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# Theological Observer

## LUTHER ON FREEDOM

### A Summary Report and Analysis of the Eighth International Congress for Luther Research

The Eighth International Congress for Luther Research convened at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul (Minnesota) on August 8-14, 1993. One cannot help being impressed by the ongoing scholarly interest in Luther demonstrated by these international gatherings. More than one hundred and fifty participants from every continent of the world and twenty-five different countries were present for the eighth congress, representing various denominational ties—primarily Lutheran, no doubt, but including many Luther scholars with other connections, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, or purely academic. All shared a common interest and expertise in Luther, manifest testimony to the continued significance of Luther, his writings, and his work more than five centuries after his birth.

The congress has met regularly since 1956, when it was initiated through the efforts of the Commission on Theology of the Lutheran World Federation. The first congress met at Aarhus in Denmark, where Regin Prenter was a leading figure. Thereafter the usually week-long meetings took place in Muenster (West Germany) in 1960, Jarvanpaa (Finland) in 1966, St. Louis (Missouri) in 1971, Lund (Sweden) in 1977, Erfurt (East Germany—at the restored Augustian monastery) in 1983, commemorating the quincentenary of Luther's birth; and Oslo (Norway) in 1988. The next congress is scheduled to meet in Heidelberg in 1997, coinciding with the five-hundredth anniversary of Melanchthon's birth.

The expenses of the Eighth International Congress, in addition to the registration of each invited guest, were partially underwritten by Luther Northwestern Seminary, Lutheran Brotherhood Insurance Company, and the Lutheran World Federation. Serving as chairman of the committee on local arrangements was Gerhard Forde. The continuation committee of the congress is chaired at present by Mark Edwards, a professor of Harvard University. The week-long program featured nine plenary presentations, at least a dozen intensive, small-group seminars devoted to individual topics (each registrant participating in the group of his choice), and a series of short presentations on sundry subjects related to the Reformation and Luther. The comments that follow herewith will be limited to a summation and evaluation of the plenary presentations, particularly the highlights as perceived by the writer. The general theme of the congress was "Liberation and Freedom: Martin Luther's Contribution"—in German, "Befreiung und Freiheit: Martin Luthers Beitrag." At least half of the plenary papers were delivered in German. Discussions

after each plenary paper were conducted in either English or German.

Dr. Gerhard Forde, a professor of Luther Northwestern Seminary itself, presented the first plenary essay of the congress, addressing the topic "Called to Freedom," thus keynoting what was to be a continuing theme through the week of sessions, Luther's contributions to freedom in both spiritual and secular realms. The papal bull of Leo X (*Exsurge Domine*) of June 15, 1520, threatening Luther's excommunication as "an especially wild boar out of the woods . . . snorting about and uprooting the vineyard," alerted the church and, to a lesser degree, the secular world as well, to an advancing storm-front threatening liberation in some sense. Forde, however, underscored early on that Luther's concentration was first and foremost theological, not social, economic, political, or even ethical. "Luther raised this whole discussion to a new level" by leading it away from the Erasmian fixation with the philosophical canon that ascribed free will to fallen man, also in matters of the spirit, pointing out how dangerous was such an idea and how impossible was such freedom. Luther instead pointed to Christ as the only force able to drive the tempter from the heart of fallen man, making Himself the end of the law to those who are in Him. Luther became, therefore, the champion of the freedom of faith, the freedom for which Christ has set us free, liberating conscience from the power of law, sin, and death (Romans 10:4; Galatians 5:1). Other sorts of freedom cannot hold a candle to this freedom and, in comparison, are but drops in a bucket. To make light of such freedom as lacking all relevance to existential reality or as being naive and subversive—promoting an antinomian and libertine way of life—is to lock oneself into deliberate bondage to sin under the tempter and the world's conception of freedom. This worldly conception repudiates the Christian gospel and so turns the so-called liberation-movements into moralistic crusades which are not only more enslaving and tyrannical than the medieval papacy ever was but also destroy the gospel which alone can make man free. If Christ does not dwell in the heart, Luther contended all his life, we are captive and not free—indeed, without hope.

