

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LUTHER FOR TO-DAY¹

THE greatness of Martin Luther has never been in dispute amongst the informed, but nowadays we are realizing just how great he was. The full range of his significance is emerging into view. The Luther we have known in the past was too small. He was cast into a mould too narrow to contain him. He was regarded primarily and almost exclusively as a prophet soul who recalled a wicked generation to God. He was the monk who shook the world by challenging the embattled might of Rome. Yet, however stirring and impressive was this version of the pioneer reformer, it involved certain limitations. It implied that Luther was a fighter rather than a thinker: that his deeds were more important than his doctrines. His theological contribution was seriously under-estimated. Consequently his relevance for to-day was largely overlooked. We admittedly basked in the benefit of what he had done, but what he said lacked the Kierkegaardian grace of contemporaneity. His was not a living voice.

That view of Luther held the field almost without question until very recent years. In this country it still predominates, although, particularly since the War, the "new look" Luther is beginning to be appreciated. But a veritable Luther renaissance has taken place in the world of scholarship which has restored the reformer to his rightful place on the theological map. This rediscovery is one of the highlights of our era.

As we might expect, this modern Luther revival began in his native land of Germany itself. The initial stimulus was provided in 1883, when the four hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth was celebrated. In that year the definitive Weimar Edition of his works was launched. To-day it runs to over sixty bulky volumes, and is still incomplete. A further fillip was provided by the commemoration, in 1917, of the publication of the Ninety-five Theses, which all unwittingly kindled the Reformation flame. Since then much patient and fruitful research has been devoted to Luther by such scholars as Karl Holl, Wilhelm Herrmann, K. L. Schmidt, Theodore Harnack and Adolf Köberle, to name but a few. From Germany, the interest spread to Sweden, where it still remains and displays its in-

¹ The thirty-second Annual Lecture of the Scottish Reformation Society (Western Committee), delivered in the Christian Institute, Glasgow, September 23, 1952.

valuable results in the writings of the Lund school of theology. In 1913 Gustav Aulén, who had been deeply influenced by Nathan Söderblom and Einar Billing at Uppsala, transferred to the University of Lund and there gathered about him a distinguished band of researchers who have added new lustre to Swedish theological scholarship in particular, Anders Nygren, Ragnar Bring, Hjalmar Lindroth and Gustav Wingren.

The effects of this new enquiry into the theological significance of Martin Luther are gradually making themselves felt throughout the entire Protestant world and are compelling the Roman Catholics to take them seriously. Its foremost carrier is Barthianism, though probably the modifications of Brunner reflect more accurately the truly Lutheran standpoint. Continental Protestantism is now saturated with it. America is awakening to it. But in this country we are only just being touched by it. The next twenty-five years will undoubtedly witness a theological return to Luther in Great Britain and may help us to find the rock of certainty and unity which we have been seeking so long. This return to Reformation first principles in the realm of theology will, in its turn, have repercussions in the life and thought of the rank and file in our churches, and will provide the most propitious conditions that could be imagined for an evangelical revival in our midst.

Let us then turn to Luther himself and learn the lessons he has to impart. When we have heard him speak, we shall echo the verdict of Professor Hugh Watt: "We can only stand in wonder before his genius and his courage, and in gratitude before his rediscovery and proclamation of the great central truths of the Christian faith."¹ We shall encounter three of these great central truths as we consider now what Luther has to say about Doctrine, Bible and Church.

I. DOCTRINE

The current reinterpretation of Luther has stressed his contribution to the history of doctrine. It is no longer possible to believe that Luther had no interest in Christian doctrine. We are being compelled to recognize that doctrine was his primary concern, and that the Protestant Reformation was essentially a doctrinal revolution. Luther achieved something far more positive and constructive than a mere protest against the reli-

gious and practical degradations of the medieval system. He effected a reorientation of doctrine. That, indeed, is the distinction he deliberately draws between himself and the earlier reformers. They attacked only the "life", whereas he attacked the "doctrine". As Principal Philip S. Watson has put it: "Luther was not simply a Protestant; it is much more important that he was, to use his own favourite word, an Evangelical."¹ He sought to re-align the doctrine of the Church to the Evangelical tradition.

