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## Luther's Christ

In my heart this one article reigns supreme: faith in Christ. From Him, through Him, and to Him all my theological thoughts flow night and day.

So Luther spoke to his students. Looking into church history, he observed:

I experienced and noted in all accounts of the history of the church that all who believed and kept intact the chief article of Jesus Christ also remained in the right Christian faith, and even though they erred or sinned, were nevertheless preserved to the end.

For Luther, Christianity centered in the Lord Jesus Christ. First of all, in Christ as the Son of God. For no one else, he says, can overcome the wrath of God, destroy the power of death and devil, and grant eternal life. Whoever, therefore, sells short anything of this article "will in course of time lose all of Christianity and ultimately become a Turk." One may not, therefore, tamper with the divine Word.

But Luther also stressed the humanity of Christ — "and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary." Christ did not flutter about like a ghost, but dwelt among men. He had eyes, ears, mouth, nose, chest, belly, hands, feet, just like you and me. He suckled at His mother's breast. He ate and drank, became angry, prayed, was sad, wept. Because He was man in every way, though without sin, we can find God. Apart from Christ's humanity we cannot lay hold on God. If we attempt it nevertheless, we are ascending into rarefied ether where we shall perish.

Luther's piety, which grew out of his view of Christ, was not like that of medieval mystics, the piety of St. Bernard or

St. Elizabeth or St. Hildegard. Their piety is like the deep-red hue of the sinking sun after a sizzling hot day in July. Luther's piety is rather like the bright rosy dawn ushering in a beautiful summer day when pearly dewdrops hang from tender blades of grass and when all else in God's creation joyfully awakens to new life and to new tasks. In all church history there is no piety as Christocentric as that of the medieval mystics and of Luther. But Luther's piety is more virile, more masculine, more in accord with the holiness concept of Scripture. In Luther's piety there is nothing ecstatic, nothing resembling an erotic infatuation, no honey-sweet liquefaction. For him Christ is not the amorous bridegroom, as He had been already for Origen, but the mighty and powerful liberating leader, the Lord.

This was due to Luther's deepest experience. He, too, had read the *Theologia Germanica*. He had, in fact, published it in 1516 and in 1518. He also knew Tauler and St. Bernard and esteemed and revered them. But his great experience had been to discover that Christ had saved him from the agony of despair and had forgiven his sins. In that crushing awareness of God's wrath over sin, Luther had clutched the strong hand of Christ. This hand had lifted him up to the highest peak of blessed communion with God. Again and again Luther therefore speaks of Christ as "the Man." "We'll dare it with this Man!" "But for us fights the Valiant One" — an unfortunately weak rendering of "*Es streit' für uns der rechte Mann.*" At times Luther even speaks of Christ as "my Chief." He calls Him his *Herzog*, for Luther has in

mind the Old Testament "Sabaoth Lord" — the Lord of hosts, or armies.

And so Luther often shows a preference for the name Christ rather than Jesus. Not sentimental familiarity, but unshakable confidence and trust determine his attitude to Christ. He regards himself as a vassal under compulsion to take orders from and to follow his liege-lord. And so we discover in Luther a reverent awe for Christ.

This does not mean that Luther does not at times become as tenderhearted as a child. One of the symbols of Christ he likes best is that of a hen spreading her wings over her helpless brood. And we all remember the moving stanza:

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,  
Make Thee a bed soft, undefiled,  
Within my heart, that it may be  
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.

In such moods Luther is often reacting against the Christ as the Middle Ages frequently represented Him, the Christ conceived by artists as a sullen and inflexible judge seated high on a rainbow. It is then that Luther can also say: "Whether I like it or not, when I hear and think of Christ, I see in my heart the picture of a man hanging on a cross." And yet, we hasten to add, not the Christ of Matthias Grünewald on the altar of the church in Isenheim, which depicts a Christ with unnaturally long fingers and a fearfully mutilated body, but the Christ of Albrecht Dürer, that manly Christ in whose torn and bleeding body one nevertheless seems to discern Christ's divinity and to hear His word of forgiveness. For Luther Christ means: "My Substitute; He suffered what I should have suffered; He rendered the one perfect obedience unto death."

Because Luther thus clung to Christ as

his Redeemer from sin and hell, this Christ was for him both transcendently exalted at the right hand of God far above all heavens and yet so truly near and truly present "as though He is shedding His blood this very moment." This explains why Luther liked to speak of the proximity of Christ. "How I wish," he said on one occasion, "I could spend one evening with Him at a time when He would be in a really happy mood."

But there was one place in particular where Luther most firmly believed Christ to be present and offering Himself bodily to him: the Holy Sacrament. Here Luther could seize and receive Him orally into himself. But this experience, too, meant for Luther not a religious reverie as though he had now achieved mystical oneness, but joy, inexpressible joy. This joy comes to the surface in the hymn:

Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice,  
With exultation springing,  
And with united heart and voice  
And holy rapture singing,  
Proclaim the wonders God hath done,  
How His right arm the vict'ry won,  
Right dearly it hath cost Him.

"Proclaim the wonders God hath done!" God performed His greatest *Wundertat*, according to Luther, when He, through His Son Jesus Christ, rescued man from the bottomless pit of sin and now offers him forgiveness of sin, without man's merit, moved only by His grace.

This grace of God Luther conceived not as a kind of spiritual medicine but as the loving and kind disposition of God. Nor did Luther understand God's grace to be a power-supplying substance of a supernatural character infused into man through the Sacrament and qualifying the soul for

good works and supplying the balance of what man is not able to perform by himself. Again, God's grace was for Luther not God's righteousness viewed as an attribute of God's being but the gift of Christ's righteousness which God freely grants the sinner. This meant that over and over again in moments of temptation and doubt Luther became assured of the Father's forgiving love in Christ.

But what was the nature of Luther's faith? It was not, as it was for Thomas à Kempis and later Pietists, a mere imitation of the virtues of Christ accompanied by sentimental tears. It was not, as it is for all humanists and moralists, a view of Christ as a wise teacher and a new Moses. Nor was Luther's faith mere respect and reverence for, and bare assent to, divine truth. His faith was rather passionate affirmation. It was the clutching in his heart, as it were, of the word of forgiveness as though life and death were dependent on it — as they are. "If you believe, you have; if you do not believe, you do not have."

At the dawn of the Reformation Albrecht Dürer painted his masterpiece of the knight who dares to defy death and devil. This may be said to be a symbol of Luther's faith. This faith gave him not

only a sense of security but also a sense of freedom: freedom from the Law and freedom to serve God and his fellow men. This faith determined the nature of his prayer life, his concern for his family, students, colleagues, friends, parishioners, the community, and the empire. It was that faith which was for him the mainspring of good works, of serving down to the very end the Christ who had loved him. But this faith had as its object, and was nourished by, the *Crucifixus*, the Christ who had overcome sin, death, devil, hell, and the law, the Christ who daily spoke to him in the Word, the Word of the Gospel, the Word of Holy Scripture. It was this faith which enabled him on Feb. 18, 1546, to reply with a distinctly audible yes to the question asked him by Justus Jonas, "Reverend Father, are you willing to die in the name of the Christ and the doctrine which you have preached?"

It is this faith in this Christ of Scripture which must ever remain the core of all true Biblical theology and preaching and the heart of Christian education in all our schools and Sunday schools, high schools and colleges, university and seminaries. God grant this for the sake of Jesus Christ.

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