

CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

*Martin Luther: Doctor of
Sacred Scripture*

by

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

Martin Luther



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LUTHER AS A REFORMER

THERE WAS A STRIKING DIFFERENCE BETWEEN Luther's attitude to the primitive Church and that of the more extreme camp-followers of Protestantism. The latter tended to regard the first century as a kind of Christian Utopia, and as things had gone from bad to worse since then, the only way out in the present seemed to be to reconstitute the idealized structure of those unadulterated beginnings. They saw a great gulf fixed between their own time and that of the early Christians. Their conception of renewal apparently involved a gigantic air-lift over the intervening years, in order to transplant the model community from the first to the sixteenth century. The initial fallacy of this theory lay in the assumption that, even in New Testament times, the Church was ever altogether pure and free from defect. The second was to be found in the impossibility in any case of so shifting the stage scenery of history that the past could be exactly reproduced in the present. No doubt the radicals of the Reformation would have repudiated such a presentation of their views as a caricature, but there were at least some of them who gave the impression that this was how they saw things.

Luther, on the other hand, rejected any such static conception of the Church. He considered it rather as an organism which had maintained its life, now more strongly, now more feebly, throughout the entire period between the first century and his own. It was in the continuing existence of such an organism that his ministry was set and the work of the Reformation proceeded. It is in this sense that Luther showed himself to be a true reformer. His aim was not to scrub everything out and start again from scratch, even if that could have been done. He never hankered after a clean slate, for he knew that Christian history is a serial. He had to deal with the situation as it was, not as it might have been or ought to have been. Of course, he sought under the Spirit's tutelage to wrest the present into shape again. But he recognized that it is the divine prerogative to create *ex nihilo*. As a mere man – even a man in the hand of God – he had to deal with things as they were. It was no use expecting some apocalyptic miracle to make them different overnight. They could only become different as they were made different – the hard way, step by painful step. That, basically, was what Martin Luther understood by reformation. That was the kind of reformer he was. He was no rabid revolutionary. As he took

the Word of God as his standard, his intention was not to destroy but to fulfil.

There came a time, certainly, when he abandoned any hopes he may have cherished that Rome itself might respond to a call to self-criticism and initiate a reform from within. Reluctantly he came to the conclusion that she had forfeited her right to be regarded as the true Church at all. But he nevertheless strove to maintain within the emergent Protestant congregations this vital sense of continuity with the past. It was with the Scriptures as his guide that he took up this attitude. Luther's stress on this link with what had gone before goes far to explain why, in his reforming endeavour, he found himself fighting a battle on two fronts. On the one hand, he was up against the traditionalism of Rome, and was constantly seeking on biblical grounds to combat the errors and abuses of that apostate institution, as he believed it to be. On the other hand, as the years went by he was increasingly harassed by and compelled to contend with the advocates of a much more drastic solution than his – the *Schwärmerei*, or fanatical enthusiasts like Karlstadt and Münzer, and the leaders of the proliferating Protestant splinter groups. In some ways, this was Luther's toughest struggle. But, as Herman Preus reminds us, "Luther refused to be the father of left-wing Protestant sectarianism, which disregards the voice of the Church, the fathers, and of the teaching tradition of the Church."¹ It is important for us to be aware that Luther was very far from being what his Roman opponents tried to make out – a schismatic, an individualist, a sectarian, an ecclesiastical anarchist. As we proceed to watch Luther as he carries forward the plan of reform, what will doubtless surprise us is not his impatience but his conservatism.

We can best gain an impression of Luther the reformer as we examine some of the treatises he penned, especially in the earlier days of the movement he almost unwittingly initiated. Before we set out on such an inquiry, we should remember that all this was never unrelated to his Christian experience of a gracious God, and his vocation as a biblical instructor. Gordon Rupp brings out the connection: "The doctrines which Luther had worked out in lecture room, cell, pulpit, which with a Cellini-like intensity he had forged in the fire of his own *Anfechtungen*, are not something apart from what we might call the practical writings of improvization but form the ground base of them all."² We shall be concentrating on what Luther wrote from 1520 onwards in a series of what are virtually manifestos of reform. Luther's output was prolific – in his literary *annus mirabilis* of 1520 he produced no less than twenty-four publications.³ "I have a swift hand and a quicker memory," he revealed.

¹ Herman A. Preus, "The Christian and the Church", *More About Luther*, p. 167.

² NCMH. 2. 81.

³ A. G. Dickens, *Martin Luther and the Reformation* (1967), p. 45.