We shall look in vain for a systematic theology in Luther. It was left to Calvin to produce a coherent synthesis of Protestant belief. Luther attempted something more fundamental, without which the other would have been impossible. He strove to discover the clue to all theology. He searched for the key which unlocks its mysteries. He dealt with guiding principles. And in the doctrine of justification by faith he found what he sought.

He reached his goal not by the way of speculation or academic inquiry, but through Christian experience. His doctrine is living because it lived in and for him. His own spiritual emancipation was wrought by an encounter with the gracious God. He had entered the monastery of the Augustinian Eremites at Erfurt with one purpose in mind. He wanted to save his own soul. He became a monk in order to get right with God. He hoped that by pursuing the evangelical "counsels of perfection", by prayer, meditation and ascetic discipline, he would achieve the status of salvation. According to his theological preceptors, the Nominalists, this was the only way. By climbing the mystic ladder Luther aspired to reach heaven. Self-help was his guiding motto. It was out of the utter failure of this attempt to acquire salvation by works that Luther's burning experience of justifying grace was born. It all began under a pear tree. Luther was pouring out his soul to his spiritual adviser, Johann von Staupitz. We should do well to salute this saintly vicar who first set Luther's feet upon the right path. "If it had not been for Dr. Staupitz," he said himself "I should have sunk in hell."² There beneath the pear tree—which Luther treasured ever afterwards—Staupitz turned his distracted mind away from himself, his fears and his striv-

¹ *Let God be God*, p. 10.

² *Dokumente zu Luthers Entwicklung*, ed. Otto Scheel, No. 461.

¹ *Representative Churchmen of Twenty Centuries*, p. 212.

ings, to the Bible. He counselled him to seek the way of salvation in the pages of Holy Writ. And so Luther set himself to search the Scriptures. The transforming experience came to him as quietly as the dawn. There was no heavenly apparition, no dramatic voice, no supernatural revelation. In the stillness of his study in the tower of the Augustinian monastery God spoke straight to his soul and, like John Wesley after him, Martin Luther felt his heart strangely warmed. This is where the Reformation started: not on the steps of the Scala Sancta in Rome or even at the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, but here, where a man sits before an open Bible and allows God to address him face to face.

It was from God's Word that Luther learned the secret of justification. A man is not put right with his Maker by anything he can do, but by everything God has done. It is all of grace. On man's side the sole requisite is faith. That faith is itself a gift. And so for this whole process of spiritual renewal Luther took over the Pauline terminology of "justification by faith". He tells us how he dwelt upon the first chapter of Romans: "Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by faith'. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Whereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven. . . ."¹

Luther's doctrine sprang direct from his experience: but it is to be remembered that his experience was cradled in Scripture. He now had a new conception of God and therefore a new conception of theology. Justification by faith was seen to be more than one doctrine amongst many, even though the most important. It was recognized as the clue to all doctrine, the golden chain that binds together all the tenets of the faith, the guiding principle of all theological thinking. It is in this sense that Luther described justification as "the article of a standing or a falling Church"² and "master and prince, lord, ruler, and

¹ *Luthers Werke*, Weimar Ausgabe (henceforth referred to as W.A.) LIV, p. 185.

² Art. Smalc. II, i, *Symbolische Bücher*, ed. J. T. Müller, 300, 5.

judge over all kinds of doctrine, which preserves and governs all ecclesiastical doctrines".¹ It is this central and unifying doctrine which ensures that theology shall be reduced to its vital essentials—that it shall be thought about GOD. "In Luther," says Aulén, "there is at bottom only one question—the question of God. Whatever has no relation to this question has no place in his Christian thinking."² "Let God be God!": that is the essence of Luther's message, and nowhere is it more evident than in his theology. His doctrine is rooted and grounded in God. It is theocentric.

This Godward reorientation of theology has been fittingly described as Luther's Copernican revolution. The earlier astronomy assumed that the earth was the centre of the universe, around which the planets revolved. Copernicus demonstrated that the sun is the centre, not the earth. The universe is heliocentric, not geocentric. A Copernican revolution, therefore, means the transference of the centre of gravity from subject to object. That was precisely the nature of Luther's doctrinal restatement. Formerly man had stood in the centre of theological thinking. Luther set God in the centre. He showed that theology is theocentric, not anthropocentric. This is his vital contribution to doctrine.

