Martin Luther as Human Being: Reflections from a Distance

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A prominent scholar has recently argued that Martin Luther's famous reply to Erasmus, *Bondage of the Will*, is of such seminal import that

> Were these the only pages of his writings to have survived, we could deduce from them the total scope of Luther's thinking.[1]

If accurate, such an assertion certainly reduces the required reading for nascent Luther scholars! Yet, is it of no importance that the reformer lived an active and productive life for more than two decades after publishing this treatise?

It might be asked whether the reformer's thought may be so easily excised from the actual course of his life. Was his most influential biographer, Roland Bainton, correct in allotting only fourteen pages to the last sixteen years of his life, and justifying this by claiming that the last quarter of Luther's life was 'neither determinative for his ideas nor crucial for his achievements?'[2]

Only six years after the publication of Bainton's work Heinrich Bornkamm publicly lamented the narrow theological focus of Luther research which concentrated on the first decade of reform, and challenged scholars to expand their field to embrace the 'older Luther'.[3] Despite this warning that Luther 'the man' might be lost, it took nearly a quarter of a century before a movement could be detected which picked up on Bornkamm's complaint. Only in a little more than the last decade have a number of voices been raised against the purely theological, chronologically constrained image of Martin Luther.[4]

Two substantial points emerge from this research. First, one cannot understand the whole man from a single aspect of his career, be it theological as with Oberman, or chronological as with Bainton. In approaching Luther one must be willing to embrace the totality of his life. His genius was reflected in the lifelong dynamic of contextual theologizing, not in artificially constructed systems or isolated fragments of thought elevated to the status of timeless truth. To make a whole of the part only contributes to the long tradition of atomizing the reformer's life and career.[5]

Secondly, attempting to understand the reformer on the level of day-to-

day living, at work and home, may profoundly enrich our appreciation of the man and his theology. Further, how the historical Luther is viewed may lead to a deeper understanding of the nature of our faith and heritage. No apologies are necessary for embracing a stringent historical method from a consciously confessional standpoint. To seek to learn from Luther, to have him 'speak' today, does not necessarily mean imposing a present day agenda on him, or ripping him out of his time so as to serve us in ours. It means allowing him to witness from the distance of his day and age.

The most prominent feature of his life was its mind-numbing busyness: pastor, professor, political adviser, church administrator, academic dean, prolific writer, husband and father, to mention some of his tasks. Luther embraced the gospel as a reality and promise infiltrating and determining every aspect of life. He spoke out on all facets of life, from marriage to politics, music to sex, and did so with a confidence that the gospel had something to say in each. In this regard the six thick volumes of *Tischreden*, or 'Table Talk', in the Weimar Edition are a most helpful source.[6] Historically, Luther's *Table Talk* allows us to hear the man himself putting his life and experiences, both past and present, into perspective. Further, the very nature of their creation allows us to witness how his students and friends heard and experienced him.

Though clinging to Scripture as the only source for the gospel, he continually found affirmation of grace and manifestations of judgment in the mundane details of life. For Luther, daily existence was an object lesson on the gospel. Whether the lessons were touching and quaint, or, conversely, brutal and harsh, an intrinsic relation existed between life as Luther experienced it, and the gospel as he interpreted it. His views on marriage as an institution, along with his own personal union with ex-nun Katherine von Bora, exemplify this incarnating of the gospel in daily life. How telling is his description of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Luther related this epistle, from which he culled much of his teaching of the passive righteousness of Christ, to the woman he loved, calling it his 'Katie von Bora'.[7] Little sentimentality here; rather, a human confession of grace and where that grace was concretely experienced. Such a statement illustrates well the point made by Steven Ozment, that 'Luther discovered that life within a family had a way of rewriting theology'.[8] Here may be seen one of the facets of Luther's attack on monasticism. His hatred of the institution was not only based on convictions against works righteousness, but also against concrete ramifications of a lifestyle that attempted to separate faith from mundane existence. Marriage, sex and family, along with work and play, were not aspects of life to be religiously avoided, but rather these carried the capacity to be the very channel and *locus* for the blessings of the gospel itself.

