

LUTHER

Dr. Hoeh gave the comments found below in the Theological Research class of 9 October 1969. They are important in discovering the real Martin Luther!

The quotes that I will read and comment on are found in Chapter One of The Cambridge History of the Bible (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1963). This work as a whole gives the best summary available of the history of the English Bible in the western world as well as the rise of Higher Criticism and modern theological reasoning.

This first chapter is entitled "The Bible in the Reformation" and opens with these statements: "The reformers dethroned the pope and enthroned the Bible. This is the common assertion; but when so stated it is not valid, because a book cannot replace a man. A book has to be interpreted. This was the main reason why authority had come to be ascribed to the pope in faith and morals. Catholics argued that if there were no infallible interpreter, there could be no infallible revelation. Scripture at many points is not clear, and when a difference of opinion arises as to the meaning, unless there be some authoritative way of knowing which is right, the inevitable result will be uncertainty"

The Bible Interprets the Bible

The Protestants indeed, as far as they were concerned, dethroned the pope; then they attempted to enthrone the Bible as the final authority -- without realizing that there are passages in scripture which are not clear to most people! Is there anyone in this room who feels that all passages of scripture are absolutely clear to him or her?

The point should be as obvious to us as to anybody!

It is not, however, as our author, Roland Bainton, says here that the Book has to be interpreted from a wholly outside source. This is a mistaken idea that we do not have to dwell on at length here. The Bible gives its own explanation of things that are self-contained. There may be some things in terms of background information where one would have to give an explanation to the Bible that lies outside; but this would only have to do with items like farming tools or something like that which is not part of the spiritual revelation, but merely a part of the vocabulary which has to be interpreted by external evidence not self-contained in the scripture. That's a linguistic matter rather than a spiritual matter. That kind of problem is only incidental and by no means basic.

Other than that, it is clear that the Scripture must find an explanation within itself if God is speaking to man. Certain passages in the Bible that are obscure are made plain by other passages. There was a time, of course, with less Scripture, that there had to be also the personal revelation of an individual -- as when God spoke and communicated with Moses and the prophets. Even as late as the time of Jesus Christ there was an authoritative, if you please, interpreter; there was an authority to explain some of the things that the Apostles didn't understand.

An Authoritative Teaching Ministry Still Necessary

But when God's revelation is all complete as we now have it (for this day), the Scripture does not need to be interpreted by an outside source. But this does not mean that there can be a sufficient authority in the Scripture so that individuals may make their appeal to this authority exclusively because it is so clear and plain to everybody including the lowest layman and the least educated. It just isn't so!

This is why God, even in the latest revelation, ordained a teaching authority — a ministry rather than a priesthood — that should be qualified and trained to explain what is there having deduced the interpretation of one passage by means of another, letting the scripture interpret itself. If we were to turn over the understanding of the Bible just to every layman or every student, you know where the Church of God would shortly end up! It would be like the Sardis Era with each person doing his own thing. Some would say divorce and remarriage is okay, others that it's wrong; some would say eating unclean meats is a spiritual sin, some that it was a physical one; some would keep Passover on the 15th, some on the 14th, some in one month, some in another. That whole church is divided and confused! There is no one in authority in that church in whom Christ lives. (There may be some in whom Christ lives in the church, but none in authority.)

So the Protestants made the major mistake of assuming that a book alone was clear enough that anybody could appeal to it and come up with the right answer — anybody! This was the theme. All you had to do was have public education, so the public school system was developed.

As a result we have Lutheranism, Zwinglianism—which was the evangelical branch that ultimately, in Germany, joined to be the evangelical Lutheran movement; and that is divided into all kinds of groups. Then you know of all the Lutheran groups in America—the Missouri Synod and the American Synod are just two main ones (the former conservative, the latter liberal). And in England there is the Church of England; and broken off that are the Methodists, and the Methodists are split between the north and the south. We have the Baptists who claim to be earlier than any of these; and the Baptists are split up also. So, when all is said and done, we have these major Protestant divisions—and then divisions within the divisions! Different groups sub-divide lower and lower depending on the type of argument: they argue about the pastor or doctrine or money matters or whatever.

This is what has happened in the Protestant Christian world for the simple reason that they attempted to put a book in absolute authority without an authoritative, inspired ministry through whom Christ was working.

The Real Luther

We have to see this to understand the original flaw of Protestantism in its initial inception. In other words, the Protestants didn't even take the Bible at face value! How could they if spiritual things are spiritually discerned and all they had was Martin Luther??!!—a monk of the Augustinian order who believed that getting back to the faith was getting back to Augustine; who believed the Book of Esther really didn't belong in the Bible and that the Epistle of James was a book of straw; who explained the Book of Revelation until he discovered the seventeenth chapter and then said this should not normally be made available any longer!

