



Lutheranism in America: Its Glory and Its Mission.



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by

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The event which forms the historical basis of the present celebration, and, if necessary, furnishes the moral reason for it, lies at a remote distance from us, as regards both time and place. In our day the event is studied, as a rule, merely in the magnitude of its consequences. We are like men standing at a point near the estuary of the majestic river which drains the great central basin of our country: we see an immense body of water rushing past us, bearing on its bosom the commerce of many cities, supplying the energy for the industries of many towns, and determining the character of the agriculture of vast tracts of land. If our eye could sweep from the Eads Jetties to Lake Itasca, and beyond; if in one comprehensive vista we could embrace both the enormous mouth and the tiny source of the great river, — would our admiration be lessened because of the tiny source? I take it, the very opposite would occur. A feeble beginning only serves to render more intense and more cordial our appreciation of great results which have sprung from it.

Let us leave for a while our present social environments; let us step outside of our political institutions; let us forget our present religious status; and from our present point of observation in twentieth century North America let us ascend to the headwaters of the reformatory movement. We are transferred to a sixteenth century border town in Saxony. Yonder stands a little dilapidated church. A handful of people going to morning mass on All Saints' Day find a parchment on the church-door posted by one of the Augustinian friars of the town. It is in Latin, and many pass by without reading it. Others read it, and shrug their shoulders. A few grow thought-

1) Published by request of the New York City Conference.

ful, exchange remarks more or less favorable to the views set forth in the document, and join the worshipers inside. That is all. There is no excitement, no demonstration. And if we were to look in at the cell of Brother Martinus, the author of the document, we should behold a very plain, unpretentious man, small of stature, of serious mien, but with no outward criterion to indicate to us the heroic courage, or to portend the startling achievements which have made the name of Luther a household word in both hemispheres, and raised the last day in October, 1517, to the dignity of one of the few truly great days in the life of the race.

A modern historian has said: "Had there been no Luther, the English, American, and German peoples would be thinking differently, would be acting differently, would be altogether different men and women from what they are at this moment." And a modern poet and divine has voiced this kindred sentiment: "How would Christendom have fared without a Luther? What would Rome have done and dared but for the ocean of the reformed that bounds her? Luther lives yet—not so beneficially in the Lutheran Church as out of it—an antagonistic spirit to Rome, and a purifying and preserving spirit to Christendom at large." These are great assertions, and they are the more welcome because they were made by parties who are outside of the Lutheran Church, and hence cannot be suspected of bias friendly to our church. One of them even questions whether the work of Luther has attained its just measure of appreciation within the church that was named after the Reformer. These assertions credit this one man Luther and his deed with the impulse which has started the nations now marching in the van of civilization on their career of progress; they trace the religious, moral, intellectual, social, political advancement of the age in which we are living to the valor of the one act which at Rome they called "a cloister-brawl of German buffoons."

Imagine someone telling Luther that all this would come of his Wittenberg Theses: in his honest, sober way he would

have scrutinized the speaker with that peculiar look which questions a person's mental balance.

When Luther began his life-work, Europe was agog with excitement on account of the new continent that had been re-discovered in the far West. America was, to the European nations, just nineteen years and a few days old when Luther challenged Tetzl. Four years later the first American natives were seen on European soil and exhibited to Charles V at Worms. Now, imagine someone telling Luther that it would be here, in this savage country, that his labors would bear their richest fruit; that out of the trackless forests and the pathless prairies of the mysterious land that was said to be lying toward the setting sun there would rise, within four centuries, a church that would cherish his teaching with greater fervor than they would be cherished in the land of his birth; that a time would come, when in the country where the voice of the living Luther had been ringing his name and remembrance as a religious teacher would be largely dropped, and his authority as a correct expounder of Scripture would be generally set aside, by the nation for which he toiled, and that then there would be two and a half million men, women, and children in North America who would not be ashamed to call themselves Lutherans; that the beginning of the twentieth century would behold on American soil a Lutheran clergy with over 8000 names on their roster, ministering to over 13,000 Lutheran congregations; that this American Lutheran Church would conduct over one hundred schools of higher education, — seminaries, colleges, academies, — with nearly one thousand teachers and over fifteen thousand students; would dispense charity in over one hundred orphans' homes, hospitals, hospices, etc.; that the periodical press of this church alone would number nearly two hundred church-papers; and, what is best of all, that the two great principles of the pure Christian religion, which he had championed against the combined forces of an apostate church, and paganized universities, and a hireling autocracy, would here be upheld, with rare exceptions, by a loyal laity and clergy, even at the risk

of incurring the dreaded censure of the universities of Luther's own land. Imagine, I say, someone telling Luther all this: no doubt, the humble preacher, whose words in the course of events shook the foundations of the Roman hierarchy, would have smiled incredulously at such information, and in his heart of hearts he would have set his informant down as a "Schwaermer."

