

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## LUTHER AS A PREACHER

MR. T. H. L. PARKER has recently written a book on Calvin as a preacher. It is entitled *The Oracles of God*. It introduces a neglected aspect of the great Reformer. Calvin was not exclusively a theologian whose motto was "Theology for theology's sake". He was primarily a preacher. He only became a theologian as he wrestled with the Word in the study prior to declaring it in its contemporary relevance from the pulpit.

A similar work is needed on Luther's preaching. It would point in precisely the same direction. But no such work exists. No exhaustive treatise on this subject has ever been prepared, not even in Germany.<sup>1</sup> The usual accounts in homiletical textbooks and histories of preaching are woefully inadequate and sometimes equally inaccurate. And, unhappily, the very material on which such a study could be based—the actual sermons of Martin Luther—is almost unavailable in English. Out of 1,978 complete sermons classified by Ebeling,<sup>2</sup> only a fraction have been translated into our tongue. Nine appear in the Philadelphia Edition of Luther's writings,<sup>3</sup> and the same number in Henry Cole's *Select Works*.<sup>4</sup> Several selections of Luther's sermons under various editors have appeared in the last hundred years, most of which seem to be based on the first translation into English of Luther's preaching. This bears the quaint title: "*Special and Chosen Sermons of D. Martin Luther, collected out of his writings and preachings for the necessary instruction and edification of such as hunger and seeke after the perfect knowledge and inestimable glorie which is in Christ Jesus, to the comfort and salvation of their souls.* Englished by W.G. Imprinted at London by Thomas Vautroullier dwelling in the Black Friers by Ludgate, 1578." The initials W.G. conceal the identity of one William Gace who in the same year published a rendering of Luther's *Tessaradecas Consolatoria*. This edition contains thirty-four sermons.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Mackinnon, *Luther and the Reformation*, IV, p. 318, n. 66.

<sup>2</sup> G. Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung*, Anlage I, Tabelle I.

<sup>3</sup> *Works of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia Edition (P.E.), II, pp. 391-425; IV, pp. 142-78.

<sup>4</sup> *Select Works of Martin Luther*, translated by Henry Cole, I, pp. 355-569.

The only sound and adequate sources on which any enquiry into Luther's preaching can be based are the twenty volumes in the massive Weimar Edition which contain his sermons. The task of examining them thoroughly in the original Latin or German is a formidable one. The result is that Luther as a preacher has scarcely been seriously considered in this country. Yet he is pre-eminently a preacher and especially a preacher's preacher. His sermons are models of evangelical exposition. His homiletical principles are of perennial value.

We tend to overlook the debt we owe to Luther. He set the sermon in the centre of the Church's worship. He elevated preaching to the level of a sacrament. "It was Luther," claimed Dr. A. E. Garvie, "who put the sermon in Protestantism in the place held by the Mass in Roman Catholicism and made preaching the most potent influence in the Churches of the Reformation."<sup>1</sup> We may go further than that. Luther's influence went beyond Protestantism. As Professor Mackinnon has shown, he revolutionised the preaching of the Roman Church.<sup>2</sup>

The sermon occupied a central position in Protestant worship, not as the word of man, but as the Word of God. The preacher was not a free-lance thinker who gave expression to his personal views. He was the mouthpiece of God. "God, the Creator of heaven and earth, speaks with thee through His preachers," declared Luther, "baptises, catechises, absolves thee through the ministry of His own sacraments. These are the words of God, not of Plato or Aristotle: it is God Himself who speaks."<sup>3</sup> Preaching is not what man says about God: it is what God says to man. Only as such can it claim an exalted place in the liturgy of the Church.

Luther did not become a preacher when he became a priest.<sup>4</sup> A priest was not necessarily required to preach. Luther was ordained in 1507. He did not begin to preach until 1510. On the advice of Staupitz he was seeking a doctorate of theology at the University of Wittenberg and it was part of the statutory requirements that he should be able to preach. Luther received a summons to preach his trial sermons first in the refectory of his convent at Erfurt, and then in the Stadtkirche of Wittenberg.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. E. Garvie, *The Christian Preacher*, pp. 115 f.

