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The Search for a Usable Luther

by *Cameron A. MacKenzie*

Historians are often at pains to discover a “usable past,” i.e., an explanation of history that is relevant to their own concerns and the issues of their own society. This is one of the reasons that there seems to be no end of historical writing regarding any particular person or period. Each historian brings to his subject matter the questions of his own times in an effort to provide understanding for the readers of his own generation. And in this respect, church historians—even Confessional Lutherans—are no different from their secular counterparts; so we investigate questions like what was Luther’s doctrine of church and ministry or how did 16th century Lutherans worship, because we are interested in church, ministry, and worship today and think that the answers of the past may be relevant to the issues of our own times.

Especially for Confessional Lutherans, the 16th century remains fertile ground for historical investigation on account of our ongoing commitment to documents written in that period while Luther himself remains *the* theologian for us to study and to interrogate historically, because our Confessions recognize that “By a special grace our merciful God has in these last days brought to light the truth of his Word...through the faithful ministry of that illustrious man of God, Dr. Luther” (FC SD Rule.5). Luther was God’s man, and so we continue to consult him regarding questions of doctrine and practice. In general, therefore, historians are interested in presenting a usable past; but we have a particular interest in discovering a usable Luther.

And Dr. Kiecker has done just that for us regarding Luther as a historian. Although he acknowledges several deficiencies in Luther’s approach to history—at least by contemporary standards—still he can conclude that “Luther is surprisingly modern. He bases his writing solidly on sources, both churchly and secular, which he examines critically and carefully, searching for authenticity and rooting out bias. . . . He knows the importance of historical causation, that thing which moves history along. He tries to interpret history, so that history becomes intelligible for the reader.” Sounds good, and I guess we can

all breathe a sigh of relief, for even here—regarding history—we have a usable Luther.

But do we, really, and is it significant whether we do or don't? These are questions that I think worth exploring in the light of Dr. Kiecker's very fine and stimulating presentation. So, first of all, let's consider the question of significance: Does it matter to us today how Luther approached history? On the one hand, it seems obvious that the answer is no. It doesn't matter. After all, our Confessions commit us only to Luther's doctrine based on the Word of God. We say in the very first sentence of the Solid Declaration of the Formula, "By the special grace and mercy of the Almighty, the teaching concerning the chief articles of our Christian faith... was once more clearly set forth on the basis of the Word of God and purified by Dr. Luther" (FC SD Preface.1). The Confessional documents themselves are presented as "the sum and pattern of the doctrine which Dr. Luther of blessed memory clearly set forth in his writings on the basis of God's Word and conclusively established against the papacy and other sects" (FC SD Rule.9); and Luther's Catechisms are called the "'layman's Bible'" for "they contain everything... which a Christian must know for his salvation" (FC Ep Rule.5).

So it would seem, then, that according to the Lutheran Confessions, it is Luther's doctrine that is important, but not necessarily his thoughts on history any more than say his approach to the natural sciences. For instance, Luther uses heated iron as an example of two substances, fire and iron, existing together in a way similar to the bread and body of our Lord in the eucharist (LW 36:32, 282). Today, we don't think of fire as an element, and so Luther's analogy doesn't work for us. But who cares? Luther's understanding of physics is not important. His doctrine is.

But is that also the case with history? Can we so easily separate what Luther says about the past from his understanding of Christian doctrine? Or is history an integral part of what Luther teaches in connection with God's Word? For one thing, of course, it is necessary to recall that Christianity is a historical religion. Already in the second article of the Apostles' Creed, we confess that our Lord suffered "under Pontius Pilate," a reference to a real person who lived at a particular time and place and through whom God accomplished His redemptive purposes.

The New Testament writings present themselves either as eyewitness accounts, or as accounts once removed from the eyewitnesses, of what God has accomplished once and for all in history by means of a real human being—and much more than a human being—Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, those same documents present our Lord's coming as the culmination of many previous divine interventions in time and space as evidenced by the Old Testament. Thus, the fundamental documents of the Christian religion are filled with history—history that matters in terms of our salvation—and, therefore, to be a Christian means among other things to confess a certain history. Our religion is not a set of disembodied truths or precepts. But instead, we believe that God has acted in time and space for the salvation of people. Take away history, and in a very real way, you take away Christianity.