Often during the congress speakers referred to the famous aphorism which formed the theme of Luther's treatise on Christian liberty, *The Freedom of a Christian*, which he sent as an open letter to Pope Leo X—dedicated to him, in Luther's own words, "as a token of peace and good hope," containing "the whole of Christian life in a brief form" as Luther's little "gift" to Leo dated September 6, 1520. "I am a poor man," said Luther, "and have no other gift to offer" (*LW* 31, 343). It was there that Luther expressed the spiritual axiom which became so famous: "A

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Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." The treatise remains one of the theological masterpieces of the Christian world, as well as being a literary gem, because of the brilliantly clear and ingenuous way in which Luther explicates the freedom—really the only genuine freedom—with which Christ endows the fallen sinner through faith in Him. Luther focuses first on the inner man underscoring the nature of "his liberty, and the source of his liberty, the righteousness of faith," which is in Christ; hence "he needs neither laws nor good works but, on the contrary, is injured by them if he believes that he is justified by them" (Ibid., 358). Immediately, however, Luther proceeds to the outer man of the Christian believer who "has no need of any work or law in order to be saved" and shows how "a Christian, like Christ his head, is filled and made rich by faith . . . [and] most freely and most willingly spends himself" in behalf of his fellowman, to "become, as it were, a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians" (Ibid., 366-367).

Forde's essay very nicely supported Luther's great insight into the true nature of Christian freedom, showing that the second thesis is by no means contradictory to the first, but "rather the quite natural outcome of the first." Luther's aim was to show "how they fit together," indeed, how "we will never get to the second thesis unless all our moralistic pretense has been shattered by the first." Here is where human reason fails fallen man utterly, for it constantly directs and argues him back to and into the law for the hope of salvation. Man's fallen nature relentlessly urges his retreat from the freedom effected by Christ and received in faith by the believer, and as a result "one might be tempted to try the law." However, stated Forde, it was Luther's great contribution to hammer home the truth that we "will most surely not be helped thereby." What are we to do? "One can only go on preaching the gospel," as Luther resolutely repeated. He firmly believed in the regenerative power of the gospel, as did the Apostle Paul, and he lived by its promise (Romans 1:16-17).

Proceeding, then, to the second plenary essay of the congress, Dr. James D. Tracy, professor of history in the University of Minnesota, spoke on "Liberation through the *Philosophia Christi*: Erasmus as a Reformer of Doctrine, 1514-1521." Undoubtedly this study was intended to describe an approach contrasting with Luther's. Erasmus could be shown to support the cry for reform and to harbor rightful disgust for the legalistic enslavement of souls by the church of his day, decrying how the wells of the gospel had been filled with dirt of all kinds. "What would

Augustine say could he see the free Christian people" caught up in "so many laws, ceremonies, and snares," oppressed not only by the secular princes, but also by popes and cardinals and bishops, clergy and friars, "who having put on the mask of religious life serve the interests of their bellies." Erasmus' mistake, Tracy pointed out, was to think there was a congruence between the *philosophia Christi* and the inherent goodness of human nature, which merely needs to be renewed to be good as God created it. A kinder and gentler people is the goal for Erasmus, and the focus must be on how people live—not on faith and creedal forms, but on piety and the stringent moral demands of Christ. Although it was not stated by Tracy, the gulf between Luther and Erasmus, later sharply exacerbated by their debate on the human will, gave evidence early on that Erasmus never understood the nature of a sinner's salvation *sola gratia* and *sola fide*.

The essays that followed struggled in turn with the question of how Luther saw the believer's freedom of the inner man empowering the outer man in interpersonal relationships with his fellowman and the world around him. Professor Karl-Heinz zur Muehlen, a theologian of the University of Bonn, stressed the inseparability of freedom and responsibility in Luther's thought. In the dialectic between these two realities Luther emphasized the empowering force of the Christian's faith and freedom for pastoral activity in the world. Erasmus, it was pointed out, understood freedom as following "Christ as model and as the rule of reason aided by grace over the power of fleshly desire," whereas "Luther repudiated this moral-theological interpretation of Christian freedom." This judgment was reinforced by Professor Steffen Kjeldgaard-Pedersen of Copenhagen in his essay on "Freedom and Justice" in Luther. "Luther the theologian knows of no other justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) than that which is bestowed on man through faith," and this datum must be kept separate from the question of Luther's influence and contributions in the social, political, economic realm. These contributions, to be sure, were very real, as Professor Peter Blickle of Bern also stated in his essay on the same theme. The German people, he pointed out, were raising the question—even before Luther's time—whether feudal serfdom was a divinely-ordained order and were suggesting that Holy Scripture spoke in behalf of basic human rights and in support of freedom from oppression and fear. Such thinking led to the appearance of the Twelve Articles, or list of grievances, just prior to the Peasants' Revolt of 1525. With many things in these articles we know Luther agreed. (The interested reader is referred to Luther's *Admonition to Peace* of 1525, in *LW* 46, 5-43.) Yet as Blickle noted, Luther

