



THE SPRINGFIELDER

July 1974
Volume 38, Number 3

Luther and Higher Criticism

(A Reply to his Debunkers and Defusers!)

EUGENE F. KLUG

HISTORY REMEMBERS LUTHER chiefly for his heroic stand on Scripture. His many writings (now nearing one hundred volumes in the Weimar edition) verify the faithfulness and skill with which he gave Scripture's message and meaning. He was an obedient listener to God's Word, regardless of any assertions (e.g., by Catholic scholar, Joseph Lortz) to the contrary. Luther's genius was precisely this, that he did not construct a theology, but dutifully played back what he found in God's inspired Word. Luther's translation of Holy Writ was his most notable achievement, as almost everyone agrees. In fact, perhaps the most remarkable feat of modern times—even rivaling the placing of a man on the moon—was Luther's translation of the New Testament from the original Greek into German in the incredible time of ten or eleven weeks. This occurred during the period of his "exile" at the Wartburg Castle, where his prince, Elector Frederick the Wise, had hidden him away for safe keeping. Today it takes teams of translators years to do what Luther accomplished alone from late December 1521 to February 1522. Then he returned to Wittenberg to quell the uprisings which threatened the populace with anarchy; he accomplished this with eight remarkable sermons on eight consecutive days.

Yet, in spite of all his unrivalled Scriptural attainments, scarcely anyone is more used and misused in his statements concerning the sacred text, which he called "the Holy Spirit's book." Even Lutheran theology itself and Lutheran churches, notably The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the last year, are split between so-called "moderate" (or liberal) and conservative poles. Moderates dig around in Luther for tidbits intended to disabuse minds of the idea that Luther was held by the text of Holy Scripture; conservatives point to a Luther who was forever doffing his hat to the Holy Spirit and His inspired Scriptures with the admonition, "Do the Holy Spirit the honor of admitting that He is more learned than you."¹ "Would Luther be allowed to teach at Missouri's seminaries?" moderates jibe, especially since he is reported to have been the fastest hand at shooting down cherished passages in the Bible, in fact whole books? *Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, James, Jude, Revelation, Hebrews*, whichever book one cares to name, somebody is sure to quote the great Reformer in some apparently devastating, compromising comment about the book's author, authenticity, content, or overall value. Perhaps, as long as modern "prophets" are twirling the crystal ball, the question ought rather to be whether Luther would *want* to teach at a seminary, whether in this country or abroad, if it lacked, or failed to put its money where its mouth is in support of, clear-cut, unambiguous, unquestioned Biblical authority.

But, frankly, what are such hypothetical questions worth anyway? Who is going to answer them? At best they are academic

peccadilloes designed to titillate, or irritate, the proverbial itching ears, but proving nothing. All kinds of dubious probings of this type—really innuendoes—swarm around a controversial figure like Luther. Was Luther a mentally disturbed youth? Erik Erikson wrote a whole book on the subject (*Young Man Luther*) and proved nothing. It is difficult to psychoanalyze a dead man—dead 428 years. A new field in history, psychohistory, devoted to psycho-analysis of historical personages is opening up. Yet psychiatrists admittedly have enough trouble with the live specimens, including even themselves, without disturbing the dead. What were Luther's physical ailments? Gastro-intestinal complications? If you believe John Osborne (*Luther, a play*), constipation was the key to Luther's life and work, pressing him to some of his greatest accomplishments.

What next? Luther's interpreters come a dime a dozen. Many of them are seedpickers—better, nitpickers. Here and there they find a morsel, suiting *their* fancy, *their* preconceived notions, undergirding something *they* wanted to prove all the while anyway. And so, without bothering to read him at length, or in context, they pontificate broadly, "Luther says so and so . . .," and then feel that he has helped them close the gap in *their* favor. It used to be that debunking came only from the side of those who opposed Luther. Two star performers were the Roman Catholic historians Grisar and Denifle. In recent years, however, Romanist scholars, e.g., Joseph Lortz, have followed a considerably softer and generally fairer line of appraisal. But history plays its tricks. Now it is cricket for those who claim to espouse him, Luther's own namesakes no less, to get into the act. To prove what? That he had feet of clay—and no halo around his head? Great guns! Did anyone really need proof of that? I can cite a dozen places without further ado, where he himself tells us what a maggoty bag of worms he is.