In the greatness of Luther and his work this, I take it, is the grandest and most endearing feature: the simplicity, the utter lack of ambition, the uncalculating conscientiousness, with which he set about doing what his pastoral duty required of him. Consider how it all happened. Here is a confessor to whom men come with their burdened hearts, and he counsels them, as the desert preacher fifteen hundred years before him had counseled the multitudes on the banks of the Jordan. He speaks kindly to them as the Christ had done to the weary and heavy-laden. While thus pursuing the even tenor of his pastoral calling, there rolls into his path a monstrous engine of oppression and extortion, in the form of an indulgence monger. It threatens to arrest and to crush his pastoral activity. Luther is placed before the alternative of either removing the monster or resigning his charge. He is called upon to decide this question: In this business of the forgiveness of sin, who is right — am I, or is this fellow Tetzal? A fearful conflict of authorities is looming up before him. As yet Luther is not conscious of the real identity of his opponent. He imagines that he is correcting a set of sacrilegious monks. He is not aware that he has risen against the highest ecclesiastical authority at that time. Luther is such a simple-hearted, unsuspecting, undesigning, artless person, that he sits down to write the Holy Father at Rome an earnest letter, to inform him that religious scoundrels are committing all manner of irreligious nuisances in his holy name. And he expects that the Holy Father will at once cashier Tetzal. It was not until he had met the supercilious Eck, and the haughty Cardinal of Gaeta, and the smooth-tongued Miltitz, that Luther's vision became clear; and then

there were moments when he himself would stand aghast at the magnitude of the conflict which he had conjured up.

They have charged Luther with ambition, rebellion, apostasy. They do not know Luther. This unsophisticated recluse shunned nothing more than worldly fame and secular glory. He was naturally a timid, shrinking man. What brought him into the arena of public strife was the call of duty; and what turned this meek man into a bold lion was, because the truth of God's Word and the genuineness of his Redeemer's pardoning grace were assailed. In the defense of these treasures, which he had learned to prize, the pale scholar, worn and wan with many a vigil, much fasting, and exacting study, would rise in solemn earnestness; and as he spoke he would seem to grow tall, giant-like, towering above the barking rabble at his feet.

Face thine enemies, accusers;
Scorn the prison, rack, or rod;
And if thou hast truth to utter,
Speak! and leave the rest with God, —

this rugged sentiment would then seem to speak from every line of his radiant, upturned face.

Luther's testimony startled the world in his day. Within an incredibly short time the Ninety-five Theses were read as far south as Jerusalem, and were echoed from the Grampian Hills. This was due, solely and alone, to the inherent virtue of the testimony. The old, dear voices that had been heard on Mount Zion, at Jacob's Well, in the Roman Catacombs, the voices of prophets and apostles, the "Thus saith the Lord," before which Western Asia, and Southern Europe, and Northern Africa had bowed a thousand years before, resounded again in the teaching of Luther. The days when the authority of the Word of God was supreme, when Athanasius faced Arius, and Augustine met Pelagius, with the challenge, "Thus it is written," seemed to have returned. The new era was ushered in with a solemn appeal to the written Word of God: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says: Repent ye and believe the Gospel!" And every forward step in the reformatory move-

ment that had to be taken in order to maintain the original ground occupied by the reformer, was characterized by his unquestioning submission to the Bible.

In theological parlance the Bible is called the formal principle of the Reformation. The meaning is this: The Reformation was the reaffirmation of the authority of Scripture, over and against all human authority, for the regulation of the faith and conduct of Christians. That which gave due and proper form to Luther's teaching was its uncompromising scripturalness. In the Leipzig Disputation, in Luther's arraignment at Worms, at the Colloquy at Marburg, at the Diet of Augsburg, where the first Lutheran Confession was submitted, in every theological treatise, in every sermon, in every devotional writing, yea, even in the correspondence of Luther and his associates, there is this constant appeal to the Scriptures. Luther is acknowledged to have been the foremost Bible scholar of his age; and Lutheran theology of the sixteenth century is distinguished by this trait above all others, *viz.*, that it collects the testimony of Scripture on any one point of doctrine, takes in the entire range of revealed truth, ever careful not to admit anything that is not written in the Word of God, and then presents the finished product for men's examination and acceptance with this statement: Judge for yourselves! Do not believe us, but believe your Lord! The Convention at Smalcald, in 1537, Luther being present, adopted what has since become the standing rule of the Lutheran Church: "The Word of God should frame articles of faith, otherwise no one, not even an angel."