"When I write, it just flows out; I do not have to press and squeeze."¹ Some half dozen of these constituted the platform of reform. We can only refer to them, and indicate how in each the appeal to Scripture is basic.

In May 1520 his *Treatise on Good Works* appeared.² It is an analysis of the Decalogue, and a little compendium of practical theology. Although originally pastoral in intention, it is cast in typical thesis form, the arguments being advanced in a strictly logical way.³ Luther's new evangelical outlook and spirit is most pronounced. "To his Catholic contemporaries it must have seemed like a book from another world," according to Schwiebert. "Even though there are still some traces of his earlier training, the sermon presented a wholly new interpretation of Christian ethics, which normally flowed from his doctrine of justification by faith."⁴ He saw faith as the only foundation of all good works, and allowed no differentiation between the religious and the secular. With this single treatise, it has been said, Luther obliterated the distinction between the two which had dominated the Middle Ages and altered the whole system of Christian ethics.⁵ Throughout the exposition of the Ten Commandments which forms the substance of this work, Luther repeatedly compared Scripture with Scripture to prove his point.⁶

In June of the same year, Luther wrote *The Papacy at Rome*, which Köstlin regarded as "one of the most important of his general doctrinal treatises of this period".⁷ It is his first major attempt to state his teaching on the Church. Some Roman Catholic historians have sought to argue that Luther's new definition of the Church was the result of his break with the papacy. Just the reverse was in fact the case. It was his new understanding of the Church from Scripture which led to his break with Rome.⁸ Previously, "when he thought he touched the hem of the skirt of Mother Church, he found he was touching only the orphrey of a pope or a bishop or a priest - always a man," explains Preus. "By the enlightenment of the Word the day finally came when Luther reached out again for the comfort of the Church - and this time he touched nothing human, but the Body of Christ, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints. He touched Christ. He had searched the Scriptures, he had examined the Church fathers, he had seen the unity and the continuity of 'the faith once delivered to the saints'. Through it all he had learned that in spite of his ecclesiastical isolation he was still in the Church."⁹

In what Theodore Schmauk has called "Luther's declaration of

¹ Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, p. 299.

² LW. 44. 21-114.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

⁵ LW. 44. 20 (James Atkinson).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23, 25-26, 33, et al.

⁷ Julius Köstlin and Georg Kawerau, *Martin Luther* (1903), Bd. I, p. 299. For *On the Papacy at Rome* PE. 1. 337-94.

⁸ Holl. *op. cit.*, Bd. I, p. 288-90.

⁹ Preus, "The Christian and the Church", *More About Luther*, p. 132.

emancipation from the spiritual pre-eminence of the Church of Rome", he had in 1519 replied to the thirteen theses brought against him by Johann Eck of Ingoldstadt.¹ The Leipzig Disputation was the outcome. Following it, Luther was the target of so much criticism that he felt he must defend his position. He was by no means eager to rush into the fray. "You cannot make a pen out of a sword," he wrote: "the Word of God is a sword. I was unwilling to be forced to come forward in public; and the more unwilling I am, the more I am drawn into the contest."² *The Papacy of Rome* is subtitled: *An Answer to the Celebrated Romanist at Leipzig*. This was Augustine von Alveld, a Franciscan friar whom Adolf, Bishop of Merseberg, had commissioned to counter Luther's arguments.³ Alveld set such a pace in scurrility that Luther's response seems mild by comparison.⁴ The reformer was content, as usual, to rest his case on Scripture. He complained that Alveld treated "God's holy words no better than if they were the fabled pratings of some fool or jester at the carnival."⁵ If he did refer to them at all, it was often with little respect for the context. The word church, Luther declared, is commonly used in three senses: of a building, of the Roman organization, and of the spiritual fellowship of believers.⁶ He will only recognize the latter as scriptural. The Church is "a spiritual assembly of souls in one faith" and "no one is reckoned a Christian for the body's sake", since "the true, real, right, essential Church is a spiritual thing, and not anything external or outward, by whatever name it may be called".⁷ This unity of the Spirit "is of itself sufficient to make a Church, and without it no unity, be it of place, of time, of person, of work, or of whatever else, makes a Church".⁸ Hence it is obvious that "external fellowship with the Roman communion does not make men Christians, and so the lack of that fellowship certainly does not make a man a heretic or an apostate".⁹ Of this scriptural Church, Christ is the only head.¹⁰ "All that the pope decrees I will receive on this condition, that first I test it by the Holy Scriptures. He must remain under Christ, and submit to be judged by the Holy Scriptures."¹¹

In July 1520 Luther published one of many attacks on the Roman mass. Already he had written a sermon on the subject in 1519, but in *A Treatise on the New Testament* (1520) he was clearly moving to a more comprehensively biblical view.¹² The chief external reason for observing this

¹ PE. I. 329.