So Luther's view of the past *is* significant, particularly as it concerns biblical interpretation, and it is more than a little useful in today's context to recognize, as Dr. Kiecker has pointed out, that Luther treats the biblical narratives of Isaiah, David, Abraham, and all the rest as real history. In earlier eras of the church, there had been a tendency to minimize the historical character of the biblical writings, especially the Old Testament, preferring to find in them symbols and pictures of spiritual realities; but Luther was part of a movement to recover the real, flesh and blood figures who populate the pages of holy writ. For him – as for us – biblical history is the record of God at work among people like us to save people like us through faith in the historical Jesus, God's Son and our Savior.

But what about post-biblical history or secular history? Do our faith commitments have any relevance to our study of the persons and events not recorded in Scriptures? And does Luther provide us with any model here? Once again, Dr. Kiecker's insights are helpful, for in his conclusion he urges us to follow Luther in what is very definitely *not* a characteristic of modern historiography, and that is his commitment to all of history—and not just biblical history—as the record of God's activity in time and space, "Lutheran Christian historians will look for the God who is often hidden in the events of history, and discernable only by the eyes of faith. The field of history must not be surrendered to the secularists. For to do so would be to lose the God incarnate, the author and finisher of our faith, and the hope of eternal life."

Now, I like that and Luther would too, for an affirmation of God at work in history *is* part and parcel of the biblical doctrine of providence, the idea that God is guiding human affairs in the interests of His Church. This means then that there is some sense to what happens, that there is significance to what human beings do. Christians do not believe in a universe governed by randomness or chance but in a God who governs the universe for the sake of His people. God is at work in history; and we can see it—at least with the eyes of faith—as Dr. Kiecker demonstrated in quoting Luther’s introduction to Capella’s history, “Histories are nothing less than a demonstration, recollection, and sign of divine action and judgment, how [God] upholds, rules, obstructs, prospers, punishes, and honors the world and especially men, each according to his just desert, evil or good” (LW 34:275-76).

I do have a question, however, at this point regarding the implications of belief in divine providence for how we read and write history. Are we saying that the Christian historian will, like Luther, make judgments regarding the hand of God in history and that his interpretation of the past will include explicit statements regarding the fulfillment of God’s purposes? It sounds good, but if that is the case, how does one go about actually doing this? If, for example, I am writing a history of American politics in the 1990s, should I describe the election of Bill Clinton over George Bush the elder as God’s punishment for permissive abortion laws in the United States? Sounds reasonable—it had to be a punishment for something! But then, how do I explain the election of the younger Bush in 2000 when the laws have remained the same? As a Christian, I will confess my belief that both results happened in accordance with divine providence but can or should I say anything more as a Christian historian about the contents of the divine plan in history?

Dr. Kiecker is certainly correct that the great turning point in western historiography occurred at the time of the Enlightenment, when the search for historical explanations became, frankly, more scientific. But that was only because the same change had occurred earlier and successfully in the natural sciences when men like Newton—a convinced theist—nonetheless looked for and discovered natural laws in astronomy and physics. Scientists ever since have concentrated on what theologians might call the secondary causes of natural phenomena and not the ultimate cause which in Christian theology remains

God. But just as a Christian can be a natural scientist today without incorporating into his work explicit statements regarding divine causality, so I believe a Christian historian can study the proximate causes of historical events—the social, ideological, economic, personal factors—that explain outcomes without necessarily compromising his faith. To use our 1990s political example again, it is not a denial of divine providence to point out that voters in 1992 were influenced by the state of the economy when making their choice for president. It is simply a recognition that divine providence works in and through the deliberations and choices that men make.

Nor do I think that Dr. Kiecker is saying that historical writing of this sort involves a denial of divine providence. But my question remains, how does one employ a providential reading of history in the manner of Martin Luther in a post-Enlightenment world?

But providence is not Luther's only point regarding history; and our search for a usable Luther is not complete unless we also consider how he actually interpreted post-biblical history in connection with the Scriptures. In 1536, Luther explained his thinking in a preface to *The Lives of the Popes*, written by one of his English followers, Robert Barnes, in which he commented on the value of history, "Though I was not at first historically well informed, I attacked the papacy on the basis of Holy Scripture. Now I rejoice heartily to see that others have attacked it from another source, that is, from history. I feel that I have triumphed in my point of view as I note how clearly history agrees with Scripture. What I have learned and taught from Paul and Daniel, namely, that the Pope is Antichrist, that history proclaims, pointing to and indicating the very man himself."¹ For Luther, then, history is an arena that vindicates the Bible. In particular, what Luther believed, is that in certain critical points, God has revealed in the Scriptures what was going to happen in post-biblical times, especially, the manifestation of anti-Christ. But this is not just a matter of showing how the pope fits the descriptions of anti-Christ in certain passages like those of 2 Thessalonians. No, it is also involves reading history as the fulfillment of the visionary literature that we find in Revelation and Daniel.

