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**THE SERVICE IN THE CENTRAL BAPTIST
CHURCH, REV. W. A. HEWITT, PASTOR**

William H. Scott, elder in the Market Square Church, Germantown, Pennsylvania, President of the Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, a commissioner to the General Assembly, and a member of its Committee on the Celebration of the Four Hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation, presided.

The addresses were delivered by Henry Sloane Coffin, D.D., pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, and Associate Professor of Homiletics in the Union Theological Seminary, and by Frederick W. Loetscher, Ph.D., D.D., Professor of Church History in Princeton Theological Seminary.

MESSAGES FROM LUTHER FOR OUR DAY

BY

HENRY SLOANE COFFIN, D.D.

IN Martin Luther God gave the world a religious genius, who is destined to stand for all time among the major prophets of the Christian faith. In his complex personality discordant elements jostle one another. Mentally he was a child of his age, sharing to a large degree its superstitions and prejudices as well as its aspirations, and voicing so accurately its feelings that his message won instant popularity. Yet he so far transcended his age as to become one of the foremost makers of the modern world, a force whose creative energy is by no means yet exhausted. In character, he was a combination of many serious faults, faults of taste and of temper, and of heroic virtues. He was coarse, abusive, obstinate, domineering, passionate, yet also intrepid, generous, broadly human, sincere, with high spirits that bubbled over in humor, and an intensity of devotion to his purpose that made him an incalculable power. He was guilty of two ugly moral blunders: the incitement to bloody reprisals against the rebellious peasants, and acquiescence in the bigamy of Philip of Hesse; yet he is to be credited with a fearless conscience seldom equaled in history. But what gave him, a mere preacher and theological professor in a small out-of-the-

way Saxon town, his abiding influence was his unique discovery of the living God, whose good pleasure it was in him, as truly as in his great master, Paul, to reveal his Son.

In a letter that comes down from his student days Luther expressed the wish that instead of philosophy he might be studying theology, adding, "I mean that theology which searches out the meat of the nut, the kernel of the grain, and the marrow of the bones." Such was his main contribution, to discover the essential thing in the Christian religion, to get at and bring into the heart the Christian faith. Commenting on the familiar words of the First Commandment, he asked, "What is it to have a God?" and answered: "To have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe in him with all our hearts. Whatever, then, thy heart clings to (I say) and relies upon, that is properly thy God." Such unwavering trust of the heart in the God whom he found in the Christ of the Bible was for Luther the whole of religion. In throwing everything else aside as relatively trifling, he recovered the Christian faith for mankind.

Luther was careful to distinguish what he meant by faith. "There are," he wrote, "two kinds of believing—first, a believing about God which means that I believe that what is said of God is true. This faith is rather a form of knowledge or observation than a faith. There is, secondly, a believing in God which means that I put my trust in him, give myself up to thinking that I can have dealings with him, and believe without any

doubt that he will be and do to me according to the things said of him. Such faith which throws itself upon God, whether in life or in death, alone makes a Christian man."

Such faith Luther preached, and of such faith he became the living embodiment. Many things that he believed are now obsolete; at a number of points he was inconsistent with his own fundamental conviction; but wherever he acted in thorough loyalty to it, he is increasingly approved as right, and he remains a magnificently contagious believer in the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

There are three aspects of this fundamental conviction which repay our special study in this anniversary year: Luther's faith in the self-evidencing character of religious truth, his faith in Christian men, and his faith in the historic Christ.

1. *His faith in the self-evidencing power of religious truth.* In all ages devout minds have asked themselves: "How may I attain certainty? How may I be sure that I know God?" The Roman Church had replied: "Truth is a mystery which lies beyond human power to test and prove. These mysteries are contained in the Bible and can be interpreted correctly only by the Church through its popes and councils." Luther from his reading of the Bible, found God's truth flashing out on him and authenticating itself to his own soul. It is often said that the difference between Romanists and Protestants is that the former accept as their authority an infallible Church, and the latter an infallible Book.