<sup>2</sup> J. Mackinnon, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

<sup>3</sup> *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar) (W.A.), *Tischreden*, IV, No. 4812.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. O. Scheel, *Martin Luther*, II, pp. 551 ff.

It was with much trepidation that he essayed his first sermon. This duty was no delight. "Oh how frightened I was at the sight of the pulpit!" he says in the *Table Talk*.<sup>1</sup> And yet this initial diffidence was an important contributory factor to his subsequent greatness as a preacher. Great preachers are often nervous, though not all nervous preachers are great!

Luther was first and foremost a preacher. Preaching was the spearhead of the Reformation. What was later printed and published abroad throughout the length and breadth of Germany was first preached in Wittenberg. Luther was not only a preacher; he was a pastoral preacher. He was Bugenhagen's assistant as well as a university professor. To this one Church he was attached to the end of his days. It is true that he went on preaching tours elsewhere, but from 1510 until his death in 1546 he was associated with the Wittenberg congregation. This was *his* congregation—"ecclesia mea" he calls it—and for it he knew he would be responsible at Judgment Day.<sup>2</sup> He only permitted himself to be drawn away from Wittenberg by exceptional circumstances—to attend the Leipzig Disputation and the Diet of Worms or to seek refuge in the Wartburg when the seas of opposition were running high. Usually he preached two or three times a week. When Bugenhagen was absent (as he was in 1528–9 in Brunswick, in 1530–2 in Lübeck, and in 1537–9 in Denmark) the whole burden of the pastorate devolved upon him and he preached three or four times a week. In the festival seasons he increased the frequency of his preaching correspondingly. In 1529 he preached no less than eighteen times in Passion Week and Easter Week—on eleven consecutive days from Palm Sunday to Wednesday of Easter Week.<sup>3</sup> "I am not only Luther," he said, "but Pomeranus, Registrar, Moses, Jethro and what not—all things in all."<sup>4</sup> These incessant pulpit labours lasted on to his dying day, for his swan song was delivered only four days before his death. In the *Table Talk* he modestly claims to have equalled the preaching activity of Augustine and Ambrose.<sup>5</sup>

It must be remembered that the Church at Wittenberg, as the Reformation progressed, was regarded more and more as a sort of test case. The eyes of all the world were upon it.

<sup>1</sup> W.A. *Tischr.* III, 3143b.

<sup>2</sup> W.A. XLIX, p. 318.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* XXIX, pp. 132 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Luthers Briefwechsel*, Enders, VIII, p. 326.

<sup>5</sup> W.A. *Tischr.* III, 3590a; V, 6434.

Protestantism might rise or fall according to the success or failure of this Church and congregation. Yet the members of this trial Church were not hand-picked : they did not represent a specially selected circle of super-Christians. They were very ordinary folk who needed the careful exhortations of the preacher and the pastoral ministrations of a true shepherd of souls. Moreover, this was a mission Church, too. Luther preached not only to the converted, but to the vulgar mob. The fervent appeals with which his sermons close make it quite evident that he was out for a verdict from the unawakened.<sup>1</sup>

There are no finer specimens of his congregational preaching than the eight sermons he preached in Wittenberg after his return from the Wartburg in 1522.<sup>2</sup> In his absence, Carlstadt, Zwilling and the Zwickau prophets had been sowing seeds of discord. The city was in an uproar when Luther returned. On 9th March, the first Sunday in Lent, he mounted his pulpit and preached the first of eight sermons covering such controversial topics as the Mass, images, the eating of meats and confession. But if the subjects were debatable, the tone was conciliatory. These remarkable discourses were delivered in a *vox suavis et sonora*<sup>3</sup> and their message was one of patient love. They produced immediate results. Dr. Schurf wrote to the Elector on 15th March, after the sixth sermon, "Oh, what joy has Dr. Martin's return spread among us ! His words, through divine mercy, are bringing back every day misguided people into the way of truth. It is as clear as the sun, that the Spirit of God is in him, and that he returned to Wittenberg by His special Providence".<sup>4</sup> Zwilling openly confessed that he was wrong and declared that Luther "preached like an angel". Carlstadt was silenced, and the city council acknowledged Luther's intervention by substantial gifts. The eloquence of one man had restored law and order to the frenzied populace.

