

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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CHAPTER VIII

LUTHER AS A PREACHER

IN THE YEAR 1947 AN EXCELLENT STUDY OF CALVIN as a preacher was prepared by T. H. L. Parker. The title was *The Oracles of God*. It introduced a neglected aspect of the man who led the work of reform in Geneva. John Calvin was not exclusively a theologian whose motto was "Theology for theology's sake." Nor was he merely an administrator. He was primarily a preacher. He only became a reformer as he wrestled with the Word. Throughout his career he conceived his first duty to be that of preaching.

A similar book is needed on Luther's preaching. It would point in precisely the same direction. But no such survey exists. No exhaustive monograph on this subject has yet been presented, not even in Germany.¹ The usual accounts in homiletical textbooks and histories of preaching are woefully inadequate, and sometimes inaccurate too. There is a certain amount of material in the standard biographies of Luther and now and again in the accounts of his theology which have multiplied in recent years. There is a useful introduction in the volume in the American Edition of Luther's works which starts off the series containing his sermons, and a similar preface in the Weimar Edition.² It is to the latter that we have to turn also for the opportunity to examine Luther's homiletical output. The bulk is considerable, for Ebeling has classified 1,978 complete sermons delivered by Luther, and with the addition of some that are unfinished, over two thousand are included in the Weimar collection.³ Not even this contains all the sermons of which transcripts are available. Sixteen volumes are filled with nothing but sermons, six more record the postils, and there are others elsewhere in the series. One of the reasons why no detailed research into Luther's preaching has yet been done is that the task of examining all the sources available is a formidable one indeed. "Every Luther scholar knows that this requires years of labour," said Emanuel Hirsch.⁴

Luther did not become a preacher when he became a priest.⁵ A priest

¹ The lacuna mentioned by Mackinnon (op. cit., Vol. IV, *Vindication of the Movement* (1530-1546) (1930), p. 318 n. 66) still remains; cf. LW. 51. xi. Some material contained in this chapter has been presented in A. Skevington Wood, "Luther as a Preacher", *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. XXI (1949), pp. 109-21.

² LW. 51. xi-xxi; WA. 10. iii. III-VII, IX-XV.

³ Ebeling, op. cit., Anlage I, Tabelle I. LW. 51. xii.

⁴ LW. 51. xi.

⁵ Scheel, op. cit., Bd. II, pp. 551-553.

was not automatically required to preach. Luther was ordained in 1507. As far as we know, he did not begin to preach until 1510. When he embarked on his course for the doctorate at the University of Wittenberg it was part of the statutory requirements that he should be able to preach. Luther received a summons to deliver sermons first in the refectory of his convent at Erfurt, and then in the *Stadtkirche* at Wittenberg.¹ It is not at all certain whether these have been preserved, but two manuscripts were discovered in Zwickau by Georg Buchwald which may belong to this initial period. They came from the remains of Andreas Poach, the Erfurt preacher, who supplied this note: "From an autograph of Luther discovered in the monastery of the Augustinians, Erfurt."² The text of one is John 3:16 and of the other Matthew 7:12. John W. Doberstein thinks that the latter may perhaps represent Luther's first sermon.³ At least we may agree with Vogelsang that it is the earliest of his that we possess.⁴ It was with much trepidation that Luther essayed his maiden speech. "O how frightened I was at the sight of the pulpit!" he confessed later in the *Table Talk*.⁵ Yet this diffidence was a contributory factor to his subsequent effectiveness. Great preachers are often nervous, though not all nervous preachers are great!

Luther was first and foremost a preacher, for as we have seen, he did not differentiate, as is now the custom, between his lectures in the classroom and his messages in the church. "For the reformers," according to von Schubert, "the pulpit was a kind of popular professorial chair, and the professorial chair a kind of students' pulpit".⁶ Preaching was the spearhead of the Reformation. What was later printed and circulated throughout the length and breadth of Germany was much of it first preached at Wittenberg. Moreover, Luther was not only a preacher: he was a pastoral preacher. He was not an itinerant. In addition to being a university professor, he acted as assistant to Johann Bugenhagen at the parish church of Wittenberg. To this one congregation he was attached for the rest of his days. It is true now and again he preached elsewhere, but from 1510 until his death in 1546 he was associated with his local church. This was *his* congregation - "*ecclesia mea*" he called it - and for it he knew he would be responsible at Judgement Day.⁷ He only permitted himself to be drawn away from Wittenberg on exceptional occasions - to attend the Leipzig Disputation and the Diet of Worms, or to seek refuge in the Wartburg when the seas of opposition were running high.