But that is misleading. The real difference lies in two contrasted views of truth. To the Roman Catholic truth is so hard to recognize that only a divinely accredited teacher can guarantee it to us; to Luther truth was so clear that conscience once faced with it cannot but acknowledge it. Augustine had stated the traditional position when he wrote, "I would not believe in the gospel without the authority of the Church." Luther, much as he respected Augustine, revolted: "Thou must not place thy decision on the pope or any other; thou must thyself be so skillful that thou canst say, 'God says this, not that.' Dost thou stand upon pope or councils? Then the Devil may at once knock a hole in thee and insinuate, 'How if it were false? How if they have erred?' Then thou art laid low at once. Therefore thou must bring conscience into play, that thou mayst boldly and defiantly say, 'That is God's Word; on that will I risk body and life, and a hundred thousand necks if I had them.' Therefore no one shall turn me from the Word which God teaches me, and that must I know as certainly as that two and three make five, or that an ell is longer than a half. That is certain, and though all the world speak to the contrary, still I know that it is not otherwise. Who decides me there? No man, but only the truth which is so perfectly certain that nobody can deny it." The evidence of a revelation is simply that it reveals, exactly as the evidence of daylight is its ability to make us see. No amount of external signs, miracles, or fulfilled prophecies, can make anything convincing that does not grip

us by its own cogency. The evidence of God's truth, in the Bible or from any quarter, is its power to make us see God and live with him, the Fact of facts in a world of facts.

Luther found God's self-evidencing truth primarily in the Bible; but that did not mean that to him the two were identical. The Bible is the literary record of events through which God unveils himself. Luther bowed before God's self-revelation, but he was singularly free in his handling of the Scriptures, in which as the soul in the body, God's Word is contained. Speaking of Genesis, he said, "What though Moses never wrote it?" He considered the books of Chronicles less reliable history than the books of the Kings, and he thought the present form of the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, probably due to later hands. He asserted that the prophets had not always given the kings of Israel sound political advice. In the New Testament he distinguished between "chief books" and those of less moment, and called The Epistle of James a letter of straw in comparison with the writings of Paul and of John. It is quite certain that Martin Luther could not be licensed in some of our presbyteries, and could not subscribe to some doctrinal deliverances of recent Assemblies. He read the Bible with the eyes of his own spiritually enlightened heart, exactly as his Lord had read the Old Testament; and he found God everywhere through it, as the soul pervades the body. But the Bible itself was not to him God's truth; that was the gospel or the Christ in the Bible. Only in the books

where he found Christ did he recognize authoritative Scripture. "That which does not teach Christ," he wrote in his vigorous fashion, "is not apostolic, though Peter or Paul should have said it; on the contrary that which preaches Christ is apostolic, even if it should come from Judas, Annas, Pilate, or Herod."

Here is no doctrine of Biblical inerrancy stultifying free investigation. Here is the liberty of the Spirit bearing witness within him to the divine message through the Book. Matters of authorship, of historical accuracy, of science, are left completely open for scholarship. God's life is imparted to the believing soul through the literary record, whoever wrote it, whether the alleged events occurred exactly as recorded or not, and whether the scientific views held by the Scripture writers be correct or incorrect. Needless to add that had our own Presbyterian communion been as Protestant as Martin Luther in its attitude to Scripture, the controversies of recent years would never have occurred. Until we recover his spiritual freedom, until we rise to his greater faith in the self-evidencing power of God's truth, we shall not fulfill our mission to the thinking men and women of our day. To the Roman Catholic the Bible is a book of laws and propositions to be obeyed and believed; to Luther it was a book of life, quickening him with its own vitality. The life he attained was its own indisputable evidence: he was alive unto God through Jesus Christ in the Scriptures.

2. *His faith in Christian men.* Luther struck a prodigious blow for democracy, little as he himself realized

its full consequences, when in his "Address to the German Nobility" he tore down the wall that separated clergy and laymen, the spiritual and the temporal estates, and declared, "All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate and there is no difference among them, save of office alone." It was the logical conclusion from his conviction that God's truth is accessible to every believer. Each man is a priest with direct relations with God, each a pope hearing for himself the authoritative word of God. His treatise on "Christian Liberty," one of the finest things he ever penned, lays down two famous propositions: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone." Here is religious individualism at its fullest, and here is religious solidarity at its closest. Roman Catholicism had supplied all manner of checks and restraints to control men and to help them to suppress themselves. Luther believed in the duty of a Christian man to be himself and to give himself free expression. He encouraged

"the perpetual play
Of every faculty that heaven bestows."

