

CHAPTER V

THE LITERARY WORKS OF DOCTOR MARTIN LUTHER

Luther was a prolific writer, and no study of the Reformation would be complete without a study of the many products of his agile pen and keen intellect. The art of printing had been invented less than a century before the Reformation and was a powerful aid in the spreading of Lutheran doctrine. No sooner was the ink dry on many of Luther's writings than they were whisked off to some printer for wider circulation. In the third chapter we mentioned the famous Ninety-Five Theses, thus we need not discuss them again here. We simply call attention to their importance.

1. The Pamphlets of 1520

Among Luther's early writings should be mentioned the three famous pamphlets of 1520. In the first of these, *The Address to the Christian Nobility*, Luther makes a stirring appeal to his countrymen to put an end to the wrongs suffered at the hands of the Roman Church. In this pamphlet he asserts that there is no essential distinction between clergy and laity and expounds the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers according to which each believer is a priest privileged to approach the throne of grace. In a second pamphlet, called the *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther attacked the Sacramental system of the Roman Church, and, asserted that the Church is essentially the body of believers. In the third pamphlet, *On the Freedom of the Christian Man*, Luther developed in popular format the doctrine of justification by faith and its implications. The first pamphlet was intended for the rulers, the second for scholars and theologians and the third for common people. (See Appendix H).

2. The Translation of the Bible

In the fourth chapter, we referred to the translation of the Greek New Testament into German which was completed during Luther's stay at the Wartburg castle. That was in 1521, but it was not until 1534 that the Old Testament was translated from the original Hebrew. Thus at that point the whole Bible was made available in the language of the people.

The Old Testament was translated in more or less piece-meal fashion by Luther and his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg. Between the time of the last class in the afternoon and the time when Katie would appear to summon the "Herr Doctor" to supper, Luther, Melancthon, and several other professors would gather in Luther's study and work on this Old Testament translation.

These men had the task not only of translating Greek and Hebrew into German, but also the task of creating a German language as they went, since there were so many varying dialects. When Luther's Bible was finished, it gave the German people not only God's Word in their own language, but also their language itself. The German of Luther's Bible was the standard for correct German ever since. Perhaps you have read the story of how at times the learned professors at Wittenberg were puzzled over the proper German terms for the parts of the sacrifices described in the book of Moses, and how they would leave Luther's study and go out

to a butcher shop and inquire of the butcher what the popular term was for the various parts of lambs and other sacrificial animals. One of the great blessings of the Protestant Reformation is the open Bible in the language of the people. Now once again God's children can follow the example of the "noble Bereans" who "received the Word with all readiness of mind and searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so." (Acts 17:11)

3. The Order of Worship

Luther's Order of Service of 1523 has already been alluded to, but we will discuss it here in more detail. The Order of Service of November, 1523, was in Latin, and was entitled "Formula Missae" or "Formula of the Mass." This term "mass" was but an ancient term for holy communion, and as such was retained by the reformers. The order of 1523 began with the Introit (entrance verse), followed by the Kyrie (Lord, Have Mercy) and the Gloria in Excelsis (Glory Be to God on High). This was followed by the Salutation and Response, the Collect, the reading of the Epistle and the Gradual with the Hallelujah. The reading of the Gospel, the Nicene Creed and a Sermon followed. In the Communion Service proper, there was the Preface, the Words of Institution, the Lord's Prayer, the Sanctus and the Pax, the Distribution while the Agnus Dei was sung, then the Post Communion Prayer followed by the Benedicamus—the Benediction given in Numbers 6:24-26. In 1525 a German service was introduced, modeled after this Latin one of 1523, and thus the general outline of the Lutheran service was established for centuries to come.

The Common Service in use in many English-speaking Lutheran congregations in America is a composite of Lutheran orders of worship of the sixteenth century, and is seen to be much like Luther's "Formula Missae" of 1523. The Confession of Sin with which we often begin our service today was originally a private confession for the priest. It later was made into a general confession for the congregation (see Appendix J).

4. Luther's Hymns

Luther will always be remembered for his thirty-seven hymns which he contributed to the church's treasury of sacred song. During the middle ages, there were no congregational hymns, and the part of the congregation in the service was limited to a few Amens and a few other short responses. Hymns were written during this period, but were intended for private use.