Usually he preached two or three times a week. Sometimes it was even

¹ Ebeling, *op. cit.*, p. 15; Fife, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-5.

² LW. 51. 5.

³ *Ibid.* Cf. H. S. Bluhm, "The Significance of Luther's Earliest Sermon", *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. XXXVII (1944), pp. 175-84.

⁴ CL. 7. 19-20.

⁵ WATR. 3. 188. No. 3143b.

⁶ Hans von Schubert and Karl A. Meisinger, *Zu Luthers Vorlesungstätigkeit* (1920), p. 3.

⁷ WA. 49. 318.

more. "Often I preached four sermons on one day," he told Bucer. "During the whole of one Lent I preached two sermons and gave one lecture every day. This was when I first preached on the Ten Commandments to a large congregation, for to preach on the catechism was then a new and uncommon thing."¹ The reference was to the years 1516 and 1517. In 1529 Luther preached eighteen times in eleven days from Palm Sunday to the Wednesday after Easter.² When Bugenhagen was absent – as in this instance – the whole burden of the pastorate devolved on Luther, and his preaching rate was stepped up accordingly. The festival seasons also increased his commitments. "I am not only Luther," he declared, "but Pomeranus, Registrar, Moses, Jethro and what not – all things in all."³ These incessant pulpit labours lasted on to the very end, for his swan song was delivered only four days before his death. He modestly claimed to have equalled the preaching activity both of Augustine and of Ambrose.⁴

It must be remembered that the church at Wittenberg, as the Reformation progressed, was regarded more and more as a sort of test case. The eyes of all the world were on it. Protestantism might rise or fall according to the success or failure of this one congregation. Yet the members of this trial church were not hand-picked. They did not represent a specially selected circle of super-Christians.⁵ They were very ordinary folk who needed the ministry of men who took their preaching and pastoral responsibilities seriously. Luther showed himself to be a true shepherd of souls who fed and tended his flock. But this was a mission church, too. Luther preached not only to the converted, but to the common people. The fervent exhortations with which his sermons closed made it quite evident that he was out for a response from the hitherto unawakened.⁶

There are no finer specimens of Luther's congregational preaching than the eight sermons he gave in Wittenberg after his return from the Wartburg in 1522.⁷ In his absence, Karlstadt, Zwilling and the Zwickau prophets had been sowing seeds of discord. The city was in an uproar when Luther came back. On the 9th March, the first Sunday in Lent, he mounted the pulpit and preached the first of a series of sermons covering such controversial subjects as the mass, images, fasting, and confession. But if the subjects were debatable, the tone was conciliatory. These remarkable discourses were delivered in a *vox suavis et sonora*.⁸ Their message was one of peace and love. "Let us, therefore, feed others also with the milk which we received, until they, too, become strong in faith.

¹ LW. 54. 282. No. 3843.

² WA. 29. 132-3.

³ End. 8. 326. Pomeranus was Bugenhagen, who hailed from Pomerania.

⁴ WATR. 5. 659. No. 6434; cf. 3. 437. No. 3590a.

⁵ Ebeling, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 473-5.

⁷ Cf. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church. Modern Christianity: The German Reformation 1517-1530* (1888), Vol. II, pp. 388-91; Félix Kuhn, *Luther: sa vie et son oeuvre*, Tome II (1884), pp. 70-75.

⁸ LC. 2. 115.