But there is something particularly unwelcome about what is going on now in the name of Luther study—especially on the part of Lutherans who try to justify their surrender to neo-Protestant liberal views on Scripture under the convenient cover of Luther-isms! Not only is this procedure unwelcome, but terribly unfair to Luther. An article of this length scarcely suffices to scratch the surface of the vast amount of material, but a few pertinent examples may help. What is happening, after all, is no parochial phenomenon. It is a symptom of the wide-spread infection and ennui that has spread through all of Christianity with respect to the concept of the Holy Scriptures as the inspired Word of God. Back in the hot summer of 1973, on July 24, immediately following the historic, turbulent convention of the Missouri Synod, in New Orleans, where conservative delegates won the battle for the Word, the St. Louis faculty majority (now known as Seminex, Concordia Seminary in Exile, since their walk-out in January 1974) issued a protest statement which concluded by purportedly quoting from Luther's world-famous treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*.

We confess an open Bible unfettered by any human rules.
With Luther we "acknowledge no fixed rules for the interpreta-

tion of the Word of God"—whether historical-critical, grammatical-critical, or any other—"since the Word of God, which teaches freedom in all other matters, must not be bound."²

Now let's set the record straight. First, it should be noted that the words in quotation marks are *not*, as stated, from Luther's treatise itself on Christian liberty. They are actually from Luther's accompanying letter to Pope Leo X, to whom he is appealing for help against his (Luther's) detractors and maligners.³ The year is 1520, just one year before Luther's heroic stand at the Diet of Worms. Once again Luther is saying what by this time he has said several times over, that his conscience will be held and bound by no higher authority than the written Word of God, Holy Scripture, which is its own best interpreter.

Second, to put historical-critical methodology on the same line or in the same ball park with historical-grammatical Biblical interpretation is unscholarly, if not to say dishonest. The latter method of Bible interpretation, really the Bible's own, is helpful and good when properly used. Luther used it; conservative Bible scholars, committed likewise to Scripture's inspiration and inerrancy, still use it. But the former, the historical-critical methodology, is the basis on which the Bible in our day has been torn apart. The difference between the two is like that between fighting a fire with gasoline or fighting it with water. Everyone knows the difference. Luther would have had none of *that* freedom!

Third, the "fixed rules of interpretation" which Luther *is rejecting* are those of Scholasticism, approved by the Romanist church at the time, by which *every* passage of Scripture was put through the arbitrary sieve of allegorical interpretation. Every verse of Scripture was held to have four meanings: literal, moral, allegorical, heavenly or spiritual. The distortions of Scripture's plain and intended sense were gross, incredibly twisted. Luther's judgment can be shown to apply to all brands of subjectivism, no matter what its cloak, because it lords itself over Scripture and its clear sense.

But Luther never—to repeat, *never*—disavowed the evident and fixed rules of interpretation which Scripture itself demanded (like any other written document). Simply put, and to summarize Luther, the rule is this: 1) Scripture is an eminently clear book, which requires no interpreter; because 2) it is its own best interpreter, even as it authenticates itself best of all, better than all books that are written about it; and so 3) if one will but "give a thought to the actual text, and to that which precedes and follows the word, from which our understanding of it must be sought" (the context, in other words), one will know its meaning exactly.⁴ Luther tacitly assumes, of course, that the reader of Scripture has command of the language and the rules of grammar (preferably, if possible, the Bible's original Hebrew and Greek). He is aware of the usual so-called "Bible difficulties," but refuses to be diverted by them from trust in Scripture's trustworthiness, convinced for himself that solutions lie nearby, and if not *now*, then eventually in glory. It is a desperate kind of theologizing, therefore, which quotes Luther out of context and implies

that there are no fixed rules for Scriptural interpretation. The rules are Scripture's! Luther certainly did not suggest that "freedom in the Gospel" lets every man find whatever meaning he can in Scripture. That would be to reintroduce the allegorizing, or (modern-day) demythologizing, technique which makes interpretation a highly subjective enterprise and often ends by making tales out of historical facts. Everyone knows that the Biblical field is strewn with numerous casualties as a result of such methodology—and all in the name of scientific theologizing. Finally even the resurrection of Christ itself is not safe.