With the advent of the Reformation came the rediscovery of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers. There is no need of a mediating priest in the New Testament, since through faith in Christ all believers have become priests and need no mediator save the One Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus. Since all believers are priests, their voices ought to be heard in the church service, and these voices were heard in Lutheran congregations in the liturgy and especially in the congregational hymns.

The restoration of hymn singing was one of the blessings of the Reformation which should not be overlooked, since it has been asserted that Luther did as much for the Reformation through his hymns as he did through his preaching. The enemies of the Reformation complained that the common people were "singing themselves into Lutheran doctrine."

In 1524, Luther published the first Protestant Hymnal, the *Achtliederbuch*, or "Song Book of Eight Songs" of which four were by Luther, three by Speratus, and one by an unknown author. Luther's Battle Hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" (see Appendix J), did not appear in this

first hymnal, but about 1529. Of the hymns of Luther, two others besides the Battle Hymn deserve just a word of comment. "From heaven above to earth I come," Luther's Christmas hymn, was thought out while Luther was rocking his little son Paul to sleep just before Christmas in 1534, and was suggested by a secular song which Luther was humming, a song about a traveler who came from a strange land and brought wonderful news. The hymn "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word" was written for a children's prayer service which was to be held in Wittenberg in 1541 when the Turks threatened the Germanies. The title is "A children's hymn, to be sung against the two arch-enemies of Christ and his holy Church, the Pope and the Turks." (See Appendix J).

5. The Two Catechisms

The year 1529 as a significant one, in that it was the year in which Luther's two catechisms appeared. A catechism is a book of instruction composed of questions and answers. By means of these two catechisms Luther sought to combat the ignorance in religious matters which was so prevalent in his day. Both catechisms have been made a part of the official confessions of the Lutheran Church to which Lutheran pastors pledge their fidelity at ordination and to which Lutheran congregations bind themselves in their constitutions.

If you examine the Small Catechism, you will find the heading of each part begin this way: "As the Head of the Family Should Teach in All Simplicity to His Household." This catechism was originally not intended as a book of instruction in church schools, but rather as a book of instruction for the home. The first edition of the Small Catechism did not appear in book form, but rather in chart or poster form so that the head of the family could attach it to the wall where all could read it and learn it. The section on "The Office of the Keys" did not appear in the edition of 1529, but was added later.

We should remember that the book out of which most of us have received instruction prior to Confirmation was not simply Luther's *Small Catechism* but rather *An Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*. In the front part of this book was Luther's "Enchiridion," Luther's Small Catechism proper; in the latter part of the book was a further elaboration of Luther's text. These meanings to the Commandments, the Articles of the Creed and the Petitions of the Lord's Prayer are a part of Luther's Enchiridion, as are also those definitions of Confession, Absolution, and the Office of the Keys, and the answers to questions about Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Those answers to questions about sin, creation, the nature Christ, the office of Christ, conversion, sanctification, etc. are part of the "explanation" of Luther's text. This fact explains why we have so many varying editions of what is popularly called Luther's Catechism; they are really various expositions of Luther's text, with this original "Enchiridion" the same in each. The word "enchiridion," by the way, is a term used to denote "a book of pithy brevity, an elementary book."

6. Sermons

In recounting Luther's literary contributions, we should not forget his many sermons, many of which have been preserved, and find a place in the libraries of many Lutheran pastors. Most of those which have been preserved have also been translated into English.

7. Smalcald Articles

There is one other work of Luther which ought to be mentioned, a work which, like the two catechisms, has become one of the official confessions of the Lutheran Church—the Smalcald Articles. From the beginning, the Lutherans had always expressed their willingness to submit their cause to a general council of the Church, but when in 1536, Pope Paul III finally called such a council, he gave as its purpose “the utter extermination of the poisonous pestilential Lutheran heresy.” In answer to this decree of the pope, Elector John Frederick of Saxony asked Luther to write an ultimatum to be considered by the various Lutheran Estates to meet at Smalcald in 1537. The Smalcald Articles are the most polemical of the Lutheran Confessions, and it is in this document that the pope is termed the “anti-Christ.”

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What was the significance of Luther’s German Bible?
2. What relation does the Common Service have with the Reformation?
3. What is Luther’s place in hymnology?
4. Has Luther’s *Small Catechism* served its original purpose? Explain.
5. How did the Smalcald Articles happen to be written and what do they teach?

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Read *Luther, Biography of a Reformer*, Chapter 7, “Kidnapped,” pp. 113-125; Chapter 8, “Work, Worry and War,” pp. 129-142.

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