Lutheran ministers today are advised, in certain Lutheran publications, to be careful how they describe the Church of Rome "because, after all, she is our Mother!"

And then we should not fail to mention Henry VIII and his first wife, and his second one, and his third; and you can go all the way down the line through number six! Then you can understand how the Church of England arose.

Mr. Meredith brought out many interesting things about Luther's career in his thesis on the Protestant Reformation (which was published serially in the Plain Truth beginning July, 1958). For example, Luther approved polygamy because he had to have the backing of the prince in order to survive as a religious entity in his area of Germany; so he rationalized that perhaps this prince was more noble than other people and also more troubled by sex than others and should necessarily have more than one wife in a situation like that!

Luther's Theology

Now as the Bible developed in the Reformation it was translated into the various languages to make it available to the people because, if there is ultimately no pope, there must be something else to which people can look. And since there was no other teaching authority present on the scene, they thought they could put the Bible in that position but they failed to realize that spiritual things are spiritually discerned.

Ultimately the Catholic Church had to declare Luther a heretic for going so far as he did. He engaged in a number of theological debates. His ideas basically centered around a verse in the writings of Paul — Romans 3:28 — to which he added a word, and this became the basis of his doctrine. In Latin the word is solus—only; that is, saved by faith alone!

You may remember that Luther went through this series of experiences: He went to Rome after he had punished himself and beaten himself. By going through all these penances and by visiting the Eternal City and its holy places, he thought he might rid his conscience of guilt. But after seeing that cesspool his conscience still troubled him!

Nothing seemed to satisfy until he read his interpretation into a verse in the writings of Paul which mentioned being "justified by faith"; and he added the Latin word solus. This gave him complete satisfaction. And so the German translation read "through faith alone." /Actually two verses in Romans are being alluded to here — Romans 1:17 — "The just shall live by faith" — which Luther said opened the gates of Paradise for him; and Romans 3:28 in which he inserted the word alone later when he produced his German translation./ Faith is a basic aspect of the whole picture but Luther put it entirely out of proper perspective when he inserted that word solus or alain — alone, one, by itself. Repentance, faith, obedience must all work in conjunction; faith alone is insufficient. There is more to it than that. Mr. Meredith explains the fallacies of Luther's doctrine very clearly in his account of the Reformation.

Building of St. Peter's Triggered Reformation

But Luther didn't have anything else to fall back on. He had rejected penance, he had laid aside the concept of penance. And penance was, of course, maximized in the beginning of the 16th century with the building of St. Peter's.

Here was this great public building being erected. This public building had a function: it was to be a kind of temple for the Catholic Church, if you please. That's what it was! The German financial houses had loaned the pope the money and they demanded repayment. And, unlike the Jews who might have charged 15 to 25% interest, most of the German houses charged 100 to 400% interest! These German houses—Fugger, for instance (see pp. 364-5 in the Mainstream text)—had this money, loaned it to the pope, and the pope, in order to pay them back, sold indulgences to the people.

The idea ultimately developed that you could sell them in advance of sin! Not merely to forgive sin that was in the past, but now you could pay so much money and any sins you might commit in the futura would also be forgiven. Now, of course, theological considerations might have demanded repentance upon doing so to make the indulgence valid; but people soon began to conclude that mere payment of money was sufficient. After all, you had the written paper to prove it! This is how money was collected to pay the Church's debts.

So the building of St. Peter's in Rome was actually the cause, the actual cause, of the Reformation. There would have been no Reformation without that building. It was the financial burden which broke the back of the common people who wanted some kind of change. The social climate was right for what occurred. If there had not been such a financial burden which led to this extravaganza in indulgences, then there would not have been a reason for Luther to enter into his initial arguments with Dr. Eck (Leipzig debate of 1519) over these matters. He would have just been a heretic with nothing to argue about, if he had ever even become one. He probably would have had nothing to argue about because the land wouldn't have been full of so many sins.

But when you have sold these indulgences in advance, you obviously encourage adultery, bigamy, polygamy, drunkenness, and all the other things people want to do! Now they could sin with a clear conscience!

And remember, the Holy Roman Empire was still going strong. At this time it was prospering under the rule of the Hapsburgs. It wasn't destroyed internally until the Thirty Years' War of 1618-48. So the Germans at this time had control of most of the economy of the world: wherever the British, the Spanish, the Portuguese, or even the French galleons were going around the world (they might have had Spanish or Italian or Portuguese or English or French sailors), they were financed with German money! Most people don't realize it was German money that sent Magellan around the world — because it was the big empire in Europe!

This kind of situation led to moral decline from within. It's like America today: We are the moneyed peoples and this is the moneyed time. We have more money in the hands of common people who are free now to sin more! It just goes hand-in-hand. When you have to work hard and put in long hours, you don't have time for sin. That should be clear.