Luther's unusual emphasis upon justification should not lead us to suppose, however, that he was deficient in the matter of sanctification. The Anglican report entitled *Catholicity* classified the alleged severance of Justification from Sanctification as one of the two radical errors of Protestantism.³ This charge cannot be substantiated. Luther always stressed that justification and sanctification hang together. They are quite inseparable. They must always be held in tension. Luther was no Antinomian. He succeeded, indeed, in distinguishing between these vital elements without dissevering them. He thus avoided the extremes both of quietism and perfectionism. But for the purpose of Christian preaching, he declared, they should always be linked, "for if one should be destroyed it would carry the other with it, and again where one continues and is rightly taught it brings the other with it."⁴

¹ W.A. XXXIX, i, 205.

² *Gudsbilden*, p. 163. Quoted in Watson, op. cit., p. 23.

³ *Catholicity*, p. 25.

⁴ Luther, *Sämmtliche Werke*, Erlangen, XIV, 151.

Luther's Copernican revolution may be studied, as Anders Nygren has done,¹ in terms not of justification but of love. Luther occupies a crucial position in the development of the Christian doctrine of love. Nygren argues that it was Luther who reinstated the distinctively Christian idea of love as *agapé*. By *agapé* he meant the pure, disinterested, selfless love of God, as contrasted with the passionate, self-interested and self-centred love of man. Once again, Luther's theocentric concern is manifest. He seeks to show that Christian love must have God at its heart, not man. For him, there is no justifiable self-love, as the Schoolmen taught. God must be the sole object of our heart's devotion. He must reign without a rival. It was in his own experience of justifying grace that Luther first encountered *agapé*. Henceforward he became an apostle of love. This may seem an unusual rôle for one whom we prefer to depict as the fiery prophet of God's wrath and fierce indignation, but it is part of the revised version of Luther which is being presented to us by contemporary research.

This, then, is the essence of Luther's contribution to Christian doctrine. He shifted the centre of gravity from man to God. He saw that the traffic of the new Jacob's ladder is one way: from God to man. Man cannot "climb up into the majesty of God", to use one of his more vivid phrases.² All God's dealings with His children are based upon His creatorhood and their creatureliness.

II. BIBLE

We have already seen that the Bible occupied a determinative position in Luther's spiritual experience. It was through his resort to the Word of God that he was brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and it was on the sure foundation of Holy Writ that his doctrine was based. We should therefore expect that Luther's teaching on the nature of Scripture would be of value, not only for his day, but for ours. Biblical interpretation is one of the crucial issues of the present age. We have witnessed in recent years a welcome swing of the pendulum away from the prevalent liberal view of Scripture towards a more evangelical and orthodox position. There is now a genuine desire to discover a *via media* which avoids the unsatis-

¹ *Agape and Eros*, II, 2, pp. 463 ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 485.

factory extremes both of modernism and obscurantism. It is just at this point that Luther can speak and speak helpfully to our situation.

One of the most relevant insights of Luther in this connection is to be found in his recognition of the dual nature of Scripture. He realized that Scripture is both human and divine, and that any theory of the Bible which fails to do full justice to each of these elements is fundamentally deficient. He draws an analogy between Scripture and the Person of Christ. Our Lord Himself was at once human and divine. Orthodox theology enjoins us to hold both His humanity and His divinity in tension. We have to say that He was both fully man and fully God. It is a heresy to deny either. Docetism erred in overlooking His humanity: Psilanthropism erred in denying His divinity. The same sort of problem confronts us in the Bible: namely, the reconciliation of the human and the divine. Scripture is at once the work of men and the Word of God: from that apparent contradiction spring all the difficulties which puzzle us. Luther would affirm that it is wrong to overstress either one factor or the other. There is a type of higher critic who tends to emphasize the humanity of Scripture and forget its Divine origin, being thus guilty of a sort of Biblical psilanthropism. There is a type of fundamentalist who lays all his weight upon the divinity of Scripture and closes his eyes to its human features, being thus guilty of a sort of Biblical Docetism. Just as the orthodox doctrine of Christ's Person, as expressed in the Chalcedonian definition, requires us to believe in the two natures of our Lord "without confusion, without mutation, without division, without separation", so also we should recognize the twofold nature of Scripture and hold firmly both to its full humanity and its full divinity.

