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ARCHIVES

Kings and Priests

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[A Study Review of *Luther's Works* (American Edition), Volume 13, *Selected Psalms II*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956. 420 pp.; ind. *rerum, locorum*.]

THIS review will spend little time on the excitement that greeted the first two volumes of the new translation. The reader will be impressed with the clean job of editing by Jaroslav Pelikan and the remarkably high and uniform excellence of the translations by six contributors. The introduction adequately notes the settings of the seven psalm expositions and correlates the locations in the Weimar and St. Louis editions of Luther's works. Footnotes — occasional but not too many — explain renderings of German idioms, suggest sources of Luther's quotations or indicate parallels, many of them in the two preceding volumes of this edition, and indicate judgments of occasional Weimar notations.

Now that these volumes are coming off the press and moving smoothly to the shelves of subscribers, it is of first importance to stimulate to reading and use of Luther. The St. Louis edition was a notable venture both of faith and scholarship, but too many busy pastors left the buckram volumes untouched. Individuals and conferences will have to stay busy to keep the blight of theological illiteracy from invading studies where the new books are standing in state.

Before entering on several of the pervading themes of the new volume, we shall remind readers that Luther is always a blend of the unexpected and the consistent. The style ranges from the relatively decorous of Psalm 90, translated from a predominantly Latin series of lectures, to the ultra-German of the "commentaries" which were basically series of parish sermons. The commentary on Psalm 68 dates from the Wartburg exile in 1521; several others in the volume are as late as 1535. While these writings of Luther do not reveal his skill at vilification for which he is famed, they are remarkable for proverbial turns of phrase and the effort to think in terms of German hearers. Preachers looking for cues for series of sermons, e. g., on Psalm 110, will be disappointed in the lack of persuasive organization and the unconcern for Gospel in

every sermon. Much of this lack is due to the fact that our text is the product of stenographic notes enhanced by emendation other than Luther's.

I

THE TWO KINGDOMS

All of the units of the volume incidentally, and some of them amply, concern themselves with a phase of Luther's teaching, consistently shaping his utterance and making him remarkably practical also to current readers. This is the insight into the two governments or regimes of God among men, that through Christ as Redeemer and Lord, and that through civil government, earthly princes at its head. Psalm 82 (in a translation reworked from the Holman edition) serves as an admonition to civil rulers, once dominated improperly by spiritual overlords but through the Reformation catapulted into license and persecution. Dating from 1530, the commentary is mindful of the importance of good order, which the Peasant Revolt had violated. That rulers are termed "gods" means that God Himself works through them; and God puts human beings into communities in which He governs through rulers. The preacher is to stand in the midst of the community rebuking the "god" of civil government; and Luther uses his exposition of the psalm to register his complaint and warning against the princes of Germany. Luther frankly considers the duty of rulers concerning spreading the Word of God and putting down heretics. He feels that those who deny that Christ died for their sins are guilty of blasphemy (in medieval terms a breach of the peace) and should "go where there are no Christians." But the government should prevent parties of Christians who claim Scripture on their side from preaching against each other; "if neither party is willing to yield or be silent . . . let the rulers take a hand. Let them hear the case and command that party to keep silence which does not agree with the Scriptures" (p.63). He inveighed against private services and ceremonies.

Similar functioning of a Christian preacher toward his ruler appears in Psalm 101, which he interprets as the speech of a pious civil ruler. He strikes particularly at the quality of councilors of the prince, certainly in the constitution of a feudal court the most vulnerable area. Interesting is the discourse on "natural law" and

reason as the source of written laws; he stresses that people differ, and no individual should assume that he has the "natural law in his head" (p. 161). He insists that spiritual heads should not meddle with the civil law or the secular prince try to change the Word of God (p. 196). The two kingdoms are neatly defined and the Christian's role applied (p. 193).

Princes are, in part, Luther's concern also in the sermons on Psalm 112; however, the application concerning poverty and wealth is made broadly, and God's guidance in the spiritual realm is considered.

The commentary on Psalm 90 is useful in this connection for indicating that "the two kingdoms" are not simply Law and Gospel. Here he displays Moses as the preacher of God's Law, of which death is a climactic part, driving to the need of comfort; this the Christian is to find in Christ, in the assurance of God's mercy.

II

THE PRIESTHOOD — CHRIST'S AND OURS

We might expect that a pervading accent of this book would be Luther's absorption with the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. The initial commentary of the volume, on Psalm 68, has the superscription "About Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost." He finds v. 18 central and paraphrases St. Paul's use of it in Ephesians 4: "All the miracles foretold here of the Gospel and Christendom are traceable to Thine ascent into heaven. For there Thou didst receive all power and didst send the Holy Spirit to the earth with His gifts, by means of which the Gospel was proclaimed, the world converted, and all that was predicted fulfilled" (p. 20). Luther develops his theme around the complex of Christ the Victor over sin and death through the resurrection and ascension, appropriate to the Lordship of Christ over the nations and in the spread of the Gospel.

Different is the motif in Psalm 110, originally a series of eight sermons in 1535. Also this Psalm exalts the lordship of Jesus, and the commentary takes its cue from the great festivals. Luther stresses the supremacy and deity of Christ and attacks the unbelief of reason and rebellion. His government is "Christendom on earth," which subsists indeed under the cross, to the end of time. The

means of rule and scepter is "the mere word or oral preaching" about Christ (p. 266), which meets with hostility but will prevail. Christ's people willingly serve Him, sacrifice themselves to Him in the holy adornment of the gifts of the Spirit. They are born to Him like dew, entirely by the work of God (p. 302). But as King, Christ is also Priest, a priest of the Gospel to reconcile men to God by His sacrifice and then preach and publish this fact through the proclamation of those whom He sends (p. 317). Hebrews 4, 5, 7, 9, and 10 are used to interpret the sacrifice of Christ, and Is. 53:12 is added to outline the intercessory work which goes with it. The papacy is attacked for vitiating this doctrine by making Christ's work a terror of judgment and making the Mass and the human minister the sacrifice and the priest. Christ is the only Priest; He bestows the title on all Christians because they believe in Him (p. 330). Ministers, pastors, etc., are not priests in the Scriptural sense (p. 331). They are eligible for their office only as they are themselves already members of the universal Christian priesthood, and they equip all for their task; notable is Luther's interpretation of Eph. 4:11, 12 (p. 332). "Even though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right and the duty to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God" (p. 333).

Splendid is the insertion, in this connection, of the commentary on Psalm 111. Luther presents an exegesis of it as review of the Passover. Then he goes through it again applying its detail to the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Christians gather about it as living saints; there is no "private priest" (p. 366). In it there is a remembrance of the wonders God has done for us in Christ, the covenant of the Gospel.

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