

Luther the Humanist

James M. Kittelson, The Ohio State University

I hope you don't mind hearing a little confession here and now at the outset of this afternoon. I confess that I chose the title for my second presentation today with a certain mischievous intent. To my knowledge I have never before given a lecture that was such a dud that no one came to the second one. But it could happen. Fully aware of this fact, and knowing that the word, "humanist," raises a red flag to many people, I decided to label Luther a "humanist" just to guarantee that I had an audience, even if a hostile one. After all, a hostile audience is better than none at all, and I did promise Professor Reichwald that I would stir the pot some during my time here.

Now that I have played my little joke on you (and now that you are here), I hasten to reassure you on one point: Martin Luther was by no means a humanist in our contemporary sense of the term. He did not believe that human beings were the measure of all things, nor did he by any means think that our reason, will, or inclination to the good could merit much besides eternal damnation. He was, after all, the man who said that "Reason is the Devil's whore" as well as the professor who removed Aristotle from the curriculum of his own university. He is also the one who accused Erasmus of being no Christian at all, because Erasmus had defended the freedom of the human will on the grounds that such mighty questions were finally unanswerable.

There is, however, also some solid truth to the title I have chosen

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for this afternoon; indeed, if there weren't, I wouldn't have played my little trick. To find it requires us to take three steps: 1) I have to say something about the word, "humanism," and what it meant in the early 16th century; 2) we have to know what Luther owed to this particular humanism; 3) we have to know the grounds on which he broke from it, too. Only then can Luther have something to say to us in our circumstances.

Everyone knows about the conflict between Luther and Erasmus on the question of the freedom of the human will. Many have regarded and continue to regard this debate as the division between Renaissance and Reformation and between Humanism and Luther. Here was Erasmus "defending" the freedom of the will and here was Luther denying it. On the other hand, even Erasmus would by no means have claimed to be or even recognized as we today call a humanist. He had no doubts about the absolute necessity of divine grace. Instead, his query was whether grace was sufficient for salvation. In his last words he even reverted from the Latin tongue to his maternal language, Dutch, and said, "Lieve God" or "Love God." Erasmus, too, was not a 20th-century humanist, who would never say such a thing.

Just as this morning with late medieval theology and religion, so too this afternoon: we must get 16th-century humanism straight before we can understand Luther as a "humanist." In the first place, this humanism was by no means a philosophical or theological set of convictions about the abilities of human beings over and against God. Lorenzo Valla, one of the best known Italian humanists of a half-century earlier, wrote a dialogue amongst a Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew in which the Christian declared that he was completely dependent upon the grace of God and could accomplish nothing for his salvation on his own. He also composed a set of

Notes on the New Testament from which Erasmus worked in composing his own Adnotationes in Novum Testamentum. Luther used both and chided Erasmus for following Valla in all ways except his views on the bondage of the will. "Humanism" was not—at least in the Renaissance—a set view on the capabilities of human beings in the presence of God.

What was it, then? It was an insistence that the studia humanitatis or "the humanities," as we call them, were far more important for the conduct of life than what we might call logic, philosophy, or systematic theology, to say nothing of advanced mathematics, the social sciences, or theoretical physics. They might add—to someone who lives in our world—that how one actually conducts life is far more important than what one thinks about life. They firmly maintained that the studies they recommended prepared one actually to live life in a productive and even God pleasing way.

It is very easy for us to think of this matter in the sort of flabby "life skills" manner that is all too common in high schools, colleges, and universities these days. The humanists had nothing of the kind in mind. To them, the conduct of life was not the acquisition of certain skills that might allow one to manage one's life in the sense of balancing one's check book, but the gentle intrusion of the wisdom that will never fail me. After all, knowing how to manipulate my family, business, and political circumstances is one thing; being able to live within it is yet another. The humanists wanted to provide—or lead to—the wisdom that would enable me to live within it and to make a contribution to it.

How, then, was one to meet this goal? It was not easy. Above all, it required learning how human beings had lived in a better time than their own. To do so required skipping over the Middle Ages and going back to

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classical and Christian antiquity. Accomplishing this feat naturally required, in addition, learning the ancient languages and learning them the way the ancients wrote them. Initially, someone like Petrarch limited this undertaking to correct Latin and even wrote a long, boring epic poem, Africa. Later, Lorenzo Valla extended the task to Greek, in particular with his Notes on the New Testament, and finally a German, Reuchlin, added Hebrew with his studies of the Cabbalah. Please note that this program contains no real concern for Christian doctrine any more than it does for political theory or philosophy. Thus, Valla could observe that the Greek which Jerome rendered as "do penance" really meant "repent," but draw none of the theological implications that this emendation suggests, while Erasmus could warn against becoming involved in doctrinal debates, because they would draw attention away from the necessary reform of life and morals. One of his followers observed in an index to his edition of Jerome, that the index was not to be used to search out Jerome's teachings on this or that dogmatic issue but for the purpose of "distinguishing fine phrases." In sum, the humanists were interested in education for the conduct of life, whether it be in business, politics, or the family. They wished to inculcate enlightened piety rather than true doctrine, that is, the wisdom that would guide a person to live life well and usefully.