Let those who accuse Luther of antinomianism weigh such a section as this :

We shall now speak of the fruit of this sacrament [i.e. the Eucharist], which is love; that is, that we should treat our neighbour even as God has treated us. Now we have received from God naught but love and favour, for Christ has

<sup>1</sup> G. Ebeling, *op. cit.*, pp. 473 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: The Reformation*, II, pp. 388 f.; F. Kuhn, *Luther, sa Vie et son Oeuvre*, II, pp. 70 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of Albrecht Burer, *Briefwechsel des Beatus Rhenanus*, 303; cf. also Introduction, p. liii, W.A. X.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in P. Schaff, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

pledged and given us His righteousness and everything that He has, has poured out upon us all His treasures, which no man can measure and no angel can understand or fathom, for God is a glowing furnace of love, reaching even from the earth to the heavens.

Love, I say, is a fruit of this sacrament. But I do not yet perceive it among you here in Wittenberg, although there is much preaching of love and you ought to practise it above all other things. This is the principal thing, and alone is seemly in a Christian. But no one shows eagerness for this, and you want to do all sorts of unnecessary things, which are of no account. If you do not want to show yourselves Christians by your love, then leave the other things undone, too, for St. Paul says in 1 Cor., "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal". This is a terrible saying of St. Paul. And further, "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries of God, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profiteth me nothing". You have not got so far as that, although you have received great and rich gifts from God, especially a knowledge of the Scriptures. It is true, you have the pure Gospel and the true Word of God, but no one as yet has given his goods to the poor, no one has yet been burned, and even these things would profit nothing without love. You would take all of God's goods in the sacrament, and yet not pour them forth again in love. One will not lend the other a helping hand, no one thinks first of another, but every one looks out for himself and his own gain, seeks but his own and lets everything else go as it will—if anybody is helped, well and good. No one looks after the poor or seeks how to help them. It is pitiful. You have heard many sermons about it and all my books are full of it and have the one purpose, to urge you to faith and love.<sup>1</sup>

Luther's preaching, however, was not confined to the pulpit. It was a peculiar feature of his approach to the Bible that he recognised no fundamental distinction between preaching and exegesis. For him true preaching was expository and the loftiest exegesis was declaratory. The sermon was a lecture and the lecture was a sermon. "For the Reformers," says von Schubert, "the pulpit was a kind of popular professorial chair, and the professorial chair a kind of student's pulpit."<sup>2</sup> Luther preached in the lecture-room as well as in the church. The syllabus of theological studies had no other aim than to educate preachers of the Gospel who were saturated in theology, not merely through the assimilation of knowledge, but through personal experience. "*Sola . . . experientia facit theologum.*"<sup>3</sup> "I see this," he wrote, "that he is not a theologian who knows much and teaches many things, but he who lives a holy and theological life."<sup>4</sup> Luther's theological and exegetical lectures were directed at the heart

<sup>1</sup> P.E. II, pp. 420-1.

<sup>2</sup> H. von Schubert, *Zu Luthers Vorlesungstätigkeit*, p. 3. Quoted by Ebeling, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> W.A. *Tischr.* I, 16.

<sup>4</sup> W.A. V, 26.

as well as the head. We may well take note of that to-day. In our theological colleges the Bible has been placed too often on the dissecting-table and too little on the altar. It has been approached from a purely academic standpoint. We have forgotten that it is a living Word in which God Himself speaks. The Bible is best studied in the context of the church rather than the classroom.<sup>1</sup>