It is fashionable to say that the Reformation substituted an infallible Bible for an infallible Pope, suggesting that inerrancy can no more satisfactorily be claimed for a book than for a man. This question of authority was indeed a crucial one for Luther, but it is unfair to accuse him of supplying a solution simply in terms of a naïve bibliolatry. There were times, it must be admitted, when he appeared to equate the Word of God with the written "words of God", but elsewhere he was at great pains to make the distinction. For him the final source of authority was neither the Pope nor the Bible, but Christ. But since for him "Christ" and "the Word" were almost inter-

changeable terms, confusion has sometimes arisen. By the Word, however, Luther did not mean the *ipsissima verba* of Holy Writ, but the living voice of the living Christ speaking in and through them. Scripture is subordinate to Christ. It is the witness to Christ. It is the vehicle of the word. Its authority is derivative.

That authority is nevertheless real. Luther staunchly maintained the supremacy of Scripture over the pronouncements of the Fathers, the Councils and the Pope. He quoted with approval the saying of Nicholas Tudeschi that a layman with the Bible is to be preferred to a Pope without it.¹ He submitted the tradition of the Church to the vital test of Scripture. "With all due respect to the Fathers," he said at Leipzig, "I prefer the authority of Scripture."² And again, "The Pope and the Councils are men: hence they are to be judged according to the Scriptures."³ He strongly objected to the Roman treatment of the oracles of God. "They make out of them what they like, as if they were a nose of wax, to be pulled around at will."⁴ Luther was content to take as his motto one of the great Reformation slogans: *Sola Scriptura*. For him the Bible was the one source of faith and doctrine.

In rejecting the Roman reliance on tradition, however, Luther avoided the opposite pitfall of a crude Biblicism. That is of major importance and needs to be stated quite categorically. Luther saw that the cruder sort of Biblicism was only another form of traditionalism, because it actually turns Scripture itself into tradition, by reducing it to a collection of revealed truths and divorcing it from the voice of God. As Dr. Regin Preter has said, in the Lutheran contribution to the World Council of Churches' statement on *Biblical Authority for To-day*, "Tradition is only a means of interpretation, a relative authority, a *norma normata*. The *norma normans* is the living Word of God itself."⁵

One of Luther's most valuable principles of Biblical interpretation is his insistence on the literal sense of Scripture. He

¹ *Works of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia Edition (English Translation) (henceforth referred to as P.E.), III, 96.

² *Disputatio Joh. Eccii et M. Lutheri Lipsiae habita*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ P.E. I, 367; W. A. VI, 305.

⁵ *Biblical Authority for To-day*, ed. Alan Richardson and W. Schweitzer, p. 110.

firmly sets aside what Farrar dubbed "the dreary fiction" of the fourfold sense.¹ The medieval Schoolmen had taught that the Scripture was to be interpreted in four different ways: literally, spiritually, allegorically and anagogically. St. Thomas Aquinas had sought to apply a restraint by adding "There is no confusion in Holy Scripture, since all the senses are founded upon one, from which alone argument can be drawn",² but since his day all manner of weird and fanciful expositions had appeared. Luther rejected all such absurd and exaggerated verbal jugglery and took his stand on the plain and obvious meaning of the Bible. "The literal sense of Scripture alone," he said, "is the whole essence of faith and Christian theology."³ And again, "If we wish to handle Scripture aright, our sole effort will be to obtain the one simple, seminal and certain literal sense."⁴

This leads naturally to his assertion of the clarity of Scripture. He believed that each passage of Holy Writ possessed one clear, definite and true sense of its own. "The Holy Spirit," he wrote, "is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth, and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, or natural sense."⁵ He was confident that "the Holy Scriptures must needs be clearer, easier of interpretation and more certain than any other writings, for all teachers prove their statements by them, as by clearer and more stable writings, and wish their own writings to be established and explained by them. But no one can ever prove a dark saying by one that is still darker; therefore, necessity compels us to run to the Bible with all the writings of the doctors, and thence to get our verdict and judgment upon them."⁶ The Scriptures, according to Luther, shine by their own light. There is a divine perspicuity about them.