When and why Luther spoke cannot be separated from what he said. His theology is a vital part of our heritage, yet the *dynamic* of that theology is

missed if the dust and dirt of the actual course of his life is omitted. Doing so strips the proclaimer of the gospel of the very context which gave rise to the confession. Luther was not exempt from the harshness of the sixteenth century. It was a world filled with the immediate dangers of plague and death, together with the prevalent power of the sword. Earthly pleasures, however limited, along with troubles and terrors, were matched by the spiritual promises of heaven and the realities of the terrors of hell. Luther knew this world with its painful human existence. He carried that pain within his physical body and within a tortured soul. Here more than anywhere his understanding of the gospel arose from the grip of that humanness. James Kittelson states the issue well:

> In thinking about *Luther der Mensch*, the issue is not simply one of gathering all these many citations about what one might call his interior life, but approaching them from the proper point of view. Surely this point of view is his public career as reformer, professor of theology, and in particular as advocate of what he called 'the theology of the cross'. To him, this theology was not just an occasion for joy at having been liberated from sin, death, and the devil—although it was at that at its end-point—but it started as a theology that viewed humanity, and his own humanity, in all its agony.[9]

This concurs with Leif Grane's contention, that Luther the theologian was not offering theories to be carried into practice, but was constantly interpreting what he saw and heard.[10] Here emerges a biographical method that takes seriously the profound implications of the theology of the cross, yet places its genesis on the level of daily life. Luther's theology of the cross reflected the gospel in the harshness of sixteenth century life, and witnessed to the impact of the gospel at a particular time in human history.

Luther might well be classified as a responsive theologian. The nature of his theology was bound up with the contingencies which enveloped him.[11] Such endeavours to come to grips with Luther the human being in no way attempt to denigrate his theological output. On the contrary, they have to do with grasping the man's coherent activity within a life of changing circumstances, and accurately presenting his teaching as an end product of a faith-filled life.[12] Such an undertaking respects Luther's own concern toward his legacy. In the preface to the Latin edition of his works he spoke of relenting to the publication of the collection and preface, for if it were not done in his lifetime 'men certainly ignorant of the *causes and time* of the events' would publish them, creating further confusion.[13] The stated desire in this same preface for most of his books to be burned was not false humility, but rather the conviction that his writings served their purpose at a particular time, but now the door must be left open for better books to speak to the present day.[14]

This emphasis on the humanity of the reformer better reveals the contours of his pastoral nature. In the practical and often scandalous advice that Luther gave to those with troubled consciences, one sees that his use

of the gospel dealt with a very real human condition. In seeking to help those struggling with spiritual anxiety, he pushed them into life and its activities.[15] The gospel promise was offered at certain times with the aid of a little drink, some music, fun and perhaps a little more drink, while at other times with a direct reference to the church and its sacraments. One cannot systematize this advice, for the content of his pastoral work arose from the differing circumstances.[16]

When Luther claimed that he 'did not learn his theology all at once', perhaps we should believe him. Looking at the broader context of this statement we find Luther talking specifically of a theology which is learned in the very practice of living. In fleshing out his remark he asked his listeners:

> What kind of physician would that be who stayed in school all the time? When he finally puts his medicine to use and deals more and more with nature, he will come to see he hasn't as yet mastered the art. Why shouldn't this be so in the case of the Holy Scriptures, too, where God has provided a different adversary?[17]

Grasping the dynamic unfolding character of Luther's theology reveals, not timeless deposits of doctrinal truth, but rather time-bound confessions of faith which sought to make the gospel real in the shifting contours of life itself.[18] Nowhere does Luther claim to have spoken the final word. His consistency of conviction concerning the human journey and struggle for faith, and for the Faith, was divulged in the little scrap of paper found shortly after his death in Mansfield. It was believed to be his last written words.