There can be no question but that Luther drew upon this tradition in many ways. Our concern here is specifically with how he drew upon it for his own work as a professor. When he succeeded to Staupitz's position as Professor of the Bible at Wittenberg University, he agreed to take responsibility for these lectures for the rest of his life. He did so, in spite of the fact that he never liked Wittenberg and even tried while he was at the Wartburg, 1521-1522, to arrange a call to Erfurt. Yet, and as I noted

this morning, he fulfilled his duties faithfully.

The best evidence for this fact comes from two little incidents in his life. The first concerns a man named Paul Lange, who, although by no means successful in his own academic career, nevertheless thought he could make something of a name for himself by writing a book about other German professors who either were already famous for their learning or who could be counted upon to become famous. Inexplicably, he included "little Wittenberg," as Luther called it, on his list of places at which to hold interviews. Even more inexplicably, he did not include Dr. Martin Luther among the people he interviewed. No one knows why he did not interview Dr. Luther, but the year was 1513 and I suspect that the reason is that Dr. Luther was simply unavailable. You see, Luther was not only lecturing on the Psalms to his students, along with his other duties, but also doing his best to teach himself Hebrew. There is indeed evidence that he used the Masoretic texts of the Psalms for these lectures.

The second incident comes from a single letter of Luther's, this time in early 1516 to his friend, Johannes Lang. Luther had apparently heard that Lang was going to visit the spring Frankfurt book fair, and Luther was up on his bibliography if not on his reading. He asked Lang to buy him three books, and promised that he was good for whatever Lang would have to pay for them. Luther had heard of the publication of the following: More's Utopia, Erasmus's In Praise of Folly, and Wolfgang Capito's Hebrew Grammar. He wanted all three. In and of itself, this request shows just how well Luther was integrated into the writings and the circles of humanist scholarship. In sum, he knew what was going on! But the odd fact is that he added that if Lang could not acquire all three for him, he must get the Hebrew grammar above all. This book Luther needed

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for his work as a professor. There were a few others in Europe who were equally keen on learning both Greek and Hebrew, but not many who were professors of theology. In sum, Luther was taking everything he could from anyplace and anyone he could get it.

One person in particular was important for Luther's early development. He was the French humanist, Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples. It is apparent that Luther adopted much of Lefevre's exegetical methods during the course of his own early lectures on Psalms. Simply put, in place of the sometimes fanciful four-fold method of exegesis so popular in the Middle Ages--the so-called Quadriga--Lefevre substituted a two-fold method, according to which the Scriptures had a literal sense and a spiritual sense but then conflated both into the prophetic sense. In this way, the Scriptures spoke directly to the believer, both condemning and saving at the same time. There can be no question but that Luther both knew Lefevre's own commentary on the Psalms and his method, and that he at the very least took them into account in his own work.

It is important now to pause for a moment and ask where we are in our consideration of the theme, "Luther the Humanist." One thing should be clear: Luther took the humanists and humanist scholarship seriously. In addition, he knew it intimately. I would simply add that for a time he courted the humanists even to the point of Hellenizing his own name into "Eleutherios," that is, "the free one" or "the freed one." Just as with respect to late medieval theology, so, too, with humanism, Luther was a man of his times. He appears once again as the university man and in particular as the young university man, that is, someone who is open to the most recent and the best of scholarly work and, above all, someone who is willing to strike out on new paths for the sake of both teaching and

defending the truth.

Naturally enough, these borrowings from the humanists showed themselves most prominently in his work as a practicing exegete as well as in his ideas about education in general, about which I will have more to say tomorrow. Of the ancient languages, he once said that they were "the sheath in which this sword of the spirit is contained, the casket in which we carry this jewel, the vessel in which we hold this wine." According to Luther, God chose to speak in the ancient languages, and we must therefore learn them.

But Luther had an even more profound debt to the humanists in his hermeneutic—that is, his basic understanding of the Scriptures—and this is the one that contemporary Christians, and even Lutherans, commonly fail to acknowledge in their own work. This debt has to do with a fundamental understanding about the nature of the text itself and therefore about how one approaches it. The question is this: are the Scriptures first and foremost a sourcebook for doctrine or are they something else? For Luther the answer was that they were something else. To put it differently, the authors of the Scriptures had a point of view and to understand each passage correctly required understanding them from the authors' point(s) of view.

Luther himself once remarked, "I am the first to place primary emphasis on the importance of laying hold upon the meaning of the book, that which it wants to say, the essential viewpoint of the author. If we do not know this central fact, it is impossible to understand a book." He put it a little differently when he said, "He who confronts the mysteries of Holy Scripture with the mind of a horse or an ass will never understand them."

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What this means, very simply (and it is simple), is that we must conform our minds to the texts of the Scriptures, that is, to the intentions of their authors. I said that this is a simple matter, and I can illustrate it simply. My wife is an avid researcher of, among other things, cook books and gardening/landscaping books, and we are both avid practitioners of these arts. As you might guess, these are not beginner's books on either of these subjects but instead books that talk about how you do, for example, Japanese cooking or Japanese landscaping. To be sure, these books contain recipes and descriptions of individual plants and how to care for them. But their point is how to cook or to landscape in the Japanese manner.