² Ibid.

³ It was the Bishop who had tried to prevent the Leipzig debate on the ground that the papal decree on indulgences of the 9th November 1518 had settled the matter once and for all (LW. 31. 319; cf. LW. 48. 164 n. 9).

⁴ PE. I. 337 n. 1.

⁵ Ibid., 339.

⁶ Ibid., 349, 354, 356.

⁷ Ibid., 353-4; cf. 349. Luther avoided the normal word *Kirche* and substituted *Christenheit* to distinguish it from the Roman organization.

⁸ Ibid., 349.

⁹ Ibid., 351.

¹⁰ Ibid., 352.

¹¹ Ibid., 391.

¹² *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ* (1513), LW. 35. 49-73; *A Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass* (1520), LW. 35. 79-111.

sacrament, he stated, is the Word of God, which no one can do without.¹ Whereas in 1519 Luther had laid emphasis on the service as a communion with Christ and the saints, now he preferred to regard the words of institution as fundamental. But more importantly still, the treatise “penetrates to the heart of Christian worship and boldly replaces the traditional notions of the mass as a sacrifice with the scriptural teaching of the Lord’s supper as a testament”, as Theodore Bachmann tells us.² “The mass is nothing else than a testament,” Luther affirmed, “and a sacrament in which God makes a pledge to us and gives us grace and mercy.” It is not to be made into a good work from which merit may be obtained. A testament is not a benefit earned but a benefit conferred. For the first time Luther unequivocally rejected the Roman interpretation of the mass as a bloodless repetition of the sacrifice made on Calvary.³ But it is nevertheless permissible to call the mass a sacrifice, “not on its own account, but because we offer ourselves as a sacrifice along with Christ”.⁴

In the same treatise Luther laid the foundation for the distinctively Protestant doctrine of the believer’s priesthood. Since “faith alone is the true priestly office” it follows that “all Christian men are priests, all women priestesses, be they young or old, master or servant, mistress or maid, learned or unlearned. Here there is no difference, unless faith be unequal.”⁵ As Green observes, “the priest was . . . the cornerstone of the fabric of medieval life,” and this biblical insistence on the part of Luther demolished at one blow the entire sacerdotal system of the past.⁶ It must not be supposed, however, that Luther therefore meant to obliterate the distinction between ministers and laymen in the Church, for this was clearly not accomplished in mainstream Protestantism.⁷ His concern was to show that the difference is merely one of function, and not at all of standing before God.⁸ And in the crucial matter of priesthood – which has to do solely with the offering of sacrifice – all Christians are one in the need to offer themselves to God through Christ, which is the only sacrifice now required since the Saviour died once for all on the cross.

Luther’s address *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, which came out in August 1520, dealt with the details involved in the break with Rome at the regional level.⁹ A. G. Dickens describes it as “one of the great reform programmes of western literature”.¹⁰ The implications of the transfer from allegiance to the pope are spelled out in practical terms. But first Luther attacked the three

¹ LW. 35. 105.

⁴ Ibid.

² Ibid., 77.

³ Ibid., 101.

⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁶ Green, op. cit., p. 17.

⁷ “The priesthood of all believers never means for Luther what it has sometimes meant in degenerate Protestantism, the secularization of the clergy, the doctrine that we are all laymen.” Rupp, *Righteousness of God*, p. 315).

⁸ Luther acknowledged a distinction of *Amt* but not of *Stand*.

⁹ LW. 44. 123–217.

¹⁰ Dickens, op. cit., p. 47.

walls of straw and paper, as he depicted them, which protected the Roman Jericho.¹ He threw them down with the trumpet-blast of the Word. The first was the false division between the spiritual estate and the temporal.² Arguing from 1 Corinthians 12 and other passages, Luther claimed that "because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike", then "all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office".³