We must not suppose, however, that Luther altogether abandoned the use of allegory. Although he was aware that allegorizing may degenerate, as he puts it, into "a mere monkey-game",⁷ he nevertheless recognized that it had a place in the

¹ Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 327.

² *Summa Theologica*.

³ Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ P.E. III, 335.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷ Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

science of interpretation. Reduced to a nutshell, his argument was that we may be permitted to allegorize when and as the Scripture itself allegorizes. St. Paul, he thought, was “a marvellous cunning workman in the handling of allegories; for he is wont to apply them to the doctrine of faith, to grace, and to Christ.”¹ “Allegories,” he added, “do not strongly persuade in divinity, but, as certain pictures, they beautify and set out the matter. . . . For it is a seemly thing sometimes to add an allegory, when the foundation is well laid, and the matter thoroughly proved: for as painting is an ornament to set forth and garnish a house already builded, so is an allegory the light of a matter which is already otherwise proved and confirmed.”² In allowing allegory its proper, though strictly delimited, function in hermeneutics, Luther preserved a principle which we are exploring afresh in our time.

Luther applied the Reformation watchword of the *analogia fidei* to the Scriptures. St. Paul’s words in Rom. xii. 6 were mistakenly interpreted as meaning that Scripture should be explained in accordance with Scripture. Whilst this is certainly not what the apostle intended to convey, Luther was nevertheless enunciating a worthwhile hermeneutical principle here. He had grasped the unity of Scripture. He saw that one passage must not be considered in isolation from the rest. The Bible is all of a piece. It hangs together. Each passage must be viewed as part of a whole. “That is the true method of interpretation,” he declared, “which puts Scripture alongside of Scripture in a right and proper way.”³ This is a principle which we are rediscovering to-day.

It is commonly supposed that Luther stood for the right of private judgment in the interpretation of Scripture. We have somehow got it into our heads that Protestantism recommends a man to read the Bible solely by the light of his own reason and to form his own opinion of it. That is a perverse distortion of what Luther intended. He sought, it is true, to wrest the key of interpretation from the dead hand of tradition. But he did not wish to entrust it to the enlightened man of reason whom the Renaissance had produced. Luther had no faith in and little

¹ Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Erasmus Middleton, p. 344; new edition by P. S. Watson (James Clarke, 1953), p. 414.

² *Ibid.*, p. 347; new edition, p. 417.

³ P.E., III, 334.

sympathy for such a humanistic figure. He knew well that the true interpreter is neither the old Church or the new man, but the Holy Spirit. Only He can breathe upon the Word and bring the truth to sight. Only He can recreate the original situation of God-man encounter which underlies the record of Scripture, and apply it to our hearts. Only He can demonstrate how all the Scriptures point to Christ alone. As Luther wrote to Spalatin in 1518, “The Bible cannot be mastered by study or talent. You must rely solely on the influence of the Spirit.”¹

III. CHURCH

It has all too frequently been assumed that Luther lacked a doctrine of the Church. He is falsely regarded as the champion of an unfettered individualism. A recent instance of this misconception is to be found in Dr. C. C. Morrison’s book, *What is Christianity?* where he makes Luther largely responsible for what he calls the “Protestant heresy”, namely, the substitution of the concern for personal salvation for the community character of the Christian faith. He is even unkind enough to suggest that “the Church which the Reformers had in mind was merely in their minds”.² The Anglican pamphlet *Catholicity* lays a similar charge against Luther. If individual religion is not actually put in the place of the Church, it is regarded as prior to it and determinative of it. “Whereas in Catholic Christianity the order is: Christ—the visible Church—the individual Christian, Protestantism is unable to avoid the notion that the right order is: Christ—the individual Christian—the Church; as if entry into the Church were a secondary stage that follows and seals a salvation already bestowed upon individuals by virtue of ‘faith alone’. Again and again Protestantism betrays its tendency to put the individual before the Church: indeed, this tendency seems to have its roots in the Protestant ethos.”³

It cannot be too strongly stressed that, however just such criticisms may be when applied to later degenerations of Protestantism, they cannot rightly be levelled at Luther. Listen to his own voice on the matter: “The Church is the Mother

¹ *Luthers Briefwechsel*, ed. E. L. Enders and G. Kawerau, I, 141.