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strenuously objected to the use of force to rectify the perceived wrongs to human freedom and individual rights. As a review of the treatise will show, Luther above all rejected any claim by the peasants to be acting in God's name by virtue of the gospel-bestowed freedom of every believer. "We do not have the right to use the sword simply because someone has done us an injustice and because the law and justice are on our side" (Ibid., 30). To use one's freedom as a Christian in such a manner "absolutely contradicts the gospel" (Ibid., 39). Such was Luther's judgment then and it remained so for the rest of his life, as it also has for orthodox Christians in every period of history.

In line with the demands made by the peasants in Swabia for the expansion of reforms into areas other than the religious, the essays by Professor Mark Edwards of Harvard University and Professor Martin Brecht of Muenster portrayed the reception which Luther's reformation received elsewhere and by other activists. In the area of Strasbourg, for example, as Professor Edwards stated, in the agitation which began with the Peasants' Revolt the new-found freedom of the gospel was interpreted to mean the right to reject man-made laws conflicting with Scripture and the capacity of the human will thereby to fulfill divine law. Meanwhile, on the other flank, the Romanists pounded away at Luther's view of "Christian freedom" as subversive and responsible for the peasant uprising. In tandem, more or less, Professor Brecht looked at various strands of radical responses to the concept of freedom, showing how they regularly misinterpreted Luther's teaching concerning freedom to mean liberation from secular restraints and the establishing of sectarian enclaves that fostered their own private, often pietistic and millennial, "gospels."

In a manner of speaking, such agitation in the name of religion was anticipatory of developments in more recent years, beginning with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and continuing down to our time in various liberation-movements. Professor Marc Lienhard of Strasbourg, first of all, addressed the question of whether subsequent convulsions involving a striving for human rights and freedom, particularly the French Revolution, were in any way related to Luther's theological impact upon the church and the world of his day—epitomized in such a dramatic manner by his heroic stand at the Diet of Worms. Lienhard minimized any direct impact on Luther's thinking on what began with the raising of the banner of freedom in the French Declaration of Rights in 1789. Opinions vary, of course, as Lienhard demonstrated by many references to interpreters of the French Revolution. Luther is as often blamed for stifling the people's aspirations to freedom as he is praised for clearly

articulating Scripture's teaching on the nature of the believer's true freedom. Lienhard raised the question of whether in Luther's mind freedom remained "an inner event that may completely coexist with external bondage" or whether "there resides in the freedom of a Christian emancipatory powers which urge the liberated Christian to bring them to bear for the well-being and freedom of others." From his own reading of Luther's writings the undersigned would answer that Luther would have no difficulty answering "yes" to both parts of the question. Definitely, however, he would insist that no individual resort to violence to achieve his quest for freedom (social, political, or economic) and, above all, that no one claim that what he does is for the sake of the gospel with God's sanction.

One further observation should be made concerning Luther's influence on the social-political strivings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: In view of the fact that this Eighth Congress was meeting in the United States, it is odd that no attention was paid to what was achieved for human rights and freedom in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the American Constitution in 1789. The foundation of the United States, after all, was one of history's most remarkable achievements, a truly great experiment which produced a democracy, where individual rights and freedom are the treasured possession of the people. Most of the founding fathers were not only highly principled men but also deeply religious. Discerning historians have often noted connections with the Reformation and specifically Luther, by whom the seeds of the rights of the individual were first sewn. The congress, then, might very profitably have devoted some time to a critical evaluation, whether positive or negative, of Luther's impact on the "American experiment."