For there are many who are otherwise in accord with us and who would also gladly accept this thing, but they do not yet fully understand – these we drive away. Therefore, let us show love to our neighbours: if we do not do this, our work will not endure. We must have patience with them for a time, and not cast out him who is weak in faith; and do and omit many other things, so long as love requires it and it does no harm to our faith. If we do not earnestly pray to God and act rightly in this matter, it looks to me as if all the misery which we have begun to heap upon the papists will fall upon us. Therefore I could no longer remain away, but was compelled to come and say these things to you.”¹

These eight sermons produced immediate results. Jerome Schurff wrote to the Elector on the 15th March (after sermon number six): “Oh, what joy has Dr. Martin’s return spread among us! His words, through divine mercy, are bringing back every day misguided people into the way of truth. It is as clear as the sun, that the Spirit of God is in him, and that he returned to Wittenberg by His special providence.”² Zwilling openly confessed that he was wrong, and declared that Luther “preached like an angel”.³ Karlstadt was silenced, and the city council acknowledged Luther’s intervention by substantial gifts. The eloquence of one man had restored law and order to the frenzied populace. Those who think that Luther preached faith without works other than in the matter of justification, should ponder what he had to say in the first of these memorable sermons: “A faith without love is not enough – rather it is not faith at all, but a counterfeit of faith, just as a face seen in a mirror is not a real face, but merely the reflection of a face.”⁴ It is noticeable that Luther consistently appealed to Scripture.

Involved as he was in this orgy of sermonizing, Luther had no time to superintend the publication of his discourses. He did not even write out his manuscript in full before entering the pulpit. He prepared a careful outline, but left the language to look after itself. Occasionally he even forgot his line of thought and preached a better sermon than he had intended. “Our Lord God himself wishes to be the preacher, for preachers often go astray in their notes so that they cannot go on with what they have begun. It has often happened that my best outline came undone. On the other hand, when I was least prepared my words flowed during the sermon.”⁵

Luther’s sermons would never have been preserved for posterity if the matter had been left in his own hands. We are indebted to a little band of scribes who devoted themselves to the tedious task of noting Luther’s discourses, and then preparing them for publication. This labour of love dates from 1522 onwards, and it is significant that, whereas prior to this year the sermons handed down were comparatively few in number and

¹ LW. 51. 74-75.

⁴ LW. 51. 71.

² End. 3. 307; cf. LC. 2. 102.

³ LW. 54. 213. No. 3494.

⁵ End. 3. 307.

badly authenticated, those preserved after this year represent no less than ninety-two per cent of the total in this period and are much more carefully recorded.¹ A fascinating story surrounds the names of Georg Rörer and Kaspar Cruciger, Luther's principal shorthand writers, and Johannes Aurifaber and Veit Dietrich, who supervised the printing of the sermons.

The salient feature of Luther's preaching was its biblical content and reference. It was subject to Scripture throughout. Luther submitted to a rigorous discipline. He was bound by the Word. His preaching was never merely topical. He could never turn a text into a pretext. "I take pains to treat a verse, to stick to it," he explained, "and so to instruct the people that they can say, 'That is what the sermon was about.'"² His preaching was never a movement from men to the text: it was always a movement from the text to men. The matter never determined the text: the text always determined the matter. He was not in the habit of treating subjects or issues, but doctrines. But when he did so, he invariably followed a prescribed Scripture passage step by step. He considered one of the major qualifications of the preacher to be familiarity with the Word. He must be *bonus textualis* – a good man with the text.³ Luther never dispensed with a text from Scripture, and never approved of the practice in others. "It is disgraceful for the lawyer to desert his brief; it is even more disgraceful for the preacher to desert his text."⁴

Luther's subjection to Scripture in his preaching was illustrated in his choice of texts. He adhered most strictly to the official list of pericopes, invariably selecting his text from the passage for the day.⁵ Whilst he freely criticised the contents of the lectionary and amended it in the *Formula of the Mass* (1523) and the *German Mass* (1526), he never sought to replace it. The result of this method was that Luther's sermons were nearly all based on the appointed Gospels and Epistles. Within this framework, Luther gave by far the greater prominence to the Gospel portions, on which a high percentage of his sermons were based. Even the continuous expositions on Sunday afternoon tended to be from one of the four Gospels. We have noted that in his university lectures Luther devoted more time to the Old Testament than to the New, and did not deal at all with the Gospels. These were covered exclusively (and exhaustively) in his preaching. He believed that a Christian congregation should be thoroughly grounded in the story of Christ.