Timorous souls have always complained that there can be no agreement where every man freely thinks for himself, and no harmonious corporate life where each gives rein to his own impulses. Luther believed that truth, being one, would guarantee all needed unity among those who obey it, and that whoever is ruled

by the Spirit of Christ will bind himself most securely to all his brethren in helpful service. He phrased it exquisitely when he said, "I will, therefore, give myself as a sort of Christ to my neighbor, as Christ has given himself to me; and will do nothing in this life except what I see will be needful, advantageous, and wholesome for my neighbor." He insisted on both the liberty and the unity of the Spirit.

It is but just to point out that historical circumstances interfered with Luther's ideal and led him into inconsistencies. He found the early protectors of his movement among the German princes and nobles, and he allowed them, perhaps not unnaturally, to control the evangelical churches. The dire consequences to the spiritual freedom of those churches are seen conspicuously in Germany to-day. State domination had throttled the gospel liberty of the Church.

As a miner's son, the peasants expected his sympathy, and they freely gave him theirs in his attacks upon ecclesiastical tyranny. But like many another who has risen from lowly origins, he grew away from their point of view. The darkest blot on his career is his urgent call to the princes to put down with a stern hand the peasant uprising. Some of his sentences are shocking: "What is more ill-mannered than a foolish peasant or a common man when he has enough and is full and gets power in his hands?" "The severity and rigor of the sword are as necessary for the people as eating and drinking, yes, as life itself." "The ass needs to be beaten, and the populace needs to be controlled with a

strong hand. God knew this well, and therefore he gave the rulers not a fox's tail, but a sword."

It is a lamentable fact that only rarely has Protestant Christianity been a sturdy force among the working classes, and that it is scarcely such in any land to-day. Even in our country, with its complete separation of Church and State, and in those communions which are most democratic in their organization, the mass of the toilers are not its adherents. The Protestant churches, like Luther, have not been sympathetic with the disinherited in their aspirations for social justice, and the result is that they are despised as negligible factors by the leaders in social advance. Our churches, despite our good intentions, are not making for social unity but for division. In how very few of them do rich and poor, capitalist and laborer, meet side by side! It is noticeable that there are practically no artisans in the present General Assembly. Many of our officer bearers, while they have better taste than to employ Luther's language, assume his superior and domineering attitude toward the immigrant industrial population who are the counterparts in our society of the peasants of his age. During strikes, elders and Sunday-school superintendents have been known to express themselves not altogether differently from Luther, when he wrote: "Our peasants want to share the goods of others and keep their own. Fine Christians they are! I doubt whether there are any devils left in hell, for they all seem to have entered into the peasants, and passion has gone beyond all bounds." Undoubtedly the peas-

ants, like many strikers since, were not without serious faults, but the neighborly spirit of the gospel, which Luther knew so well how to commend, demands that the Church of Christ keep open-minded and open-hearted to the pleas of all the wronged and the weak, and sympathize with the restless, for are we not also seeking to turn our world upside down until it stand, as God means it shall, with the love side up?

Further, Luther's combination of his cause with that of the German princes, and his own intense nationalism, led him to lose sight of the international character of the Christian Church. Protestantism has always been organized on national lines and the ties between the churches have been very loose. It has lost its power to hold nations together; and the present world catastrophe, in which the two protagonists are Protestant Germany and Protestant Britain, is in one aspect a fearful condemnation of our Protestant Christianity. To be sure the Roman Church with its supernational organization is almost as powerless, but it has machinery that can be set in motion to accomplish some helpful ends. The pope is said to have been the means of restoring, at least in part, the deported Belgians, and the cardinals from warring nations come together in Rome so that the universality of the Church is given some expression. Protestantism lacks adequate international, or rather supernational, organization. Worse yet, most Protestant Christians are not conscious that their loyalty to the Church universal is a prior loyalty to their devotion to country. They forget that German and Ameri-

can Christians have more in common than either have with non-Christian fellow countrymen, for the unsearchable riches of Christ transcend our wealthiest national heritage apart from him. They lose sight of one aspect of our commission, the ministry of reconciliation, so that while we discharge to the full our obligations as citizens and as loyal patriots of our fatherlands, we dare not cease to fulfill this heavenly calling. It is pathetic that while little groups of international socialists meet together, seeking some basis on which this hideous carnage may be ended, Protestant Christendom has no means of bringing its leaders face to face to look at the situation as servants of Christ, and to employ the legitimate influence of our large numbers and commanding positions to hasten a just peace.

