regarding episcopacy, without thereby ordaining something 'against God's word'. If this were not so, then, as one recent writer has urged, 'evangelical Anglicans ought to be pressing their friends in other churches to accept episcopal oversight and ordination without further ado'.²⁵ The fact that they are not doing so is, of course, down to the fact that they believe no such thing. The same writer correctly notes that the Anglican Articles define a true church without reference to episcopacy: 'The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same'.²⁶ There is therefore no reason, based on the Anglican formularies, for rejecting the Lutheran churches or holding back from full communion with their members and ministers, *unless* we take issue over the doctrine of the 'real presence'.

Both Luther and Cranmer rejected transubstantiation. However, the so-called 'Black Rubric' of the Holy Communion service in *The Book of Common Prayer* states that 'the natural Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ are in Heaven, and not here; it being against the truth of Christ's natural Body to be at one time in more places than one'. This does create a difficulty for mutual co-operation. Indeed, regarding the words 'This is my body', one Lutheran Synod has agreed that:

Any effort to make the 'This is' something less than a clear word, as Reformed theology does by denying the real presence of the body and blood of Christ on earth, is a departure from Christ's words.²⁷

However, such a statement, if slightly belligerent, is at least more honest than the claim in the *Porvoo Common Statement* that 'We [both Lutherans and Anglicans] believe that the body and blood of Christ are truly present ... under the forms of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper'.²⁸ For those Anglicans (particularly Evangelicals) who agree with the Anglican formularies, this is simply not true.

Nevertheless, this does not mean there is no room for manoeuvre. On the Anglican side, there are many who do hold such a belief in the 'real

24 *Episcopal Ministry: The Report of the Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate* (London: Church House Publishing 1990) p 87

25 M Davie 'Is the C of E really a church?' *The Church of England Newspaper* 1.12.95 p 18

26 Article XIX *Of the Church*

27 *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations* The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod May 1983 p 7

28 *The Porvoo Common Statement* p 19

presence' and it has been possible to retain them within the church (albeit more out of an attitude of doctrinal laxity than conviction). The question is whether the Lutherans would share Luther's tendency not to regard as Christian brethren those who differed from him on this issue. At the Marburgh Colloquy, Luther refused to shake hands with the Swiss Reformers. However, in a letter to his wife afterwards he wrote:

Tell Bugenhagen that Zwingli's best argument was that a body could not exist without occupying space and therefore Christ's body was not in the bread, and that Oecolampadius' best argument was that the sacrament is only the sign of Christ's body. I think God blinded them that they could not get beyond these points.²⁹

Intriguingly, it suggests that though Zwingli and Oecolampadius could not see beyond their arguments, perhaps Luther himself could! Moreover, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* Luther wrote of his own opinion that the body and blood of Christ and the substances of bread and wine were both present on the 'altar', 'Thus I will understand it *for the time being* to the honor of the holy words of God'.³⁰ Though Luther did not change his mind, it does not mean his mind could not be changed. If – but only if – he could have been shown to have misunderstood the word of God we may be sure he would indeed have changed even on this point.

However, we need not clutch at straws, nor insist on a formal change of opinion in the present, for both Luther and classic Anglicanism agree that *real bread and real wine form the substance of the sacrament* and that *its efficacy depends on faith, which find its object in the word of Christ*. Regarding the latter point, Luther wrote:

In the first place, in order that we might safely and happily attain to a true and free knowledge of this sacrament, we must ... turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and this alone, and set nothing before us but the very word of Christ by which he instituted the sacrament, made it perfect, and committed it to us. For in that word, and in that word alone, reside the power, the nature, and the whole substance of the mass.³¹

That word is 'the promise of the forgiveness of sins made to us by God ... confirmed by the death of the Son of God'.³² Luther continues:

29 To Katherine von Bora, 4 October 1529, quoted in P Smith (ed R Backhouse) *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1993) p 192

30 M Luther *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1970) p 152 emphasis added

31 *Three Treatises* p 153

32 *Three Treatises* p 153

If the mass is a promise, as has been said, then access to it is to be gained ... by faith alone. For where there is the Word of the promising God, there must necessarily be the faith of the accepting man.³³

Thus he concludes:

According to its substance, therefore, the mass is nothing but the aforesaid words of Christ [...] Actually, during the mass, we should do nothing with greater zeal (indeed, it demands all our zeal) than to set before our eyes, meditate upon and ponder these words, these promises of Christ – for they constitute the mass itself – in order to exercise, nourish, increase, and strengthen our faith in them by this daily remembrance.³⁴

This fits very well with the official Anglican position that ‘the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is faith’.³⁵ Thus although difficulties exist between Luther’s own position and that of official Anglicanism, there is a significant degree of convergence. Moreover, there is undoubtedly more *disagreement*, even over other aspects of the mass, between Luther and those Anglicans who believe in a ‘real presence’ than there is between modern Lutheranism and those Anglicans who do not so believe. Would it offend to point out that Lutheranism has already modified Luther’s own position on other issues and to urge that further flexibility might also be possible in this area?