Involved as he was in this orgy of sermonising, Luther had no time to superintend the publication of his discourses. He did not even write out his manuscript in full before entering the pulpit. He prepared a careful outline, but left the language to look after itself. Occasionally he even forgot his line of thought and preached a better sermon than he had intended. "Our Lord God alone will be the preacher."<sup>2</sup> His sermons would never have been preserved for posterity if the matter had been left in Luther's own hands. We are deeply indebted to a little band of scribes who devoted themselves to the tedious task of noting Luther's discourses as they were delivered and then preparing them for publication. This labour of love dates from 1522 onwards and it is significant that whereas prior to this year the sermons handed down are comparatively few in number and badly authenticated, those preserved after this year represent no less than ninety-two per cent of the total in this period and are much more carefully recorded. A fascinating story surrounds the names of Stephan Roth, George Rörer and Caspar Cruciger, Luther's principal shorthand writers, and Aurifaber and Veit Dietrich, who supervised the printing of the sermons.<sup>3</sup>

The main purpose of this present enquiry, however, is to indicate the keynotes of Luther's preaching. How are we to characterise the sermons of this pioneer preacher of Protestantism?

It is throughout the preaching of *the Word*. That is the outstanding and all-inclusive feature of Luther's pulpit activity. He was consumed in the service of the Word. There can be no genuine worship without the Word.<sup>4</sup> But what does Luther mean by the Word? Sometimes he seems to mean the voice of God. Sometimes he seems to mean the Scriptures. Sometimes he seems to mean Christ Himself. Actually he means all these. The Word is God speaking. It is God confronting man in

<sup>1</sup> Cf. P. S. Minear, *Eyes of Faith*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> W.A. *Tischr.* III, 3494.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G. Müller, *Magister Stephan Roth*; Th. Pressel, *Caspar Cruciger*.

<sup>4</sup> *Commentary on Galatians*, edited by Erasmus Middleton, p. 278.

personal encounter. It is the establishment of an I-Thou relationship between God and man. For only as man sees God in relation to himself can he see himself in relation to God.<sup>1</sup> Scripture is the witness of that divine-human confrontation. It is the indirect written record of the direct revelation. But Scripture can become once again a direct revelation through the operation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> The Spirit brings us the key to Scripture—the key that unlocks its secrets and re-creates the living Word from the dead letter. That key is Christ, who is Himself the Word.<sup>3</sup> The unity of Scripture inheres in Christ. The Word in the Old Testament can only be proclaimed under a Christological interpretation. The relationship of Law and Gospel is only clarified in Christ. The Law must be interpreted by Christ; the Gospel is constituted by Christ.<sup>4</sup> Only Christ, through the Holy Spirit, can, as it were, reverse the process of Scripture and turn it from an indirect written word into a direct living Word in which once again God speaks. It is to Luther that we owe the rediscovery of this existential and dynamic quality of the Word of God.

All Luther's preaching was coloured by this conception of the Word. In preaching, the whole activity of the Word takes place. The Holy Spirit inspires the preacher to set forth Christ in all the Scriptures and thus bring men face to face with the living God. Preaching, then, synopsis the entire work of redemption. It is a "moment" into which eternity is packed.

This is the general ground of all Luther's preaching. We shall now analyse some of its particular aspects.<sup>5</sup>

## I

What strikes us most of all is the strict *Subjection* of Luther's sermons to the Scripture, and the sole object of Scripture, namely, Jesus Christ. "I choose a passage and stick to it," he writes, "so that the people may tell after the sermon what I was speaking about."<sup>6</sup> He submits to a rigorous discipline. He is bound by the Word. His preaching is never merely topical. He

<sup>1</sup> P. S. Minear, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> On the Spirit and the Word, cf. W.A. VI, 460; XI, 52 f.; XV, 729; XX, 451; Lenker Edition, XII, paras. 16-17; Enders, I, 141.

<sup>3</sup> On Christ as the Word, cf. P.E. VI, 379, 478, 489; W.A. XVIII, 606; *Römerbrief* (ed. Ficker), 240.

<sup>4</sup> P. S. Watson, *Let God be God!* p. 151.