² Cf. Wilhelm Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation*, pp. 5 f.

³ *Catholicity*, p. 27.

that gives birth to and fosters every Christian."¹ Now, as Aulén has very properly pointed out in a vigorous reply to the above accusations, if the Church is the Mother who gives birth to every Christian, the individual cannot possibly be prior to the Church. Luther's order is precisely that which the authors of *Catholicity* describe as distinctively Catholic, namely: Christ—the visible Church—the individual Christian. "The idea of the Church as a union of individuals who already are partakers of salvation is a typical pietistic view, quite strange to Lutheranism."²

So far, then, from his possessing no doctrine of the Church, it can be claimed, with Wilhelm Pauck, that "no idea was more important in Luther's whole work than that of the Church."³ His conception of the Church was derived from his study of Scripture. It represents a Biblical-theological modification of the prevailing Roman view. Luther recovered the New Testament Church. He regarded it primarily in personal terms. It is a faith-fellowship. Faith binds the believer to Christ. Fellowship binds him to his fellow-believer. The Church is the blessed company of all believers. Luther avoided the actual word "Church" because it retained a musty breath of institutionalism. He preferred to speak of the Church as a "people", "God's people", "the society of believers", "the communion of saints", "the congregation of the spiritual". The emphasis upon the personal is preserved. It is noticeable that Dr. Emil Brunner, in his lectures to the Free Church Federal Council on *The Church in the New Social Order*, presses the same important point. The New Testament Church, he argues, is not an order. "The Ekklesia is something exclusively personal, consisting of the Person of Christ and the persons of the believers who, by faith, are in Christ."⁴ That is thoroughly in line with Luther.

This definition of the Church in terms of faith and fellowship does not necessarily imply an undue subjectivism. Faith, for Luther, is always an encounter with the living God, and fellowship is not regarded as the outcome of association but as itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. What Luther teaches is that, although Christian experience is ultimately a matter of personal relation-

¹ In Aulén, "The Catholicity of Lutheranism," *World Lutheranism To-day*, p. 5.

² Aulén, "The 'Errors' of Lutheranism," *Theology*, LII, p. 88 (March, 1949).

³ Pauck, *op. cit.*, 26.

⁴ *The Church in the New Social Order*, p. 11.

ship to Jesus Christ, yet the Christian life is never one of isolation but always one of fellowship and mutual love. Luther would have approved John Wesley's dictum that "the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." To be a Christian and to be a Churchman are one and the same. Not once, but many times Luther repeated, in effect, the famous slogan of St. Cyprian: "Outside the Church there is no salvation." Here is a selection of such unequivocal statements. "I believe that no one can be saved who is not found in this congregation (of the saints), holding with it to one faith, word, sacraments, hope and love."¹ "I believe that in this congregation, and nowhere else, there is forgiveness of sins. . . . To this congregation Christ gives the keys."² "We all believe in one Christian Church, and outside its bounds all is naught."³ "Outside the Christian Church is no truth, no Christ, no happiness."⁴ What could be more definite than that?

For Luther, the Church is always bound up with the Word. As we have seen, his doctrine of the Church was founded on Scripture. But more than that, in his view the Church is the creation of Christ the Word and in it the Word once again comes alive. In this sense Luther was at one with the fundamental Roman Catholic concept of the Church as the *corpus Christi mysticum* (the mystical, i.e. spiritual, body of Christ). But Luther sought to ensure that the Church should be determined by the Word, whereas Romanism was often guilty of subordinating the Word to the Church. "The whole life and substance of the Church," declared Luther, "is in the Word of God."⁵ The Word is the one true mark of the Church. This is its *sine qua non*. For "the word of God cannot be without God's people and, conversely, God's people cannot be without the word. For how could it otherwise be preached and heard?"⁶

Luther took the Word as his criterion of the Church. The Church is only truly constituted when it lives by the Word. This is the norm by which he assessed ecclesiastical doctrine and

¹ W.A., VII, 219.