After all, what happened at Worms in 1521 is generally acknowledged today to be the continental divide from which reform streamed down in many directions, also in matters social, political, and economic. Some of the resulting changes are still taking place around the world. A recent book (1993) by Carter Lindberg, a professor of Boston University (and incidentally also a member of the continuation committee of the Congress for Luther Research), is a signal witness to the impact that Luther and the Reformation have had in this regard. In *Beyond Charity* Carter recognizes, first of all, as the various speakers at the Eighth Congress again and again repeated, that for Luther the freedom with which Christ has made the believer free is the imputed righteousness of Christ received by faith. He adds, however: "To dismiss Luther's contributions to social ethics in general . . . has become a deficit in the contemporary life of the church."

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. . . Luther had the boldness to address structural sources of injustice and to advocate legislative redress of them because his social ethics was rooted in the worship and proclamation of the community (congregation)" (pp. 162-163). As is well known, indeed, there are four large volumes in the American Edition of *Luther's Works* devoted to social, political, economic issues (*LW* 44-47). The Table Talk of Luther (*LW* 54), too, records some of his extemporaneous comments on questions related to practical concerns. Yet "doctrine and life must be distinguished," Luther commented on an occasion in the autumn of 1533. He continued: "Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don't fight about life and condemn the papists on that account . . . I fight for the Word and whether our adversaries teach it in its purity . . . This is my calling . . . When the Word remains pure, then the life (even if there is something lacking in it) can be molded properly" (*LW* 54, 110).

The final plenary paper at the congress was presented by Professor Walter Altmann of Sao Leopoldo (in Brazil). It dealt with "The Reception of Luther's Concept of Freedom in Latin American Liberation Theology." Basically Altmann rejected the notion that there is a direct link of Luther and the Reformation with the liberation-movement going on in South America. His judgment was, in fact, that the two events are quite dissimilar. In a helpful way Altmann sketched the liberation-movement in terms of some of the primary figures in its thinking and activism, first those from the Roman Catholic side, whose names are probably the most familiar, and then two others. The following are leading lights from the Roman Catholic side: Juan Luis Segundo, who faulted the Reformation for its "Lutheran passivity" and "deprecation of human liberty"; Hugo Echegaray, who is critical of Luther for "ignoring the world" and "knowing only the freedom from sin"; Franz Hinkelammert, who scores Luther for "lacking a clear institutional perspective" and opposing the peasants with "an antimillennarian fury without limits"; Leonardo Boff, who admits that "the atmosphere of freedom runs through Luther's main texts" but says he did not recover the full potential of the gospel to liberate; Eduardo Hoornaert, who grants that Luther was "organically linked with the people at the grassroots level" and so advocates a "revision of Ernst Bloch's presuppositions" that "created an image of Luther [as] antagonistic to the people [and] committed to the powerful." Altmann also briefly depicted two other theologians involved in the liberation-movement, Jose Miguez Bonino and Elsa Tamez, both of whom recognize the key role played by Luther's article on justification by faith. Altmann's concluding summary emphasized the lack of uniformity



and accuracy of the Roman Catholic criticisms, along with a tendency on the part of these writers to deal with secondary sources, rather than the primary texts of Luther. Finally, "in relation to the concept of freedom," Altmann stated, "we observe that in liberation theology it comprises clearly social liberation, which Luther considered as a consequence of freedom, but, when elevated to the level of a religious program, as a falsification of true Christian freedom."

This summary critique, then, of the plenary papers of the Eighth Congress for Luther Research will attest to its substantive study of Luther's extraordinary contribution to the church by clarifying the believer's freedom before God through Christ and, as a fruit, the impact which the hero of Worms has had upon the world in general. For the facts are quite rightly stated by the historian Preserved Smith in his appreciation of Luther's life: "Luther's career marks the beginning of the present epoch, for it is safe to say that every man in Western Europe and in America is leading a different life today from what he would have had, and is another person altogether from what he would have been, had Martin Luther not lived." Few men have contributed more to the fundamental happiness of his fellowmen than has Luther. This is the testimony of history.

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#### ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE LWF: A CORRECTION

The accidental loss of two lines at the bottom of a page resulted in a loss of continuity between pages 130 and 131 of Volume 57 of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (January-April 1993). The full text there should have read as follows (omitted words in italics):

*Associate membership, too, requires a basic consensus, which, given the divergent root-conceptions, does not exist. Even an unambiguous declaration of one's own understanding and a repudiation of the LWF's would not help here.*