> Nobody can understand Virgil in his *Bucolics* and *Georgics* unless he has first been a shepherd or a farmer for five years. Nobody understands Cicero in his letters unless he has been engaged in public affairs of some consequence for twenty years. Let nobody suppose that he has tasted the Holy Scriptures sufficiently unless he had ruled over the churches with the prophets for a hundred years. Therefore there is something wonderful, first, about John and Baptist; second, about Christ; third about the apostles. 'Lay not your hand on this divine *Aeneid*, but bow before it, adore its every trace.' We are beggars, that is true.[19]

Taking Luther as a whole may upset theological applecarts, since it is more convenient to pick and choose appropriate pieces of his theology, and leave that which disturbs to the side. If his significance and contribution to Christian thought is limited to the 1520s, then it is much easier to sidestep portions of his legacy, for instance his writings against the Jews, which seem only to tarnish his image. If Luther's theological endeavours are subsumed thematically within a limited focus, for instance his utterances on the devil, it facilitates granting the capacity to deduce the entirety of his thought from one primary document. Yet such partisan eclecticism

robs us of the man. A deeper issue however emerges when it is considered that neglecting the man and his time, and feasting rather on isolated ideas, runs counter to the historical character of Christianity, and the time-bound confessional nature of doctrine.

Alister McGrath speaks of Christianity's doctrinal heritage as being both 'gift and task'. By this he means that what the forebears in the Faith passed down becomes the responsibility of the present generation, 'in order that we may wrestle with it within our own situation, before passing it on to those whose day is yet to come'.[20] Many today know the struggles for faith, and for the Faith. The pain of being human and the ever-increasing complexities and questions of simply being in the world bring us, as a people called Christian, into active engagement with the gospel. This gospel bequeathed to the late twentieth century comes bearing human history's fingerprints. One print, among many, belongs to a sixteenth century man named Martin Luther. Leaving Luther to his age, admitting that he may be heard only from a distance, is the only vantage which grants testimony of a living faith. No tidy but lifeless abstractions. Simply faith articulated in the midst of life, embracing its joy, sorrow and pain. That which has been given is indeed a gift, yet this gift has not been handed down without costs. In allowing Luther to witness today, we cannot sidestep this cost by simply asserting 'Luther says'. By following his witness in this context we then are compelled to look at the cross ourselves, placing our lives, our circumstances, our hopes, fears and doubts under the Word. In doing so, we embrace the costly task of articulating the gospel in today's world.

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NOTES

1 Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, tr. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989), p. 212.

2 Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950), p. 373.

3 Heinrich Bornkamm, 'Probleme der Lutherbiographie', in *Lutherforschung Heute*, hrsg. Vimos Vajta (Berlin, 1958), pp. 15–23.

4 Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521*, tr. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532–1546* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); Leif Grane, 'Luther's Cause' *Lutherjahrbuch* 52 (1985); H.G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Helmar Junghans, 'Interpreting the Old Luther (1526–1546)', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 9 (1982), pp. 271–281; James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986).

5 Kittelson, *op cit.*, p. 15.

6 *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Tischreden.* 6 Vols. Weimar, 1912–1921. [*WATr*]. A selection in English found in *Luther's Works: Table Talk, Volume 54*, ed. and tr. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967). [*LW*] It should not be surprising that one of the more ambitious efforts in exploring Luther the man, especially the older Luther, is structured around the reformer's utterances contained in this collection, see Haile, *Experiment*, p. 2.
7 *LW*, 54, p. 20; *WATr*, 1, p. 69.
8 Steven Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 151.
9 Kittelson, *op. cit.*, p. 389.
10 Grane, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
11 The model and standard for presenting Luther in this light is unquestionably the monumental three volume biography of Martin Brecht, *cf.* note 4, above.
12 Grane, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
13 *LW*, 34, p. 328. *WATr*, 54, p. 179. Emphasis author's.
14 *Ibid.*
15 Kittelson, *op. cit.*, p. 286.
16 An excellent collection of such advice is found in Theodore Tappert, ed. and tr., *Luther. Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, vol. 18. The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, 1955).
17 *LW*, 54, pp. 50–51; *WATr*, 1, p. 146.
18 Helmar Junghans, *op. cit.*, pp. 274–275.
19 *LW* 54, p. 476; *WATr*, 5, p. 318.
20 Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 200.