² *Ibid.*

³ Quoted by Hans P. Ehrenberg, "Luther as a Theologian," *Luther Speaks*, p. 100.

⁴ W.A., X, I, 140.

⁵ W. A., VII, 721.

⁶ W. A., L, 629.

practice. The Church is a faith-fellowship created and inspired and guided by the Word. This yardstick of the Word Luther applied in two directions. With it he measured the Church of Rome in his time and found it wanting. Its basic error lay in its subjection of the Word to the hierarchy and the sacramental system. But later Luther set the same line against the "enthusiasm" of the Protestant sectaries. This was his second front. His objection to these pietistic groups was precisely the same as his objection to Rome—they did not allow the Word, by which alone the Church is created, to occupy the seat of authority. In this case, immediate religious experience, instead of the hierarchy, usurped its place. The one is as dangerous as the other, since both deprive the Word of its rightful supremacy in the Church.

It is from his presupposition of the Word as the constitutive principle of the Church that Luther proceeded to draw two vital and valuable distinctions. One is between the visible and invisible aspects of the Church. Because the Church is the creation of the Word, its boundaries cannot be discerned by the natural eye. And yet, Luther had no desire to abandon the Church as a visible institution. He recognized the necessity of both and strove to preserve both. We must distinguish, he said, between the external and internal character of the Church. But though these may be dissected metaphysically they must not be separated actually. They belong together. As Eric Wahlstrom points out, in a valuable paper, "the words 'visible' and 'invisible' do not refer to two Churches, but to two aspects of one and the same Church."¹ To employ the terms "visible Church" and "invisible Church" as if in contrast is to suggest a duplicity which is absent from and indeed foreign to, the thought of Luther.² The other distinction arising from Luther's doctrine of the Word in relation to the Church is that between the universal and local aspects of the Church. We can speak of the Church "in the general sense" and also "in the specific sense."³ There is the one, holy Catholic and Apostolic Church throughout the world and there is the Church at the end of our street. This problem of interrelation is, of course, as old as

¹ "The Lutheran Conception of the Church," in *The Nature of the Church*, American Theological Committee, p. 41.

² Cf. J. Robert Nelson, *The Realm of Redemption*, p. 162.

³ Pauck, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

Christianity itself. The New Testament Church is both universal and local. Luther insisted that they are both one Church. Once again the distinction, though necessary, is purely theoretical. The body of Christ is not really divided. Viewed in personal terms, the Church as the people of God is the same, whether in the congregation, or in the wider fellowship. Luther sought, however, to retain the vital values of both these elements. Against the Church of Rome, he defended the rights and demonstrated the virtues of the local community. Against the sectaries, he rebuked the spirit of exaggerated independency and urged the claims of the truly catholic Church. As in his approach to the Bible, Luther strove to preserve both the Divine and human elements in the Church in uncompromising tension, believing that therein lay the deep truth of the matter. Aulén concludes his survey of Luther's ecclesiology with these words: "Luther has created a concept of the Church which is unified as to its principle, and which combines reality with ideality, or more exactly stated, which is able at once to keep in view the Church's character as an object of faith and the actuality of its historical fellowship."¹

Luther's double stand against the Romanists and the sectaries renders his contribution singularly relevant to our present ecumenical discussions. The position he has laid down might well form the basis of fruitful reunion conversations. He criticizes, and at times severely, both Rome and Zwickau. But he also holds out the hope of reconciliation. And that surely should be our major concern in this hour of the world's desperate need. A divided Church is woefully hampered in its evangelical witness. Principal John Baillie's impassioned plea at the Lund Conference for corporate penitence for our disunity and a renewed earnestness in realizing our oneness in Christ, must not be permitted to fall on wilfully deaf ears. We must all long and pray for the day when our Lord's robe shall be restored to Him, seamless as at first.

Paisley.

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¹ Aulén, *Den lutherska kyrkoiden*, p. 69, quoted in Edgar M. Carlson, *The Reinterpretation of Luther*, pp. 133, 134.