In describing Luther as essentially a biblical preacher, we must not overlook his broader conception of the Word. He did not equate the Word of God with the Bible, although he accepted the Bible as the Word of God. For Luther the Word of God was not static, but active. It could

¹ Ebeling, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

² WATR. 4. 356. No. 4512.

³ Ebeling, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁴ LW. 54. 160. No. 1650.

⁵ End. I. 149.

never be imprisoned in a book – not even in God's book. The Word is God speaking. It is God confronting man in personal encounter. It is the establishment of what Martin Buber called an "I-Thou" relationship between God and man.¹ For only as man sees God in relation to himself can he see himself in relation to God.² Now this meeting between man and God can take place – indeed must take place – through the medium of Scripture. But it is in no passive sense that the Bible is the Word of God, according to Luther. It is as the Spirit who inspired it breathes upon it afresh, and applies it to the reader, that God speaks again through the Scriptures, as He spoke when they were first set down. But for Luther, it is supremely in preaching that the Word of God in the Scriptures is made alive in the present. The living Word of God, once spoken through the prophets and apostles, now recorded in the Scriptures, speaks again through His servants who are called to preach. Luther would have agreed with Kierkegaard's description of the Bible as a letter from God with our address on it, but he would have wanted to add that it comes to us like that most forcibly when it is read to us in the living voice of the preacher.³

That is made very clear in his *Operationes in Psalmos*. "Christ did not write anything, but He spoke it all. The apostles wrote only a little, but they spoke a lot. . . . Notice: it says let their voices be heard, not let their books be read. The ministry of the New Testament is not engraved on dead tablets of stone; rather it sounds in a living voice. . . . Through a living Word God accomplishes and fulfils the gospel."⁴ In the *Church Postil* of 1522 Luther put the same point in a more popular way. "The church is not a pen house, but a mouth house. For since the advent of Christ the gospel, which used to be hidden in the Scriptures, has become an oral preaching. And thus it is the manner of the New Testament and of the gospel that it must be preached and performed by word of mouth and a living voice. Christ himself has not written anything, nor has he ordered anything to be written, but rather to be preached by word of mouth."⁵

There is thus a distinctly existential quality about Luther's preaching. One feels that through it God is speaking directly to His people, and to those who still reject Him – and this immediacy is conveyed even in the printed record. It was this factor which ensured that Luther's preaching should always be decisive. There was nothing vague or cloudy about it. It was clear-cut and definite. A sense of reality prevailed. Luther was no mystic. Christ and Antichrist, God and the devil – these were objective personalities to him, and this awareness gave a peculiar urgency to his

¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (E.T. 1937), p. 3.

² Paul S. Minear, *Eyes of Faith: A Study in the Biblical Point of View* (1948), p. 11.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination and Judge for Yourselves!* (E.T. 1941), p. 51.

⁴ WA. 5. 537.

⁵ WA. 10. i. 48; cf. Regin Prenter, "Luther on Word and Sacrament", *More About Luther*, ed. Gerhard L. Belgum (1958), p. 73.

preaching. He believed, as Doberstein expresses it, that "preaching continues the battle begun by the saving event and is itself the saving event."¹ This is made clear in one of Luther's own comments. "When I preach a sermon I take an antithesis."² That is to say, he never proclaimed God's great Yes, His acceptance of man in the gospel, without at the same time proclaiming His No, his rejection of all man's presumption and pretence.³ Every sermon for him was a struggle for souls. Eternal issues were being settled in the moment of preaching – the issues of life and death, light and darkness, sin and grace, the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan. There was an *Einmaligkeit*, a once-for-allness, about Luther's preaching which stimulated his hearers to respond. They were made to feel that the offer of the gospel was here and now, and now or never. Dr. John Ker said of this element in Luther's sermons: "He was taking aim at the heart, with arrows which reached their mark."⁴

