

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Treasure of the Church

WALTER R. BOUMAN

The Early Success and Gradual Decline of
Lutheranism in England, 1520–1600

BASIL HALL

A Marxist De-Lutheranization
of the German Reformation

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Editorial ✠

In this issue of the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY our authors demonstrate insight into the events and persons that animated the century of the Reformation in Europe, including Britain, the centuries since then, and into our needs today.

The article by Walter Bouman serves to make clear that the crisis of conscience in Luther's life may sooner or later occur in its own way in the life of almost anyone, though not necessarily with the intensity with which it occurred in Luther's life. Prof. Bouman also examines the gradually distorting evaluation of the initial Reformation — a personal matter in Luther's life — into a sort of system of knowing the Gospel without actually believing in its rescuing power in quite the same sense in which Luther believed it. This is a warning against a depersonalization of the Gospel, of the Word of God. We can spoil our Reformation celebrations if we do not actually appreciate our own needs and the way in which the "true treasure of the church" can fill them.

Professor Basil Hall tempers 20th-century enthusiasm about the alleged Lutheran character of the English Reformation. He lessens contemporary disappointment with the ultimate failure of Lutheranism in 16th-century England and with the slow, difficult growth of Lutheranism today in the British Isles. Lutheran teachers were heard to say a half century ago that Lutheranism could not be expressed in English, that England could never become a Lutheran country. The present state of Lutheranism in Germany might lead one to wonder whether that country can again become Lutheran, as it apparently became four centuries ago. Hall's work can perhaps increase Lutheran courage and hard work in behalf of Lutheranism — in or out of a Lutheran organizational framework. He demonstrates that the church in England has Reformation roots and could be expected legitimately to pay attention to the anniversary.

Hall's words could also help all who bear the Lutheran name to appreciate the abiding value which their confessions and their faith have for people of any nationality or any confession. After all, some of the best books on Luther and the Reformation have been written in England and in our country by such men as Gordon Rupp, Philip Watson, and Roland Bainton, to mention only three, none of whom is formally affiliated with a Lutheran congregation.

For some readers the most interesting contribution this issue brings could be the article by Douglas Stange. The bearer of a proud surname in German Lutheran scholarly circles, he tackles one phase of the sticky subject of what is admittedly one of Luther's two major mistakes — his repudiation of the peasant revolt. The Stange review of the communist canonization of Thomas Muentzer as the *real* reformer should alert our readers to something very important: the secular, non-ecclesiastical effects of the Reformation or of any great movement in the church and, vice versa, the effects on the church of any great movement in society, in this case, the communist revolution, Russian style 1917 (!) and German style (post 1945 — actually post 1918). The survival of the church in East Germany, specifically the Lutheran Church, is not a simple and certain

thing. On the other hand, it is not wise for people who live outside the iron curtain to be too quick in their condemnations of the church and her leaders and members in communist countries. As we can see from Stange's material, in East Germany the official, all-pervasive rewritten and reinterpreted history of the Reformation is "de-Lutheranized" and "Muentzerized." Stange cites only two East German historians, Franz Lau and Walter Elliger, who try to keep the picture in balance.

We can draw at least one valuable lesson from this. The church, or an individual leader in the church, no matter how correctly she or he thinks their actions are, cannot disclaim responsibility for serious errors in judgment when these bear bitter fruit long after they are committed. Could this perhaps say something to us in this anniversary year in matters of civil rights, human relations, ecumenical affairs, and the need for careful and correct decisions?

Since 1962 German Roman Catholic assertions that Luther never did "post" the Ninety-five Theses have evoked reactions ranging from consternation to cavalier dismissal. Ronald Diener's "Brief Study" collects various facts on the historicity of the October 31, 1517, event and then analyzes the theses and their present value in a helpful way.

We can only recommend strongly the reading of the first item mentioned in Diener's article: the *Luther-Jahrbuch* 1967 essay by Franz Lau, professor of church history at the University of Leipzig, on the current discussion concerning the posting of the theses by Luther.¹ The same *Jahrbuch* contains an article, also recommended reading in connection with Stange's paper, by Walter Elliger on Luther and Muentzer.² Elliger cautiously deviates from the official communist line.

In view of the commemoration of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation it may not be inappropriate to urge our readers to join the *Luthergesellschaft*, under whose auspices the *Luther-Jahrbuch* is published, and to receive its *Jahrbuch* each year. The 1967 *Luther-Jahrbuch* includes, in addition to its major articles, 36 pages³ of international bibliographical information on books, articles, periodicals, and reports published since 1966 dealing with Luther in particular and the Reformation in general.

Good reading and good celebrating! And, as Luther said, sometime in 1517: "Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death, and hell, and thus be confident of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace."⁴

GILBERT AMADEUS THIBLE

¹ Franz Lau, "Die gegenwärtige Diskussion um Luthers Thesenanschlag" *Luther-Jahrbuch*, XXXIV (Hamburg: Friedrich Wittig Verlag, 1967), pp. 11—59. [Editor's note: Dr. Lau has subsequently submitted to the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY an article in which he brings the discussion up to date on the basis of his continuing research into the question of the posting of the Ninety-five Theses. The article will appear in an early issue of this journal.]

² Walter Elliger, "Zum Thema Luther and Thomas Muentzer," *Luther-Jahrbuch* 1967, pp. 90—116.

³ *Luther-Jahrbuch* 1967, pp. 141—76.

⁴ Theses 94 and 95. *Luther's Works, American Edition*, Vol. 33 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p 33.