<sup>5</sup> For the first two headings of this analysis I am indebted to G. Ebeling, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>6</sup> W.A. *Tischr.* II, 1650.



can never turn a text into a pretext. His preaching is never a movement from men to the text ; it is always a movement from the text to men. The matter never determines the text ; the text always determines the matter. He deals with the centre of the Gospel, not the circumference. He does not treat questions, but doctrines. But when he preaches doctrines, he always follows a prescribed text step by step. One of the prime qualifications of the preacher is that he should be *bonus textualis*—a good textualist.<sup>1</sup> Luther never dispensed with a text and never approved of the practice in others. “ It is disgraceful for the lawyer to desert his brief ; it is even more disgraceful for the preacher to desert his text.”<sup>2</sup>

This subjection to Scripture is illustrated by his choice of texts. He adhered most strictly to the official Perikope system, always selecting his text from the passage for the day. Whilst he freely criticised the contents of the lectionary and emended it in the *Formula Missae* and the *Deutsche Messe*,<sup>3</sup> he never sought to replace it. Opinions may vary as to the usefulness of such a practice. It has these advantages at least : it ensures that the great themes of Scripture are handled regularly and systematically, it allows the congregation to know beforehand what is the subject of preaching and to prepare their minds and hearts for it, and it compels the preacher to cast his net wider than he would otherwise do if his own interest and experience alone determined the choice of text.

There are some words of P. T. Forsyth that Luther would have fully approved. The ideal ministry, he argued, must be a Bibliocracy. “ We must speak from within the silent sanctuary of Scripture. . . . The Bible is the one Enchiridion of the preacher still, the one manual of eternal life, the one page that glows as all life grows dark, and the one book whose wealth rebukes us more the older we grow because we knew and loved it so late.”<sup>4</sup>

## II

Surprisingly enough, this subjection to Scripture in Luther’s preaching produced an astonishing *Freedom*. He was bound to the Word, but to nothing else. In fact, this loyalty to the Word liberated him from the restriction of preaching-forms. We shall

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. IV, 4512.

<sup>2</sup> Enders, I, 149.

<sup>3</sup> W.A. XII, 209-10 ; XIX, 79.

<sup>4</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 38.

look in vain in Luther for any ingeniously constructed outline or deft juxtaposition of verses. Here are no polished periods, no affectation of style, no cleverly engineered rhetorical climaxes. Here is no heavyweight introduction guaranteed to tie the hearers in homiletical knots. Here are no textual conjuring tricks which produce the rabbit of novel exegesis from the silk hat of an unpromising verse. Bondage to the text frees the preacher for the service of the Word in the Church.

### III

A third characteristic of Luther's preaching is *Simplicity*. There is nothing grandiose about his style or matter. He begins his sermons with a frankly informal introduction and finishes with a simple appeal, devoid of any ringing climax. Dr. J. S. Stewart's striking injunction, "Cultivate the quiet close",<sup>1</sup> finds its perfect exemplification in Luther. He did not hesitate to preach on half the text if he had no time to go further, or to take the same text again and again if he had not exhausted its meaning.

Luther always sought to expound the plain meaning of Scripture. He rejected the fourfold sense of the Schoolmen and insisted on the literal interpretation of the Word. "When I was young, and especially before I was acquainted with theology, I dealt largely with allegories and tropes and a quantity of idle craft," he admits, "but now I have let all that slip, and my best craft is to give the Scripture with its plain meaning: for the plain meaning is learning and life."<sup>2</sup>

His preaching was thus popular in the truest sense of the term. It was thoroughly of the people. There was nothing formal about it. It lacked the liturgical stamp. To borrow a phrase from Dr. Luccock, he preached to life situations.<sup>3</sup> He used the common speech of every day. His homilies were home-spun. He often preached in the house—his house Postils form a considerable part of his preaching—and all his sermons have a homely touch. He always strove to make himself intelligible to the humblest of his hearers. Before he preached, he quaintly said, he would look into the jaws of the man in the street.<sup>4</sup> We

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Stewart, *Heralds of God*, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in J. Ker, *History of Preaching*, p. 102. On the Literal Sense, cf. W.A. III, 14; VI, 301, 509, 562; VII, 648-52.