3. *His faith in the historic Christ.* To Luther the Christ of the gospels was the controlling revelation of God. "We must neither worship nor seek after any God, save the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Both before and since his time, it has been the custom to gather from the world about us what intimations it discloses of deity: this is called natural religion; then to add to this portrait the details that are found in the Bible, often placing proof texts from Leviticus or Ecclesiastes on the same level with those taken from the Gospels or the writings of Paul. The result is that the distinctive Christian conception of God in the face of Jesus Christ is obscured by other, and sometimes altogether incongruous, representations of him. Luther insisted that the Alpha and the Omega

of our knowledge of the God with whom we have to do for our salvation is Jesus Christ. "Begin by applying thy skill and study to Christ; there also let them continue fixed, and if thine own thoughts, or reason, or some one else guide and direct thee otherwise, only close thine eyes and say: I must and will know of no other God, save in my Lord Christ. See, there is open to me my Father's heart, will, and work, and I know him. It is the only way of transacting with God, that one make no self-prompted approach; and the true stair or bridge by which one may pass to heaven, that one remain below here and keep close to this flesh and blood, ay, to the words and letters that proceed from his mouth, by which in the tenderest way he leads us up to the Father, so that we find and feel no wrath or dreadful form, but pure comfort and joy and peace." Luther's stress is always on the historic Christ. "Try not to see even Jesus in glory until you have seen him crucified," he wrote to Melancthon.

This meant a recovery of the deity of Jesus. To be sure, the Church, then as now, always called him divine, and assented to the truth that in him all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in bodily form; but it nullified that doctrine by predicating of God many un-Christianlike characteristics, so that, in fact, for the Church he was not the fullness but a fraction of the Godhead. Luther insisted that in Christ "God has entirely emptied himself and kept nothing which he could have given us." To believe this is to think of God always in terms of Christ, never to picture him as loving, or forgiving,

or electing, or punishing, or rewarding, in any way incompatible with, or unlike, Christ's love and forgiveness and election and punishment and rewarding of those with whom he dealt in the days of his flesh. Luther thought lightly of speculative attempts to set forth the mode of our Lord's incarnation; the doctrine of the two natures in one Person he prized only when given a practical religious interpretation. He much preferred such moving phrases as "Christ the mirror of the Father's heart towards us." Although he cordially accepted the doctrine of the Trinity, he disliked the word as not Biblical and much colder than the personal word, "God." And God was to him invariably God in Christ, the Father he trusted in the Son, and whose Spirit dwelt within him, the Source of life and liberty.

The Church of our age still suffers from un-Christlike representations of God. What we need is not less but far greater stress upon the deity of the historic Jesus. In his name we repudiate as sheer idolatry anything imputed to God, in this or any other world, that is not entirely harmonious with God's self-disclosure in the Son of his love. In his name we devote ourselves to embody in our characters and in every institution and group in human society, homes, commercial enterprises, nations, the mind that was in Christ, that God may be all in all. The wellspring of our confidence and joy is that in Christ we find the Lord of heaven and earth, the God of whom and through whom and unto whom are all things, made indisputably plain. As Luther himself

put it: "For if we are certain of this: that what Jesus thinks, speaks, and wills, the Father also wills, then I defy all that may fight against me. For here in Christ have I the Father's heart and will."

In the years immediately following his bold act in nailing his Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Luther often signed himself, "Brother Martin Eleutherius," playing upon the similarity in sound between the German "Luther" and the Greek word, *eleutheros*, meaning free. As Brother Martin "Freeman" he stands endeared in our memories in the glorious liberty of a son of God whose constraining and emancipating love he found in the Son, Jesus Christ.