It was not enough, Luther asserted, simply to preach the facts of the gospel. The historical evidence, though valuable, has no power to save. Christ must be preached as the One who lived and died to redeem men from sin. What He did was not for His own benefit, but for ours. "Christ ought to be preached to the end that faith in Him may be established that He may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of Him and is denoted in His name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what He brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept Him."⁵ There were preachers of repentance and grace even in his day, Luther went on, but they did not explain how a man might repent and how he might know the grace of God.⁶ Repentance proceeds from the law of God, but grace from the promise of God. "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). "Accordingly man is consoled and exalted by faith in the divine promise after he has been humbled and led to a knowledge of himself by the threats and the fear of the divine law."⁷

This stress on faith, which is so typical of Luther, found expression in a celebrated sentence in *The Freedom of a Christian*, from which the above quotations have also been taken. It may be translated: "If you believe it, you have it. If you do not believe it, you do not have it" (*Glaubstu so hastu. – Glaubstu nit so hastu nit*).⁸ This dictum assumes that the Word of God is always effective, claims Regin Prenter. "If it does not work salvation through faith, it works condemnation through unbelief. That does not imply that man decides, through his belief or unbelief, whether God succeeds or not in His saving work. God cannot be defeated by man. But

¹ LW. 51. xx.² WA. 36. 181.³ LW. 51. xx.⁴ John Ker, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (1888), p. 102.⁵ LW. 31. 357.⁶ *Ibid.*, 364.⁷ *Ibid.*⁸ *Ibid.*, 348-9.

it does imply that God saves through a personal Word. For that reason He can save men only through their personal faith in that Word. He cannot save them through their personal disregard of His Word."¹

Mackinnon claimed that Gospel preaching in the evangelical sense began with Luther.² It might be more accurate to say that it began again. It had been forgotten for a very long time. Luther himself deplored the lack of such preaching, and denounced the blind leaders of the blind who abounded in the Church of his day. He liberated the sermon from its medieval grave-clothes, and made it once again a means of grace to sinners. He was "importunately evangelical", wrote Peter Bayne.³ He declared God's great salvation. Like all true gospel preaching, Luther's message moved within the twin orbits of sin and grace. That man has sinned and Christ has died – that was the sum of his evangel. For him to preach the gospel was nothing else than to bring Christ to men and men to Christ.

In order to achieve this end, Luther's sermons were deliberately simple. There was nothing grandiose about his style or matter. He cut out anything that might not be clear to the common man. His preaching was popular in the truest sense of the word. It was for the people. To borrow a phrase from Halford Luccock, he preached to life situations.⁴ He used the ordinary speech of every day. He eschewed academic verbiage. His homilies were homespun. He often preached in the house – house postils form a considerable part of his sermons – and all his messages had a homely touch. He always tried to make himself intelligible to the humblest of his hearers. Before he preached, he quaintly said, he would look into the jaws of the man in the street.⁵ We are reminded of François de Malherbe's confession: "When I am at a loss for a word or a detail of style, I go and consult the dock-hands at the Port-au-fin."⁶ Luther's preaching was like the gospel itself – so simple that a child can grasp some of it, yet so profound that the wise man cannot plumb all of it. It was from the Scriptures that Luther had learned this approach. "To preach simply is a great art," he said. "Christ understood it and practised it. He speaks only of the ploughed field, of the mustard seed, and uses only common comparisons from the countryside."⁷

We have seen that Luther's preaching was essentially congregational and pastoral. It was set in the context of the local church. It was also related to worship. He restored the sermon to prominence in the liturgy of the Church. He virtually raised it to the level of a sacrament. "It was

¹ Prenter, "Luther on Word and Sacrament", pp. 74-75.

² Mackinnon, op. cit., Vol. III, *Progress of the Movement (1521-1529)* (1929), p. 62.

³ Peter Bayne, *Martin Luther, His Life and Work* (1887), Vol. I, p. 260.

⁴ Halford E. Luccock, *In the Minister's Workshop* (1944), p. 50.

⁵ WATR. 3. 427. No. 3579.

⁶ Edmund W. Gosse, *Malherbe and the Classical Reaction in the Seventeenth Century* (1920),

p. 21.