It was in the interest of this principle, and to the end of making the principle thoroughly operative, that Luther, as early as 1521, began the translation of the Bible into German. When the tradesman in his booth at the town-fair, the traveler at the wayside-inn, the peasant behind his plow, the servant in the nursery, could cite Bible proofs, and could state the will of their Maker and Redeemer in their own language,—it was then that the huge engine of fraud and oppression constructed

during a thousand years by grasping and perfidious priests came to a dead stop on the banks of the Elbe. At the point where the Reformer stood a great fountain seemed to have opened, and the waters were rushing forth with a prodigious force. The waters formed into a wide stream, branching out into many channels, and threatening to deluge the land with a knowledge which threw the entire Roman hierarchy into consternation and confusion. The old fountains of Israel, the still waters at which David had pictured the Good Shepherd pasturing His contented flock, the stream which had disappeared ten centuries ago, but had really flown underground, had come to the surface again, had forced an outlet through the rubbish of human ordinances and traditions that choked it, and the waste places of the Church were bursting into flower. A new spiritual spring had come: the nightingale was heard in the almond groves of Christ's garden; the sweet song of Heaven's unfathomable love for a sin-cursed world was poured out upon the listening midnight. Men heard it, doubting, wondering, exulting. And then there rose from thousands of German lips, which up to that time had chanted the melancholy litanies of Rome, the songs of the new age: "Es ist das Heil uns kommen her," "Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein." But through all the joyous melodies of the young church there sounded, like the booming of the mighty surf on the rock-strewn beach, the valorous strains of the battle-hymn of the Reformation:

Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn
Und kein'n Dank dazu haben.

Four hundred years will soon have passed, since all these things happened. The land which first gave a home to the Lutheran Church, where the infant faith of the young Church was cradled, has lost much of its Lutheran heritage. Above all, the basic principle of the Reformation, the Holy Scriptures, is being assailed in the very places in which Luther preached. It is the glory of the Lutheran Church of America that, without hardly any exception worth mentioning, she has been

staunch in the defense of the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures; that her pastors make it a point of honor to know and to proclaim nothing but what God has spoken; that her laymen decline to accept what cannot be substantiated from the Book; and that laymen and clergymen are uniting their best efforts to raise up an intelligent membership for our Church, men who shall know why they are what they are, and who are ready any day to take the consequences of the faith they have espoused. In the Lutheran Church there is no room for a *fides carbonaria*, a faith like that of the Bohemian collier, who believed what the Church believed, although he was not able to state what the Church really did believe. From the fact that she is a Bible Church, and conditions membership upon an intelligent acceptance of Bible teaching, the Lutheran Church has advanced to the logical consequence of becoming an educating Church, which strives to create a well-informed laity and a well-trained clergy. It is as Michael Bréal, the able French scholar, has said: "In rendering man responsible for his faith in Holy Scriptures, the Reformation contracted the obligation of placing every one in a position to save himself by reading and studying the Bible."

It is not unlikely that this principle of the Lutheran Church will be contested again in our country by the old, bitter foe of the Lutheran Church. Quite recently there came into my hands a brochure written by Ernest R. Hull of the Society of Jesus. The pamphlet, which, with a number of others, has been issued from a Milwaukee press and is evidently intended for general distribution, discusses the question: "The Bible or the Church?" The author starts out by saying: "Protestants generally take it as a principle that the Bible is the sole and adequate rule of faith. This is only natural, since, after rejecting the authority of the Catholic Church, there is no other rule to be found." Continuing, the writer makes a very profound bow to the Bible and utters a pretty compliment on its unique distinction, but enters at once into an exhaustive argument to show that the Bible is insufficient for guiding the

faith of any Christian without the authentic interpretation of "the Church," meaning the Roman Church. When he has finished, you know exactly that he does not want you to place your confidence in the Bible. And when you recall the stately obeisance which he executed to the Bible at the start, and the pretty things which he managed to say about it, and then compare the ugly conclusion which he has reached, the exclamation rises to your lips involuntarily: "O hypocrisy, thy name is Rome!"