<sup>3</sup> H. H. Luccock, *In the Minister's Workshop*, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. W.A. *Tischr.* III, 3579.

are reminded of Malherbe's confession, "When I am at a loss for a word or a detail of style, I go and consult the dock hands of the Port-au-foin".

Such simplicity must not be despised. It is not the simplicity of shallowness. It is the simplicity of depth. Luther's preaching is like the Gospel itself—so simple that a child can grasp some of it and so profound that a sage cannot plumb all of it. "To preach simply is a great art," declares Luther. "Christ understood and practised it. He speaks only of the ploughed field, of the mustard seed, and uses only common country similitudes."<sup>1</sup>

#### IV

*Evangelical Fervour* is an obvious mark of Luther's preaching. He was "importunately evangelical," says Bayne.<sup>2</sup> When he was asked, "What should we preach?" his answer was, "The Gospel".<sup>3</sup> Mackinnon claims that Gospel preaching in the evangelical sense begins with Luther.<sup>4</sup> He liberated the sermon from its medieval grave-clothes and made it once again a means of grace. He declared God's great salvation. Like all true preaching, Luther's message moved within the twin orbits of sin and grace. That man has sinned but Christ has died—this was the sum of his evangel.

For Luther to preach the Gospel was nothing else than to bring Christ to men and men to Christ.<sup>5</sup> Like John Wesley, he simply "offered Christ". Christ was his all-sufficient theme. The Bible itself was full of Christ. "In the whole Scripture there is nothing else but Christ, either in plain words or involved words."<sup>6</sup> There are problem passages, hard to be understood, but the content of Scripture as a whole is perfectly plain; it is nothing else than the revelation of God in Christ. That is true of the Old Testament as well as the New. "The entire Old Testament refers to Christ and agrees with Him."<sup>7</sup> Luther compares the Old and New Testaments to the "two lips of the one divine mouth of Christ".<sup>8</sup> If, however, the Old Testament is to be the subject of evangelical preaching, it must be interpreted in the light of the New. Only then shall we recognise

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. IV, 4719.

<sup>2</sup> P. Bayne, *Martin Luther, His Life and Work*, I, p. 260.

<sup>3</sup> Luther, *Sämmtliche Werke*, Erlangen, XLVII, 455.

<sup>4</sup> J. Mackinnon, op. cit., III, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Erl. X, i, 14.

<sup>6</sup> W.A. XI, 223.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. X, i, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by J. Macconnachie in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, I, p. 116.

the Old Testament as "the swaddling clothes and manger in which Christ was wrapped and laid".<sup>1</sup>

Luther's attitude to the Old Testament is most relevant to present-day Biblical discussions. The Report of the World Council of Churches, *From the Bible to the Modern World*, closes with these words: "Begin with the New Testament, then use the Old Testament as interpretative background; then sum up the teaching of the whole Bible in Christ. Further work may well begin with the fuller application of this principle."<sup>2</sup> That is precisely Luther's position.

Only from such a point of view can Biblical preaching be fully evangelical. Only so can the Old Testament recover its original and rightful place in the Christian kerygma.

## V

Whilst Luther's preaching is full of evangelical fervour, it never loses sight of the *Ethical Demand* of the Gospel. The charge of antinomianism is as inapplicable to Luther as it was to Wesley or Paul. In the midst of his most ardent evangelical appeals, the challenge of Christ to conduct is never overlooked or obscured. Luther complained that when he told his congregation that salvation could not be won by good works, "they imagine that we are inviting them to have a good time and to do just as they please".<sup>3</sup> He always made it perfectly clear that faith without works is dead. "It is as impossible to separate works from faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire."<sup>4</sup>

A cursory glance at the titles of some of his sermons is sufficient to convince us of their practical nature: Of the Works of Charity, Of Good Works the Fruits of Faith, Of the Life of a Christian, Of the Leading of a Godly Life, Of Giving Tribute to Caesar, Of the Good Samaritan, Of the Sum of the Christian Life, Of the Law and the Gospel. Law and Gospel are always set side by side in Luther. They are both works of Christ. Law is His *opus alienum*; Gospel is His *opus proprium*. "The Law revealeth the disease: the Gospel ministereth the medicine."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W.A. X, i, 576.