Let us look more closely at some of the tidbits that are quoted against Luther's actually solid Scriptural stance. They range from such claims as "Job was not a real person in Luther's thinking," to the more familiar, "Luther favored discarding certain books of the Bible." The first claim is really a minuscule point; but debunkers of Luther's solid Scriptural stance like to cite it, claiming that he considered Job to be a mythological figure like Aeneas. What is the answer? Here are the facts from Luther's own writings: Job was a real, historical person, who apparently hailed from Mesopotamia in Syria;⁵ of either Esau's or Nahor's line;⁶ from around Solomon's time.⁷ It was Luther's considered judgment that the book which bears Job's name, and gives the story of his life, was written by an extremely good theologian, perhaps Solomon;⁸ that it capsules Job's thoughts, if not his exact spoken words;⁹ that it affords sufferers, especially Christian believers, a most valuable consolation;¹⁰ that it attests the resurrection more eloquently than any other Old Testament book;¹¹ and that, while it is very difficult to translate from the Hebrew,¹² it is one of the most beautiful books in the Old Testament from a literary standpoint. At one place in his *Table Talk*¹³ Luther is quoted as comparing the account of Job to Vergil's epic treatment of Aeneas' trials and tribulations. This is the point at which some sleuthing scholars venture to say, "Aha, Luther did not think of Job as an actually historical person." As a matter of fact, however, and in view of all the evidence (some of it cited above), the suggestion that for Luther Job was not a real person is a shallow attempt to discredit him and his confidence in Scripture's text, which itself places Job in historical parameters.

Let us proceed then, to the second question, concerning Luther's attitude toward the books of Scripture. If and when Luther expressed himself critically (as he did at times—at first, more so; towards the end of his life, less so) on any book in our canon of Old and New Testament books, it is good to keep in mind some basic ground rules:

First, we do not have to defend or explain every last one of Luther's comments, some of them made off the proverbial cuff. No one has ever claimed divine inspiration for Luther, least of all he himself. The amazing thing really, in view of the mountains of material gathered in the many volumes of *Table Talk* by reporters who were constantly at his elbow, is that there is not more to embarrass him. He was an amazingly steady and consistent thinker, even in these off-the-cuff remarks.

Second, and most important, almost all of these comments by

Luther, which are quoted against him adversely, leave an entirely different impression when seen in context. Luther was an extremely well-balanced theologian, perhaps the only really great Bible cosmopolitan of the modern era, and he *always* retained the highest regard for *all* of Scripture. The book of *Hebrews* is a classic example. He lectured on this epistle at the University of Wittenberg early in his career, 1517-1518, and with deepest appreciation for its rich content, especially chapter 11 on the heroes of faith¹⁴—this in spite of the fact that he was fully aware of *Hebrews*' disputed position in the canon, because its author could not be firmly identified and established as apostolic.

Third, therefore, never did Luther actually feel competent to leave *any* book out of the Bible as we today have it, not even such books as *Hebrews*, *Jude*, *James*, *Revelation*, for which there are some admitted (by all scholars) difficulties in tracing back the historical chain clinching their apostolicity. For the fact is (and Luther knew this, and worked accordingly) that these books nonetheless pressed themselves into apostolic consideration, either as written by an apostle or by someone under an apostle's aegis, so that they survived all adverse criticism from earliest times onward, down to our day.¹⁵

Fourth, Luther, therefore, spoke of the whole canon, as we commonly know it, as "the Holy Spirit's book" and freely quoted from *all* its parts, including such books as *James* and *Hebrews*, as being the Scriptural Word. (The apocryphal books he stuck into a separate category, apart from the other books, much as Jerome had done centuries earlier.)

