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Theological Observer

LUTHER AT ERFURT 1983

Chances are Luther would not have recognized the "cause" as his, when the Sixth International Congress began its sessions (August 14–20, 1983) in Erfurt, with dead-serious attention to the *causa Lutheri*, or "Luther's cause," as first item on the agenda. For him it was simply, from beginning to end, a matter of a satisfying, Scriptural answer to the gnawing question, *Wie bekomme ich einen gnaedigen Gott?* How do I know that God is gracious to me? But that sort of uncomplicated posing of the soul-searching problem, which tore at his innards in the theologically stultified atmosphere of the sixteenth century church, was never really cited as the *causa Lutheri*. Instead, there was careful jockeying by the theologians and historians as they sought to find common ground for scholars from the West and from Marxist East Germany to stand on. Rather than zeroing in on what Luther considered to be of ultimate importance for himself and every other needy, sinful soul, the tendency was to focus on the social effects of the Reformation.

"The way to Luther is through Karl Marx," the East German minister of religion announced quite bluntly in a ponderous harangue. Even the East German theologians could not swallow that one! The banter in the cloistered corridors jokingly paired off the two anniversaries of 1983, the centennial of Karl Marx' death and the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth: "The first we commemorate, but he is dead; the second we also commemorate, because Luther still lives!" It was more than obvious throughout the congress that the East German government does not have the hearts of its people, nor its theological leaders.

Confusion reigned on other questions besides the *causa Lutheri*. The doctrine of the church was a case in point. Without exception the congress was dominated by views that impinged on the consistorial or hierarchical form or nature of the church. Luther's emphasis on the royal priesthood of believers and the congregation, which might include hypocrites in the fold of Christ's sheep, as the only God-ordained visible entity was lost on this audience, along with the fact that God had entrusted the Keys and the calling of qualified pastors to the Christian congregation. Lost, too, was Luther's recognizing that God had not prescribed any specific form of church organization or structure beyond the constituting of the congregation by and around the *notae ecclesiae*, the marks of the church, Word and Sacrament. A synod of congregations, thus, covenanted together under a bond of unity of faith and confession, is a very desirable structure, but it must forever see itself as *ecclesia representativa*, as church in an indirect and derived sense, by virtue of the churches, or individual congregations, which have freely formed it for the common good and mutual strengthening. Only C. F. W. Walther really understood Luther's teaching on this point, and only in a free land like America was it possible for him to shape a strong synod of autonomous congregations in keeping with Luther's guidelines, a synod of congregations linked together by common faith and unity of doctrine.

Luther scholars were unaware of Walther's *magnum opus* on the church, *Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt* (*The Voice of Our Church on the Question Concerning Church and Ministry*), even though it has gone through numerous German editions. Equally important, and unknown by the scholars, was Walther's companion piece, *Der rechte Gestalt der Kirche unabhaenglich des Staats* (*The Proper Form of the Church Independent of the State*). Reference to this whole matter as fundamental to a correct understanding of Luther's thought on the doctrine of the church, and to Walther's key contribution to modern-day church organization on the basis of it in a free land like America, was met with a stoney and polite silence when the undersigned spoke in its behalf. A mind-set has taken over among theologians and historians from both sides of the Iron Curtain; they know nothing else, and desire to know nothing else, than the churchdoms, consistories, denominational structures, and super-church organizations to which our ecumenical age has become accustomed.

Today in the western world the name of Luther is, of course, virtually commonplace, if for no other reason than that the slain civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, bore the Reformer's name. This at best is a doubtful association theologically. The story of Luther's life and work is probably known by very few, even among those tied to the church that bears his name. Still fewer really know the penetrating impact and influence of Luther's life and work upon the world in general. It is a different world today and people lead different lives five hundred years after his birth simply because the role he played on the sixteenth century's stage changed the course of history. What he said, wrote, taught and preached revolved always around a theological center, but the ripples spread outward in ever-widening circles to encompass social, political and economic nuances as well, though these were never front and center for him. He was a church reformer, not a rebel, nor a revolutionary. It would not be difficult, of course, to see or portray him as a man of the worker's class. The well-being of people always lay at the door of his peasant-orientated heart, but not as close as the salvation of the souls within reach of his voice or pen.

Communist government authorities in the German Democratic Republic (a misnomer, if ever there was one!) have gotten a lot of mileage out of their famous son. Visitors to East Germany, especially those on a return visit, are somewhat astounded by the sprucing up that has gone on in preparation for this anniversary year. Even the border crossings have become a "snap" when compared with the ordeals of the past.

Erfurt was chosen as the site of the sixth Luther Congress by the steering committee chiefly because Wittenberg could not accommodate the more than 250 invited participants. It was a good alternative, not only because of available housing facilities, but because it was here that much of the shaping of the Reformation champion took place, first at the university (1501-1505) where he received his baccalaureate and Master of Arts degrees, and then at the monastery of the austere Augustinian mendicant friars (1505-1508). The

church and cloistered buildings were severely damaged by Allied bombers during World War II, the restoration process is now far along, especially when compared with a half dozen or so years ago.