The second wall was yet more loosely built and less substantial. "The Romanists want to be the only masters of Holy Scripture, although they never learn a thing from the Bible all their life long."⁴ They assume the sole authority for themselves, and claim that only the pope possesses the key to interpret the Word. They imagine that the Holy Spirit never leaves them, no matter how ignorant and wicked they are. Luther dismissed this pretension as "an outrageous fancied fable", and went on to prove how unscriptural it was.⁵ The third wall falls of its own accord when the other two are down. "When the pope acts contrary to the Scriptures, it is our duty to stand by the Scriptures, to reprove him and to constrain him, according to the word of Christ (Matt. 18:15-17)."⁶ This can only be effectively done as the whole Church is represented in a general council. But there is no basis in the Bible for the Roman contention that only the pope can convene such a gathering. In Acts 15 it was not Peter, but the apostles and elders who called the council of Jerusalem.⁷

Luther's onslaught on Rome reached its climax in October 1520 with *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.⁸ This was written in Latin with the clergy in view. The immediate occasion was the renewed claim of Alveld about the power of the pope.⁹ Luther used to confess jokingly that men like Prierias, Emser and Eck, as well as Alveld, had been his theological professors since 1517.¹⁰ They forced him to go back to the Word in order to refute their contentions. It was as he faced these vital issues in the light of Scripture that he achieved his full stature as a reformer. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* was in essence, as Dickens says, "a plea for the abolition of non-biblical theology and of any man-made ecclesiastical laws."¹¹ It struck like a dagger at the heart of sacerdotalism and signaled Luther's final and irrevocable breach with Rome.¹²

The title is self-explanatory. The reference is obviously to the Jewish exile, and the thrust of Luther's thesis is that in the same way Christians had been carried away from the Scriptures and subjugated to papal tyranny. This oppression was largely due to a misinterpretation of the

¹ LW. 44. 126.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 127.

⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁶ Ibid., 136.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ LW. 36. 11-126.

⁹ LC. 1. 206, 283; WAB. 2. 148 n. 6.

¹⁰ LW. 36. 11-12.

¹¹ Dickens, op. cit., p. 48.

¹² LW. 36. 8. Introduction by Frederick C. Ahrens and Abdel Ross Wentz.

sacraments – especially that of the Lord’s Supper. Luther therefore devoted himself to an examination, in the light of Scripture, of the sacramental set-up in Rome. He came to the conclusion that only three of the seven recognized sacraments could at all be substantiated from the Word of God – baptism, penance, and the bread.¹ Indeed, he went so far as to say that if he were to be very strictly scriptural he would speak only of one sacrament – Christ himself – and three sacramental signs.² In dealing with the Holy Communion, Luther produced scriptural arguments for administration in both kinds and for the testamental nature of the ordinance.³ Baptism he immediately related to the promise in Mark 16:16.⁴ He utterly rejected the medieval conception of penance as “the second plank after shipwreck”.⁵ Yet from Matt. 16:19; 18:18 and John 20:23, he sought to reinstate the biblical meaning of forgiveness with a characteristic emphasis on the need for faith.⁶ Whilst his exegesis was unexceptionable, he did not really show why this should be recognized as a sacrament, along with baptism and the breaking of bread. In the rest of the work Luther tested the other four sacraments of the Roman Church and found them wanting when judged by Scripture. This comprehensive treatment “represents the culmination of Luther’s reformatory thinking on the theological side”, according to A. T. W. Steinhäuser.⁷

In considering Luther’s resistance to Rome, we have had to limit ourselves to an examination of these seminal writings of the year 1520, when the conflict was at its height.⁸ When the Rubicon was crossed, Luther continued to combat the unscriptural deviations of Rome in a spate of publications which we cannot pause to weigh. There were four treatises on the mass which represent “selections from the symphony to which *The Babylonian Captivity* was the prelude”.⁹ In the third of these Luther announced in memorable terms that the right way to honour God’s Word is to hide it within, as the Psalmist did. “The heart is its real gilded ciborium.”¹⁰ In the *Formula of the Mass* (1523) and the *German Mass* (1526) Luther translated his theological convictions into liturgical practice – retaining much more than some of his fellow-evangelicals could approve, and yet still seeking to take the Word of God as his guide. He took the view, however, that in the context of worship it is not essential that every item shall be directly derived from Scripture, but only that it must not conflict with Scripture.¹¹ By the time he wrote *On the Councils and the*

¹ LW. 36. 18.² Ibid.³ Ibid., 20–24, 37–46.⁴ Ibid., 58, 59.⁵ Ibid., 61. Jerome, *Epistolae*, 130.⁶ LW. 36. 81–91.⁷ PE. 2. 168.

⁸ We have not dealt with the last of these – *The Freedom of a Christian* (LW. 31. 333–377) since it is concerned with the application of theology to life rather than with theology as such. But it represents the quintessence of Luther’s biblical thinking at this period in its practical repercussions.