The assertion, therefore, that Luther can be claimed for the side of higher criticism, or the historical-critical methodology (some scholars dispute whether the two are the same, but the evidence is against them), stretches the truth farther than it will stretch. Whoever is guilty of doing it, either does not know Luther, or he does not know the historical-critical methodology—or he does not know either! By this time, after the historical-critical method has virtually destroyed the Bible, its content, and its authority, it should be recognized as totally naive to insist that it is a harmless or neutral technique, or, more absurd still, that, as some misguided or devious critics aver, it actually safeguards the Bible and God Himself from the smallness of men's minds. Such a statement is completely groundless, telling more perhaps about the person who makes it than about the thing he purports to be describing. Every Biblical scholar today, on whichever side he stands, be he liberal or conservative (and anything in between, "moderate," for example), knows that no other single force has done more to erode Biblical authority in our century than the historical-critical technique. As practised, it is always "higher criticism" and detrimental to Scripture. It comes under Luther's severest judgment, as he warns against the "schismatic spirits," who "cavil at God's Word; want to play the master over it; probe, measure, twist the words to read as (they) want them to; drivell over it, carve it up, toy with it, and work with it until they grow entirely blind over it" and end up despising both God's Word and His Sacraments.¹⁶ This distorting of Scripture and its evident sense occurred when first

such text critics "accepted human interpretations as godly, as more lucid than Scriptures themselves," says Luther in *Against Latomus*.¹⁷

The church does, indeed, still need the *touchstone* of Holy Scripture. That is how the Reformation Confessions looked upon it and that is what they called it.¹⁸ A touchstone, a flint-like stone, sifted genuine from counterfeit gold; when a pure gold object was rubbed across it a gold streak showed plainly. For Luther it was Holy Scripture alone which was the touchstone by which "the church judges that this doctrine is correct and that doctrine false, and that this man is a heretic and teaches falsehood" and that man the truth.¹⁹

Schismatics, higher critics, liberals, "moderates," with their vaunted freedom-of-the-Gospel formula, cannot claim Luther for their champion! Luther pleads with them, rather, as he pleaded with Erasmus, to take his words to heart and return to the truth. "Yes, yes," Luther says, "I know that Christ Jesus must be preached." Seldom, history shows, has the world known a more eloquent evangelical preacher than Luther. But what he wants Erasmus, and others like him, to see and admit is this: Do you not realize that it is "mere carping obstructionism" on your part when you refuse to see that "Christ crucified brings all these doctrines with Him"—including Scripture's teaching concerning itself?²⁰ Would not everyone like to have the liberty to be a skeptic about Scripture on this point or on that? In fact, does not every heretic find his own opinion convenient? But Luther's reply to Erasmus, for which there was no possible answer, was: "What Christian could talk like that?"²¹ Indeed, what Christian would? Every student of Luther's writings will know, or he will soon find out, if his reading is objective, that Luther was the fastest gun anywhere under the sun in *defense* of God's inspired, inerrant Word, Holy Scripture!

FOOTNOTES

1. WA 12, 440; *St. L.* 3, 21.
2. "A Declaration of Protest and Confession," by members of the faculty and staff, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, July 24, 1973.
3. Cp. LW 31, 341.
4. *Bondage of the Will*, Packer-Johnston Edition, 260; cp. also pp. 66-74; 109-136.
5. *St. L.* 1, 1601.
6. *Ibid.*, 2, 1015.
7. *Ibid.*, 22, 1422.
8. *Ibid.*, 22, 1415.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 22, 1770.
12. *Ibid.*, 21^a, 5957.
13. WA, TR I, 206.
14. Cp. LW 29.
15. Cp. the author's *From Luther to Chemnitz on Scripture and the Word* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1971), 22-25.
16. LW 23, 229f.
17. LW 32, 236.
18. Cp. the *Formula of Concord*, 1577, Preface.
19. LW 23, 231.
20. *Bondage of the Will*, 107; cf. 66-108 passim.
21. *Ibid.*, 68.