⁷ WATR. 4. 447. No. 4719.

Luther," claimed Alfred E. Garvie, "who put the sermon in Protestantism in the place held by the mass in Roman Catholicism and made preaching the most potent influence in the churches of the Reformation."¹ We may go further than that. Luther's influence extended beyond Protestantism. As Mackinnon has shown, he revolutionized the preaching of the Roman Church.²

The sermon occupied a central position in reformed worship, not as the word of man, but as the Word of God. The preacher was not a free-lance thinker who gave expression only to his personal views. He was the mouthpiece of God. "God, the creator of heaven and earth, speaks with you through His preachers," Luther declared, "baptizes, catechizes, absolves you through the ministry of His own sacraments. These are the words of God, not of Plato or Aristotle. It is God Himself who speaks."³ Preaching is not what man says about God: it is what God says to man. Only as such can it hold a high place in the worship of the Church.

But Luther did not isolate the sermon from its context in the liturgy. There was no sense of tension between the two. Indeed, Luther regarded the sermon as itself an essential expression of worship. The two were not set over against one another. "The conscientious preaching of the divine Word," he could insist, "is the real worship of the new covenant."⁴ In the preface to the *German Mass*, he referred to "the preaching and teaching of God's Word" as "the most important part of divine service".⁵ This is not to be taken as meaning that worship is mainly a matter of instruction, and that Luther wanted to turn the Christian liturgy into what has been called the "dry mass" of a synagogue service.⁶ Rather he regarded the reading of the Scriptures and the sermon as themselves aspects of worship. He criticized the traditional liturgies of the Church on the ground that they had pushed the Bible into the background - although, of course, much of the language was itself scriptural. Luther sought to restore a balance between the integral parts of worship.

He also stressed the need to relate Word and sacrament. In Rome, the sacrament had gained the ascendancy over the Word. In radical Protestantism there was a danger lest the Word should displace the sacrament. Luther endeavoured to maintain the two in fruitful tension. But he did not regard them as opposites, for the Lord's Supper is after all commanded in Scripture and in itself a proclamation of the Word. Conversely, "the sermon ought to be nothing else than the proclamation of this testament", Luther argued.⁷ It is the only ceremony or practice which Christ himself

¹ Alfred E. Garvie, *The Christian Preacher* (1920), pp. 115-16.

² Mackinnon, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 308.

³ WATR. 4. 531. No. 4812.

⁴ OL. 19. 161.

⁵ LW. 53. 68.

⁶ Jaroslav J. Pelikan, "Luther and the Liturgy", *More About Luther*, p. 29.

⁷ LW. 44. 56.

instituted for his followers to observe when they assemble. Its meaning must be made plain from the pulpit. "Where this is rightly preached, it must be diligently heard, grasped, retained, pondered often, and faith must be strengthened against every temptation of sin. . . . This preaching should induce sinners to grieve over their sins and should kindle within them a longing for the treasure (i.e. of the gospel, which is displayed in the Supper). Therefore, it must be a grievous sin not to listen to the gospel, and to despise such a treasure and so rich a feast to which we are bidden. But it is a much greater sin not to preach the gospel, and to allow so many people who would gladly hear it to perish, for Christ has so strictly commanded that the gospel and this testament be preached that He does not even wish the mass to be celebrated unless the gospel be preached. As He says, 'As often as you do this, remember me.' And, as St. Paul says, "You shall preach his death" (I Cor. 11:26). For this reason it is dreadful and horrible to be a bishop, pastor, and preacher in our times, for no one knows this testament any longer, not to mention that they ought to preach it; although this is their highest and only duty and obligation. They will certainly have to account for the many souls who perish because of such feeble preaching!"¹

In an age of liturgical reappraisal such as we live in today, Luther's welding of Word and sacrament still has a contribution to make. The sermon gains rather than loses by being incorporated into the wholeness of worship. Both in the preaching of the gospel and in the breaking of bread, we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. In this, as in all else, Luther was not just ventilating a theory. He was trying to reflect the pattern of Scripture.

¹ *Ibid.*, 57-58.