<sup>2</sup> *From the Bible to the Modern World*, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> W.A. *Tischr.* II, 1947.

<sup>4</sup> P.E. VI, 452. Cf. also *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), P.E. I, 184-285.

<sup>5</sup> *Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. Kerr, p. 219.

## VI

A final feature of Luther's preaching is its *Decisiveness*. There is nothing vague or cloudy about it. It is clear-cut and definite. A sense of reality pervades the whole. Despite Wesley's misguided strictures,<sup>1</sup> Luther was no mystic. Christ and Anti-Christ, God and the Devil—these were objective realities to him, and his keen awareness of their reality gave a peculiar concreteness to his preaching. Every sermon to him was a struggle with Satan. Immortal souls were at stake. Men lay in darkness at his side. He preached as a dying man to dying men. The eternal issues were being settled in this "moment" of preaching—the issues of life and death, light and darkness, sin and grace, the Kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world. Luther's preaching bore the stamp of urgency. There was a once-for-allness about it, an *Einmaligkeit*, which stimulated the hearers to an instant response. They were made to feel that the offer of the Gospel was here and now and now or never. Dr. John Ker says of this aspect of Luther's preaching, "He was taking aim at the heart, with arrows which reached their mark".<sup>2</sup>

This is the time; no more delay!  
This is the Lord's appointed day;  
Come in, this moment, at His call,  
And live for Him who died for all.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the decisiveness of Luther's preaching.

Irradiating all these hallmarks of Luther's sermons, and shining through his conception of the Word which is the ground of all his preaching, there gleams the purest light of all—the light of love. We have noted it already in the Wittenberg sermons. We shall close with a quotation from *Hypocrisy Unveiled*. It will serve to remind us that for Luther, as for Paul, love is the greatest thing in the world. "Love is the criterion whereby to decide whether or not the faith be true faith," he says; and again, "Love is, as it were, a touchstone, whereby we discover whether faith be true or false".<sup>4</sup> Here is the passage:

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of John Wesley* (Standard Edition), II, p. 467.

<sup>2</sup> J. Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wesley, *Methodist Hymn Book*, No. 323, v. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Select Works*, H. Cole, I, p. 455.

What, therefore, is the sum of that doctrine which is to be taught to the people? Paul answereth, "The end of the commandment is love out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned". Here, thou hast the sum of Christian life most excellently and fully comprehended, compendiously and briefly uttered, and which may be not unfitly printed in thy memory . . . [Paul] attributeth to love the sum of the whole law, wherein it wholly consisteth; and to love is nothing else but to favour and embrace one from the heart, and to show and perform unto him all the duties and friendship and good will. Now, those jangling doctors also use such words, preaching and boasting many things of love, but all by piecemeal, and particularly applied to their own trifles and follies; even as heretics, wicked men, and ungracious wretches have love also, but that which consisteth only among themselves, and them that are of the same sort with them. In the mean time, they hate and persecute all good Christians, whom they would willingly accuse of murder if they could. But this doth not yet deserve to be called true love. If I choose one or two, whose conditions like and please me, whom I do friendly and lovingly embrace, and no men beside them, it is called a particular love, which proceedeth not out of a pure heart, but from an infected and filthy heart; for true love floweth out of a pure heart when I endeavour, as God hath commanded me, to pour forth my love toward my neighbour, and to favour all without difference, whether they be friends or enemies, even as our heavenly Father Himself doth, who "suffereth His sun to rise on the good and evil, and sendeth His rain to the thankful and unthankful". Whence cometh the doing of these things? truly from pure love, whereof His heart is most full. This He poureth forth abundantly upon all, omitting no man, whether he be good or evil, worthy or unworthy; and this is called true, divine, entire, and perfect love.<sup>1</sup>

A. SKEVINGTON WOOD.

*Airdrie, Lanarkshire.*

<sup>1</sup> *Sermons*, pp. 149-50.