The wealth of our society is similar to that in Luther's Germany with similar kinds of trickery and fraud going on. They were doing it then in the name of indulgences, and you can be sure in the long run there were people selling them who were in no way authorized to do so!!

Luther's Feelings About the Book of Esther

Luther's attitude toward certain parts of the Bible are very interesting. He said, "I so hate Esther and II Maccabees that I wish they did not exist."

Do you know why Luther hated the Book of Esther? It wasn't that God's name does not appear in it. That's the excuse that was given later! It was something deeper. And it wasn't because he didn't understand the meaning. He did understand the meaning—that's why he hated the book! Esther tells of the deliverance of the Jews! This was the book in which the Jews slaughtered their enemies who were going to slaughter them! And God delivered the Jews who obeyed Him, and saw to it that their enemies who were sinners were punished!

What was the state of the Jews in Germany? Who was punishing and persecuting the Jews? I mean, 400 years before Hitler! Why, the Germans also. They were having their pogroms in that day too. They hadn't arrived yet at the "final solution"! That was left for Hitler—to try to find a final solution to this "problem" that had been going on for centuries.

Luther wrote a pamphlet entitled "The Jews and Their Lies!" Now do you understand why he hated the Book of Esther? Because in his mind this was a Jewish book foisted into Scripture to justify themselves. And he saw the German Christian people—in fact, the Christian people of the Roman Empire and of the whole Christian world—condemned by the Book of Esther because they had done, and were doing, to the Jews what Haman, and those who hated the Jews in the Persian realm, wanted to do to them. That's quite significant!

And, of course, II Maccabees has to do with part of the story of the deliverance of the Jews from the Syrians. Maccabees was not a part of the Bible but it was in the Catholic canon as part of the Apocrypha. As such, it also drew Luther's wrath!

"I so hate Esther . . . that I wish it did not exist. There is too much Judaism in it and not a little heathenism." I'm quoting this (leaving out II Maccabees) to give you the spirit.

James, Revelation, Hebrews

Now a few brief observations pertaining to the New Testament. The Protestants have kept the New Testament intact not because they were able to discern Scripture from non-Scripture, but because they followed the decisions of the Synod of Carthage (398 A.D.). The Protestants follow the Catholic Church even in the books of the New Testament—they wouldn't know which to leave in and which to leave out! If Luther had not followed the Catholic Church in this matter, he'd have left the Epistle of James out. And most people would discard Revelation! Let's notice a few more statements about Luther.

"Luther's caustic remark about the Epistle of James is notorious: he characterized it as an 'epistle of straw.' As for Revelation, in 1522 he declared that he could not regard it as prophetic or apostolic or even as the work of the Holy Ghost because so replete with visions and images. The worst was that in this book Christ was neither taught nor known. Luther would not impose his own opinion upon others, but for himself his spirit could not find its way into this book. Yet despite these strictures he did not exclude any of these books from the canon." He just went along with the Catholic tradition (except for the Apocrypha) in this matter.

If this is the beginning of Protestantism, what shall the end be?

How could Protestantism go in any direction if it began as such with a man who hated and rejected one book of the Bible, called another the 'book of straw,' and denied a third book even being written by the Spirit of God in anybody? A book that tells about the return of Jesus Christ in which Luther could find nothing about Christ even being taught or known? No, he knew what was in that book to start with — and far better than most! But when his mind closed to that, his mind closed to the whole book.

Would Luther Be A Lutheran Today?

Now there are conservative Lutherans in America who have taken a much more conservative view than Luther himself did on this subject. Or, as we might say, it is questionable whether, if Luther were here, he'd be a Lutheran!!

We go on: "Luther could not regard Revelation as apostolic or Hebrews as Pauline [written by Paul], but dislodged neither from the canon." Now the Greek church said the Book of Hebrews was written by Paul. And the Catholic Church now authoritatively says it was written by Paul in its traditional explanation based on Greek statements. It was Luther who denied the Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Luther's "test was whether a book proclaimed Christ. 'That which does not preach Christ is not apostolic, though it be the work of Peter or Paul and conversely that which does teach Christ is apostolic even though it be written by Judas, Annas, Pilate, Herod.'" So said Martin Luther! Is that clear?—or is that madness!!

This tied in directly with his doctrine: The question is, Was it apostolic in authority?—so that his ultimate definition had to be, if faith alone was all that was required, you had to have faith in Christ. And this is why "The Lutheran Hour" says that it 'preaches Christ to the nations'—"faith alone!"—solus!

It is inevitable that modern higher criticism would develop if this is the way it began!

I believe that most people, and even Lutherans, don't know what Luther taught about Scripture. Those of you here who are Lutheran in background, did you learn what he said about Esther, James, Hebrews or Revelation? It would be very rare if you did!

We have almost all, if not all, of the works of Luther in the library if you want to look into them. Check the Luther collection in the Fine Arts Library.