⁹ LW. 36. ix. Introduction by Abdel Ross Wentz.¹⁰ Ibid., 278. *The Adoration of the Sacrament* (1523).¹¹ LW. 53. 20.

Church (1539), Luther had become even more disillusioned with Rome, and complained that the pope "makes Holy Scripture subject to himself and tears it asunder".¹ He would try to throw the Protestants not only out of the Church but out of the Bible too, if he could do such a thing.² Nevertheless, "God's Word cannot be without God's people and conversely God's people cannot be without God's Word."³

We must now turn more briefly to indicate the nature of Luther's confrontation with his opponents on his second front, namely the enthusiasts and the sectarians. These were the wild men of the extreme left, who would have forfeited the gains of the Reformation by going too far and too fast. There has been a reassessment of these radicals in recent years – notably in a definitive study by George Hunston Williams – and it must be made clear that not all can be dismissed as eccentric and incorrigible.⁴ But Luther saw for himself what had begun to happen at Wittenberg, whilst he was in the Wartburg and Karlstadt held sway. He visited Zwickau where Thomas Münzer and his self-styled "prophets" ran amok. He did not think that *Schwärmerei* was too strong a term to apply to such men. Gordon Rupp, with his usual penchant for amusing comment, has defined the phenomenon as "too many bees chasing too few bonnets".⁵ As he tried to save the Reformation from itself, Luther "found himself locked in a new struggle which made the one at Worms look simple", so Dickens thinks.⁶

It was with the Bible before him that Luther sought to repel this threat to the progress of Protestantism. His *Letter to the Princes of Saxony* (1524) urged the authorities to suppress the unbridled activities of Münzer and his crew.⁷ But Karlstadt was a much more subtle antagonist, who had once been a colleague of Luther in the University faculty at Wittenberg. He had been expelled from Saxony, and in the autumn of 1524 visited Strasburg to spread his influence there. The Protestant leaders, under Bucer and Capito, scenting the danger, wrote to Luther asking him to give them some guidance. So he wrote a *Letter to the Christians at Strasburg in Opposition to the Fanatic Spirit*, in which he promised eventually to refute the opinions of Karlstadt, as expressed in eight volumes of his, which Luther had read.⁸ "For the moment he only wanted the Strasburgers to realize the errors of Karlstadt, and to counsel them to hold to the Word," explains Conrad Bergendorff. "Dissensions would of course arise, but they were meant to drive Christians closer to the Word. Luther was confident that

¹ LW. 41. 122.

² *Ibid.*, 162.

³ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴ George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (1962); cf. also Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* (1964), for a somewhat different viewpoint.

⁵ E. Gordon Rupp, "Luther and the Puritans", *Luther Today*, p. 111.

⁶ Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁷ LW. 40. 45–59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 65–71.

his teachings were based on the Word, while Karlstadt was pursuing notions born of his own fancy."¹

Luther began with an allusion to God's "salutary Word", through which the Christians in Strasburg had been brought to Christ.² They must not be surprised at what has been happening in their midst. "For if our gospel is the true gospel, as I am convinced and have no doubt it is, then it must naturally follow that it will be attacked, persecuted and tested from both sides. On the left the opponents will show open contempt and hate, on the right our own will be guilty of dissension and party spirit."³ Luther was content that the questions at issue should be settled only by resort to the Scriptures. "I am a captive and cannot free myself," he admitted, in words reminiscent of his brave stand at Worms⁴

The fuller refutation of Karlstadt which Luther had undertaken to supply was presented in 1525, with the title: *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*.⁵ It was from the biblical standpoint that he was able to show how subjective and ill-founded were the mystical dreams of the so-called "spiritualists". Luther began by urging his readers "to pray God for a right understanding and for his holy, pure Word".⁶ For him these two belonged together. What he had to say about the sacraments covered by now familiar ground, with his firmness about a plain interpretation of our Lord's pronouncement concerning the bread and wine in the Holy Communion (Matt. 26:26-28). There is also a long discussion of John 6:63.⁷ But the first part dealt with another issue that was highly relevant to the current situation - that of the attitude of evangelicals to images. Whilst he was at Wittenberg, Karlstadt had waged an iconoclastic campaign with such misguided zeal that Luther had to take the risk of leaving his retreat in order to set things straight. The most important thing, he affirmed, was that images should first of all be torn out of men's hearts by the Word.⁸ Once that had been done, those that were found in the churches would no longer have any meaning for the Christian. Luther went on to show that the only images forbidden in Scripture are those made in the likeness of God Himself.⁹ The erection of pillars and stones is expressly prohibited in Leviticus 26:1 if they are treated as idols. But Joshua set up a cairn at Shechem as a testimony (Josh. 24:26), and Samuel raised a stone of help (1 Sam. 7:12). Such things are permitted as memorials. In Scripture, idols were destroyed not by the masses, but by the leaders chosen by God (Gen. 35:4; Judges 6:27; 2 Kings 10:26; 18:4; 23:15).¹⁰ Luther accused Karlstadt of introducing a new legalism into Christianity.¹¹ He contrasted this with the liberty of the gospel, as expressed in many New