Let no Protestant be deceived into an unjustified security! The Roman Church has never acknowledged her defeat on the nethermost principle for which the Reformation contended, *viz.*, that man's faith in God, his Creator and Redeemer, must be wrought, guided, and supported by the Word of his God and Redeemer. The Roman Church claims to-day, as she has always done, to be the God-appointed arbiter of what man shall believe regarding his relation to God and to his fellowman. Her bold aggressiveness, her unscrupulous assertions, must send Protestants generally back to the primal facts of Reformation history, and stimulate afresh our interest in any enterprise which aims at the enlightening of the people and the reiteration of truths which Rome has never succeeded in stifling, and never shall.

In theological parlance the justification of a sinner by grace through faith in the merits of the Redeemer is called the material principle of the Reformation. This means that the chief matter for which the Reformer contended was, that in view of the vicarious life and death of His incarnate Son, God, the Judge of all the earth, has forgiven and still forgives to every penitent believer all his trespasses, freely, fully, and finally. This principle removes every mediation between God and the sinner, except that of Jesus Christ. It acknowledges no intercession for the sinner by the Mother of God or by other saints. It denies all justifying virtue to human works of holiness. It decries indulgences, masses for the departed, penal ordinances, and self-elected forms of devotion, which aim at

the obtaining of the divine favor, as futile and worthless *in negotio justificationis*, that is, so far as the power of these things to make a sinner acceptable in the sight of God is concerned. The Lutheran Church insists very earnestly on a sanctified conduct of her members. She has shown by her teaching how every state and occupation of men may be hallowed; how the street scavenger no less than the king, the mayor's wife and her kitchen servant, the university professor and the humble peasant's child, may each in their particular sphere serve God and their fellowman. But the Lutheran Church has ever refused to mingle human works of holiness, human virtue, into the saving of souls. The question, What must I do to be saved? she answers by directing the inquirer solely to Christ, by teaching him to disregard both his sins, which are real, and his virtues, which are specious, and to say with Luther: "*Male egerim, bene egerim; nihil ad me; ecce Christus!*" that is, "Whether I have done ill or well, is of no consequence. Behold, there is Christ, my Ransomer."

Around this palladium of Christianity the Lutheran Church has rallied also in this country, and for it she has battled manfully, and is still battling on American soil. This teaching she will not suffer to be vitiated by any of her own people. She still demands of all her members knowledge and acceptance of this truth, worded thus by Luther: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith with His holy Christian Church on earth; and that in this Church He daily and richly forgives to me and all believers in Christ all our sins." With this comforting assurance she greets the newcomer at her baptismal font and her altar; and with this imperishable consolation she speeds the parting soul on its last voyage heavenward.

The American Lutheran Church began her organized existence on this continent with the dedication of *Gloria Dei*

Church at Wicaco on the Delaware, now Philadelphia. *Gloria Dei*, the majesty of the righteous and the gracious God, as it appears in the marvelous work of the God-man, — this is the message with which the Lutheran Church came into our country. From *Gloria Dei* to *Gloria Deo* it is just as little a step as from the genitive to the dative in the Latin declension. *Soli Deo Gloria!* — All glory be to God alone! — that has been the silent or avowed sentiment which has breathed from every one of the varied activities of our church. The entire Church, not only the single edifice which the Swedes reared, and whose chief glory has since departed, might be called a *Gloria Dei* Church. The angel whom John beheld flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting Gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, has been understood by the Lutheran Church as a type of Luther. The angel is described as saying with a loud voice: "Fear God, and give glory unto Him; and worship Him that made the heaven, and the earth, and the sea, and the fountains of water." This angel is followed by another, who proclaims: "Babylon is fallen!" and by a third, who announces the discomfiture of all who have worshiped the beast and his image. The abolition of the multiform idolatry of the Roman saint-worship, the assertion of the sole intercessorship of Christ with the Father in behalf of sinners, is one of the characteristics of the Reformation. Free access to God for the sinner by virtue of the advocacy of the Son, without the aid of any "Not-helper," not even the Virgin Mary, is one of the trophies of the Reformation.