In his September Bible of 1522, Luther had dismissed the book of Revelation as non-apostolic, "The apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear and plain words . . . For it befits the apostolic office to speak clearly of Christ and his deeds, without images

and visions... I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it" (LW 35:398); but by 1530, Luther had changed his mind and was ready to suggest that the "first and surest step toward finding its interpretation is to take from history the events and disasters that have come upon Christendom till now, and hold them up alongside of these images [from Revelation], and so compare them very carefully" (LW 35:401). Although Luther did not insist on this approach from others, he himself employed it and proceeded to identify the figures of Revelation with persons in church history. So, for example, the four angels of tribulation in Chapters 7 and 8 represent Tatian, Marcion, Origen, and Novatus from the early church, and the two beasts of chapter 13 represent the Roman Empire and the papacy—the beast with two horns the papacy on account of papal claims to temporal power as well as spiritual (LW 35:402-03, 406).

And there's more, but you get the idea, for Luther viewed history as more than the record of God's providence. It was also the record of fulfilled prophecies – milestones along the way from biblical times to the last day. Obviously, there is nothing wrong here – but if by Luther's day history had exhausted Revelation's prophesies, then what can we say about the centuries since? Did we reach the end of history in the 1500s?

More problematical and clearly less biblical (in the strict sense of the term) than his identification of prophecies fulfilled is Luther's scheme of world history, his *Supputatio Mundi*, first published in 1541. Following many others, Luther divides human history into six thousand-year periods,² each of them dominated by a particularly prominent world ruler, e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, and Caesar Augustus. As James Barr has pointed out, this work clearly reveals that in Luther's thinking, the period of time since the days of Christ was simply a downward path to Judgment and that he, Luther, was living in the sixth and last millennium, the ruler (or "governor") of which was no human figure at all but the Devil himself. Once again, the papacy looms large in Luther's thinking, first making its appearance in the seventh century when the emperor recognized the primacy of the pope. But around the year 1000, Luther notes, Satan is actually loosed upon the world and the bishop of Rome becomes Antichrist with the power of the sword. Therefore, Luther calls Gregory VII "the mask of the Devil (*Larva Diaboli*)" and a "monster of monsters who first deserves to be called the man of sin and son of

perdition.” Not surprisingly, therefore, in his last note in this work, written in 1540, Luther concludes that the end of the world is to be expected;³ and elsewhere, in a “table-talk” item also from 1540, Luther says that he does not expect the pope to complete his thousand years of rule (#5300, LW 54:407).

In Luther’s reading of history, therefore, time was following a divinely determined pathway from the days of Christ and the apostles to the last times, which were his own times. Luther’s history is marked especially by the progressive revelation of anti-Christ; and the trajectory that it follows is all downhill.

Significantly, for the most part, Luther avoided an obvious corollary to his conviction regarding the end times and that is that the earlier centuries were a kind of golden era in the history of the church, as if to say, that the early church was closer not only in time but also in character to the church of the apostles. As Dr. Kiecker has pointed out, Luther was no romantic—or should we say, eastern Orthodox—regarding the fathers and the councils. He knew that they had contradicted each other and were sometimes wrong.

Catholics and Calvinists as well as Lutherans were hastening to adduce the evidence of the early church in support of their respective positions in the 16th century. But for Luther, it was the Scriptures that determined doctrine, not church history.

Nevertheless, Luther’s reading of history in the light of the Scriptures is difficult for us to use today, because we have 500 more years of it to explain—not only the Enlightenment, but the American Revolution; not only Leo X but John Paul II. And in terms of the church, the 16th century that produced the likes of Luther, Melancthon and the Lutheran Confessions looks preferable in many ways to an era dominated by Rudolf Bultmann or John Spong and in which Lutherans are subscribing to the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” Like the doctrine of divine providence, then, Christian eschatology remains a part of our faith commitment (“from thence He will come again to judge the living and the dead”), but I do not see how we use it very well in understanding or writing history. For Luther, it was obvious; for us, far less so.

In short, to find a usable Luther when it comes to history remains a challenge. Dr. Kiecker has done a splendid job in highlighting aspects of Luther’s thought that we often overlook, particularly Luther’s convictions regarding God’s work of mercy and judgment in

the story of mankind—convictions that Luther substantiated by careful, if not perfect, references to real history read in the light of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, on account of his ready resort to divine providence as well as to imminent eschatology to explain history, I find Luther much more usable as an exegete of the Scriptures than as an interpreter of the past.