The general theme for the Congress revolved around "Martin Luther's Work and Impact." Plenary sessions occupied the mornings. Triads of speakers, with as many respondents, addressed four main topics in the course of the week's meetings: Luther's Cause; Luther and Church; Luther and Culture; and, Luther and Society. A limited amount of time was allotted to responses and questions from the floor. German and English were the usual media, but Russian was also occasionally used with simultaneous translations available. Afternoons were devoted to the seminar sessions. Each registrant had pre-registered in one of nineteen different seminars. These ranged over fascinating topics in Luther's life and work— Jews, papacy, peasants, princes, women, humanism, Aristotle, Lord's Supper, baptism, church, Spirit and word, to mention a few. These smaller groups allowed for free and frank discussion, besides giving opportunity for getting better acquainted with some of the congress participants. A weak spot perhaps in the overall planning was a failure to return the results of these in-depth seminars to the plenary session for its attention. The *Lutherjahrbuch*, however, has in previous years published summaries of these discussions, along with the main papers, and it is expected to do so again.

No doubt the fact that this congress convened in the heartland of the Reformation accounted in part for the maximum number of registrants. Late registrations beyond the 250 mark were apparently denied visas. The visitors, usually professors of theology or history, came from 23 countries around the globe, with the greatest number from West Germany (70) the U.S. and East Germany were almost equally represented, 47 and 46 respectively. Only the continent of Africa had no participant. For the first time the Russian Orthodox were present. A few ranking Luther scholars were conspicuous by their absence. In general, however, it was still true that the world's leading experts in Luther studies, whatever their communion or denominational background or affiliation, were in Erfurt. A relatively large number of these were Roman Catholics. Luther, it seems, strikes a common, responsive chord in all of these hearts, resulting in a rather remarkable spirit of unanimity and harmony, in understanding and appreciating his thought. So much so was this the case that the presiding chairman of the continuation committee, Prof. Leif Grane of Copenhagen, felt called on to caution the guests at the wind-up banquet on Friday evening that they must continue to be aware that there are still wide canyons or gulfs of variance between the churches and theologies which they represent. Nonetheless a strange sort of phenomenon, under the circumstances, that it should have to be said at all! It attests to the remarkable congealing, compelling, converging power of Luther's theological thought, bearing out the saying that the closer one stays with Luther, the better theologian he will be. Could it be possible that the route of the Gospel into Japanese hearts, for example, would depend on the remarkable progress already achieved in that land of translating Luther's works into Japanese? The

same holds true for other countries like Korea, Brazil and Argentina.

The East German government authorities made every effort to shower the guests with cordial attention. Monday evening's reception, sponsored by the minister of religious affairs in the Communist government, Klaus Gysi, of Berlin, literally glittered with lavish dishes and free-flowing cognac, vodka and wines. A similar affair was sponsored by the Evangelical church consistories two nights later; and a splendid banquet on Wednesday presided over by the host country's presiding officer and Luther Scholar, Dr. Joachim Rogge, brought an end to the week's activities. Many of the guests had joined the "pilgrimage" on Wednesday afternoon to the Wartburg, Luther's so-called "Patmos."

His unwelcome exile there for more than ten months, 1521-1522, became a time of prodigious accomplishment, including the translation of the New Testament in about ten or eleven weeks, a feat so amazing that it causes the landing of men on the moon to pale in significance. During the conference week itself other interesting excursions were offered for family members of the participants.

By affirmative vote the assembly accepted the invitation to Oslo for the next congress in 1988 (or 1989). The meetings have been on a five or six year cycle, the immediately previous ones having been at Lund, Sweden (1977) and St. Louis (1971). Support monies for the congresses come in part from the Lutheran World Federation, the host country or church organizations, and the participants themselves. The undersigned gratefully acknowledges the encouragement and support of the seminary's administration, which allowed the use of funds allocated for study purposes provided by the Aid Association for Lutherans.

Eugene F. Klug

A WELCOME GIFT FROM CANADA LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Another and most welcome theological journal has appeared, this time from the faculty of Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada with the impressive title of *Lutheran Theological Review*. Volume 1, number 1 has articles by such known scholars as Ulrich Asendorf, John Wilch, Lowell Green, and a rare find, the letter of exchange between former Prime Minister Begin of Israel and Luther scholar Roland Bainton. Robert Kolb provides a review article of Green's *How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel*. A mimeographed insert offers an annual subscription rate of five dollars. The format and article presentation is scholarly and the contents are as appealing as the titles suggest. If you happen to be one of those Lutheran pastors still apologizing for some of the great Reformer's overly zealous remarks, the Begin-Roland correspondence is well worth the subscription. St. Catharines started out with the assistance of many of the Fort Wayne faculty. We are pleased to have our sister seminary offer a journal of high scholarly and confessional calibre.

David P. Scaer

A TESTIMONY FOR LUTHER FROM AN UNEXPECTED QUARTER

“In an intensive workings with the Scriptures of the New Testament, Luther began to doubt even more whether man could attain to the salvation of his soul through ‘good works,’ as the church had taught. Over a long process he came to the conclusion that man is redeemed through Christ’s death on the cross, so that such works did not play a role in this process, but it came about solely by faith.” This is not a particularly startling observation about Luther’s theology, except that this is a translated excerpt from the article “Martin Luther” by Dr. Gunter Vogler printed in *Neue Heimat* (May 1983), a magazine with the sub-title “A Journal of the German Democratic Republic.” The German Democratic Republic (DDR), a totally Communist government, has emphasized Luther as a political revolutionary, educator, and humanist, but not as religious reformer. When you deal with Luther, sooner or later, you have to confront what stood at the essence of the man—even if you are the editor of one of the most attractive and compelling pieces of Marxist propaganda. The rest of the magazine is filled with articles about peace rallies and sports programs. Through it all the real Luther did speak, even if it was just for one brief moment. Sometimes the Gospel finds the strangest preachers.