¹ Ibid., 63.² Ibid., 68.³ Ibid., 173-8, 202-10.⁴ Ibid., 87-90.⁵ Ibid., 65.⁶ Ibid., 79-223.⁷ Ibid., 84.⁸ Ibid., 66.⁹ Ibid., 80.¹⁰ Ibid., 85.¹¹ Ibid., 91.

Testament passages which he cited. He appealed particularly to Romans 14:2-6 and I Corinthians 8:8-10 for the true principle of liberty for the believer.¹ We are not under obligation to do anything at all for God except trust and love.² This is the authentic freedom of the Spirit, of which the enthusiasts tended to claim the monopoly.

Luther dealt with another wing of the radical Reformation – the Anabaptists – in 1528.³ Two pastors had asked him to take up the subject, since they were faced with the problem of tackling the heresy, as they deemed it to be, in their own area. Luther did not appear to be too familiar with the teachings of the Anabaptists, although he had been receiving information from a number of quarters. The Anabaptist martyr, Balthasar Hubmaier, had written a book in defence of his beliefs in 1525, but Luther revealed no acquaintance with it. He challenged the Anabaptists to prepare a more detailed account of their tenets. He began his reply to the two pastors by deploring the death of Hubmaier.⁴ This was no way to defeat falsehood. Everyone should be allowed to hold his own convictions, however mistaken we may consider them to be. If a man's faith is erroneous then he will be sufficiently punished by the fires of hell. It is by the Scriptures and the Word that we ought to withstand the devil and protect the truth, not by persecution.⁵

Luther speedily disposed of those who favoured rebaptism simply "to spite the pope and be free of any taint of the Antichrist".⁶ If that were to be the only motive in reform, then it would be necessary to have a new Bible, because it has been preserved by the Roman Church.⁷ His exposition of the Protestant doctrine of baptism rested on the fact that it is a promise and sign contained within God's Word and given to us on that authority.⁸ The real point at issue was not really as to whether those who had been baptized by Rome ought to be baptized again in the Protestant Church. It was whether infants should be baptized at all, and whether, if they had been, even in a Protestant Church, they should not be baptized again on profession of faith. This led Luther into a defence of paedobaptism, which he admitted could not be certainly proved from Scripture, but which he personally contended could not be altogether disproved from Scripture either.⁹ His chief charge against the Anabaptists was that "they teach doubt not faith, calling this Scripture and the Word of God. . . . Having made up their minds concerning their peculiar notions, they attempt to make the Scriptures agree with them by dragging passages in by the hair."¹⁰ Perhaps Luther did less than justice to those who differed from him, but we must not question his integrity even if we consider him to have been mistaken.

Concerning Rebaptism was only the beginning of Luther's attempt to

¹ *Ibid.*, 95, 127-8.

³ *Ibid.*, 229-62. *Concerning Rebaptism* (1528).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 255-6.

² *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

elucidate this topic from the Word of God. He preached many sermons on the doctrine, and in 1529 he incorporated his teaching into the Small and Large Catechisms. "The keynote of his emphasis affirms that baptism is not the work of man but the work of God," observes Theodore Bachmann. "Therefore the actions of men can neither make nor nullify this sacrament. Baptism is a command of God given us in the Scriptures, notably but not only in such passages as Mark 16:16 or Matt. 28:18, 19. Above all, baptism is exalted for us by Jesus Christ; God honours our baptism in that of His Son."¹

Whatever verdict we may pass on Luther's logic and the degree of conviction carried by his arguments – especially in refuting the Anabaptists – it cannot be disputed that whether he was contending with the excesses either of Rome or of Protestantism, he strove at all times to be a man of the Word. He was a reformer indeed – one who tried to mould the Church anew according to the pattern of Scripture.

¹LW 35. 26.