As to accepting ‘episcopal succession’, however, it seems to me that here the Lutherans are in danger of selling their collective soul. They should certainly not be deceived into thinking that this is a good exchange for Anglicans accepting the doctrine of the ‘real presence’. The historic episcopacy has been a dead hand on the Church of England since the Reformation itself, as Luther recognized it to be in his own situation. In the sixteenth century it was used to repress genuine gospel work. In the present it has been the source of scandal and confusion. Moreover, recent Anglican theology has emphasised the person of the bishop as the focus of the church’s life in a way that threatens the primacy of Christ as its head: ‘The bishop is the *πολυπλήθεια* (the multitude) in his person, the many in the one’.³⁶

Closer examination shows, however, that the Anglican practice of

33 M Luther *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1970) p 156

34 *Three Treatises* pp 158-9

35 Article XXVIII *Of the Lord’s Supper*

36 *Episcopal Ministry: The Report of the Archbishops’ Group on the Episcopate* (London: Church House Publishing 1990) p 9

episcopacy is an unhappy compromise resulting from this over-estimation of the bishop's personal significance. In particular, the existence of *suffragan* bishops – non-diocesan bishops appointed to assist the bishop within a diocese – shows that, unlike Luther, the Church of England is not theologically driven on the matter of episcopacy. Indeed, the Archbishops' report quoted earlier admits that the reason for the existence of suffragans is that 'diocesan bishops ... are simply expected to do more than it is possible for a single individual to accomplish'.³⁷ It appears the bishop is not so much 'the many in the one' as 'the too-many in the one'. However, the obvious solution, namely to multiply bishops, is rejected, even though this 'would represent a return to what is judged to be a primitive model' such as was used to argue for the existence of Anglican bishops in the first place.³⁸ In fact, one argument put forward for *not* multiplying bishops is that they would create too great an additional administrative load.³⁹ So whilst the burden of administration renders episcopacy ineffective and requires a theological compromise, a more theologically sound proposal to make episcopacy effective is rejected on the grounds that it would increase the burden of administration. One wonders where the middle ground lies in this case. One is also led to conclude that the argument for episcopacy is based on an *a priori* desire for bishops, not a theological conviction that it is necessary or a practical demonstration that it is workable. And yet it is into this system that the Lutheran churches have bought by agreeing to the *Porvoo Declaration*. It is hard to believe that Luther himself would have had anything to do with it, for the solution he proposed, namely to recognize that every presbyter is a bishop, would bring the whole house of cards tumbling down.

Were I to meet with Martin Luther, I have no doubt we would disagree over some issues. Perhaps I would feel the lash of his tongue and the force of his theology, but I also have no doubt it would be a bracing experience for 'faithful are the wounds of a friend'. Nor do I doubt that today he would still be a rebel and a thorn in the flesh to the ecclesiastical establishment. Perhaps his greatest criticisms would be directed at those of us who, in spite of our opportunities, seem so spineless and paralysed. Surely he would speak out against our attitude which allows the mission of the church to languish because we are forbidden by our institutions, our rules and our bishops to exercise or promote gospel ministry. But even then I am sure he would not urge us to act without thinking. Too many of us are like the Anabaptists in our enthusiasms, or the Waldensians in our ignorance. Like Melancthon, we have wavered before the modern equivalent of the Zwickau prophets, afraid we might be fooled by the

37 *Episcopal Ministry: The Report of the Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate* (London: Church House Publishing 1990) p 189

38 *Episcopal Ministry* p 193 cf pp 2-3

39 *Episcopal Ministry* p 192 quoting the Dioceses Commission's report GS 697

The Neglected Reformer: Martin Luther through Anglican Eyes

Devil and worried we might miss out on what God is doing. Surely Luther would have us return to the word of God, not in a fundamentalist or pietistic burst of revivalism, but in commitment to studying and examining it diligently for its true meaning. Thus he would expect us to arrive at the true knowledge of God in Christ on the Cross and, knowing him, to live boldly in and for him.

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