The Roman archbishop of Philadelphia is out in a pamphlet inscribed: "What Catholics Do Not Believe." In this pamphlet there occurs, amongst other things, an ingenious defense of Mary worship. "Let us suppose for a moment," says the writer, "that after Washington had achieved the liberties of the American people, he comes forward upon the platform before them. They are cheering him, their deliverer; and let us suppose that Washington's mother comes out upon the plat-

form, and someone says: 'Let us cheer the mother that gave us such a son.' Do you think Washington would be jealous of the honor given to his own mother, and given her chiefly because she was his mother, because of him?" Continuing, the writer insinuates that when Catholics worship Mary, they mean no more than the bridegroom in a Protestant marriage according to the old English Book of Common Prayer means, when he says to the bride: "With this ring I wed thee, and with my body I thee worship." He claims that Catholics approach the Virgin in about the same way as an American citizen desiring an office from the President approaches some dear friend of the President, and asks him to obtain the office for him from the President. — Alongside of this representation we place the fact that Rome has raised Mary immensely above all the saints, by claiming for her immaculate conception, thus lifting her out of the sphere of common mankind and placing her within that sphere of sinlessness where God alone moves. We place alongside of the archbishop's claim the entire Roman ritual with its ceaseless *Ave Marias*, its *Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis!* — Holy Mother, pray for us! — prayers which both in form and content ascribe to Mary powers that belong to the deity alone, and actually make Mary's intercession the basis of a sinner's hope for obtaining a hearing with Christ and God. And thus we note also in regard to this point that Rome has not changed her teaching. Enthusiastic promoters of her cause in North America are eagerly looking forward to a day when the Angelus bell shall call the American millions to prayer from Bedloe's Island to the Golden Gate, and from Duluth to Corpus Christi. What will be the character of those prayers? We may rest assured that they will not be couched in terms of Old Hundred, or of the doxology that was wafted heavenward from Plymouth Rock.

There is still need, then, of loyal hearts in our land, hearts that cherish as Heaven's most priceless gift to fallen man the unconditioned love of the Savior, the guerdon of humble faith. Men will look to this Western Continent for confessors to hold

aloft the chiefest trophies of the mighty conflict which convulsed Europe four hundred years ago. The foundations of the American Lutheran Church are laid in the bed-rock of the Word of-God. Within her walls pure worship is being offered to the Triune God; from her sanctuaries streams the light and flows the life that directs and quickens the step of the pilgrim who is reaching out with yearning heart for the greater glory beyond. In the twilight hours of this waning world-day, toward eventide, there has been kindled in this country by God's gracious hand the Pharos light of the blessed Gospel, which throws its genial rays over the darkling waters of an ocean of sin, fills the land of the saved with the glory of Jehovah, and penetrates the gathering shadows of infidelity even in far-off lands. We are no enthusiasts. We are not dreaming of Lutheranizing America or the world. We ask for no admission to a Pan-Lutheran millennium. We are not filling our brains with idle fancies; we are not building beautiful castles in Spain, or chasing the phantom rainbow of illusive hopes. We are conscious only of sober duties, which God, who has blessed us, blessing has laid upon us. We only hear the earnest call of the present hour. It summons laymen and pastors to united efforts in upholding the basic principles of the Christian Church: *Sola Scriptura*, and *Sola Gratia!* Our all-engrossing concern shall be to diligently teach, confess, and enforce the truth of God's Word and Luther's doctrine pure to any one who will hear us. Our one and only care shall be that we may do our own work well, not that our work may be well rewarded.

The American Lutheran Church of to-day has grown out of most insignificant beginnings. Out of their pinching poverty and numberless limitations our fathers managed to begin the building of the Church which engages our loving efforts to-day. The times have changed, our faith has not. We wear different garments, we dwell in different houses, we speak, many of us, a different tongue than that of the "Fatherland" ever dear to us. These things have become altered, but our Creed is the same. And judging from significant manifestations of the recent past,

we may safely say that our loyalty to that Creed has not changed. New York Lutherans, in particular, have achieved exceptionally great things of late, as large-hearted, far-seeing, and liberal friends of the cause of Christian education, and as fearless spokesmen in behalf of a truth that is being studied with intense interest throughout our land. With our increased facilities, our enlarged fortunes, our greater horizon, and our wider field of activity we purpose to accomplish greater things for our Church; however, guided and succored and prospered in every undertaking by that same Sovereign Hand which has blessed to us the day of small things and now proceeds to bless to us the day of larger resources.

May His unfailing grace speed us on our way, until the consummation of all His merciful counsels shall have been attained, and the paeon of our Church:

God's Word and Luther's doctrine pure
Shall to eternity endure—

shall rise and swell into the greater song around the glassy sea.

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