Now and then, Margaret will loan one or another of her books to a neighbor or a friend who has some interest in the subject. All too often the following occurs when the book is returned—if it is returned. My wife will say something like, "Well, what did you think of that book?" And the reply will be something like, "I found the most marvelous recipe for sushi" or "Isn't that whatever-it-is shrub just lovely?"

The point is quite simple. The reader missed the point. In these books they found all kinds of little-bitty details, but if they had to cook or to landscape in the Japanese mode with whatever they had at hand, they wouldn't have a clue as to how to go about it. My wife's cookbooks and landscaping books are not collections of recipes and they are not a listing of shrubs. Instead the recipes and the shrubs are there to illustrate the Japanese way of doing these things. Because Margaret knows how to read—in just the manner Luther and the humanists recommended—she can cook and landscape in the Japanese manner without even reconsulting the books and above all without having the proper ingredients or shrubs at

hand. So too, was it for Luther with respect to the Scriptures. This understanding of them, which he got from the humanists, was what allowed him to declare flatly that the letter of James was an "epistle of straw" and did not belong in the canon and that Revelations was probably composed by a "mad Syrian monk." Why? They did not fit with the whole.

I am perfectly aware that I may be treading on some toes here, but, rather than tread on them, I would prefer to stomp on them. You see, here is also the point at which Luther departed from the humanists. He thought, nay was convinced, that he knew the essential point of view of the authors of the Scriptures and therefore knew what they had to say. It was, quite simply, Christ alone and him crucified. Christ was the point of view of both the Old and New Testaments. To be sure, Christ was predicted in the Old Testament in all the passages we commonly use during the season of Advent. But, more importantly He was prefigured in the entire history of the people of Israel, as God repeatedly called His people to Him, chastized them, and drove them back to Him. "Understand this clearly," Luther once wrote, "that the Israelites are not [in their writing] concerned with a foreshadowing or image but with an example." The Old Testament is thus first and foremost filled with examples of the final atonement that would come in Christ. Here was why Jesus on the road to Emmaeus could expound all the law and the prophets and show that it pointed to Him.

In the New Testament one then meets Christ personally and has the opportunity to hear Him speak directly. But once again Luther was far more concerned with the speaking than with the acting. He wrote that he far preferred the Gospel of John to the other Gospels because in the others one learns much about what Jesus did but in John one hears much of

what he had to say. And, as Luther had it, what Jesus did by way of miracles, healings, and the like "do me no good. But His words are life itself."

Here we see Luther taking the humanist understanding of a text to its radical conclusion. By claiming to know what the point of view of the author was, he declares that he knows what the text means. It means, as Paul had it, "Christ and Him crucified." Now, when it is preached, it engages the hearer and finally the reader. As Luther once remarked, "It is a divine miracle when it is made possible for us to hear and to read the words of the Scriptures as though every man heard them spoken to himself personally by God Himself." In another place he concluded his discussion by declaring, "So, every word of the Scriptures that has Christ and His salvation as its subject is directed personally to the hearer as well." I ask you, "What could be more personal than the message that God loves you?"

Here of course is also where Luther divided from even the humanists of his time, even if they were not humanists in our understanding of the term. Here is the core of his conflict with Erasmus. Luther claimed to know and Erasmus—who was being in this regard perfectly true to himself—insisted that this doctrinal point was unknowable from the Scriptures. In truth, Erasmus thought of course that all doctrines were finally unknowable and, what is more, useless.

This classic confrontation—one that still appears in Western Civilization textbooks, however badly it is misunderstood—had its moments of poignancy. On Erasmus's side, it is apparent that he spent some time looking for an issue on which to indicate to all concerned that he and Luther were not in agreement. He went to the point of writing several

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friends for advice on what topic he should choose to signal their disagreement. Thomas More finally provided the answer—the freedom of the will. Even so, in On the Freedom of the Will, Erasmus did not argue that human beings had free will; instead he insisted that the issue was moot, that is unknowable.

On Luther's side, I think it undeniable that he was playing a double game for reasons that are completely understandable, given the desperate situation in which he earlier found himself. In 1517 he wrote his friend, John Lang, "I am reading Erasmus and my esteem for him diminishes daily. It pleases me that he constantly and eruditely condemns both monks and priests for their inveterate and stupid ignorance; but I fear that he does not promote Christ nor the grace of God, of which he is more ignorant than is Lefevre d'Etaples. With him the human is more prevalent than the divine. Though I prefer not to judge him, I admonish you not to read all his works, or rather, not to receive them indiscriminately." Yet, two years later he could write Erasmus himself, "Who is there whose innermost being Erasmus has not penetrated, whom Erasmus does not reach, in whom Erasmus does not reign? Wherefore, dear Erasmus, learn to know this little brother in Christ also. . . ." But in between these two letters, Luther had also written, "I find much in Erasmus which seems strange and unhelpful to the knowledge of Christ, if I speak as a theologian rather than as a grammarian."

Erasmus finally started the fight in 1523 with his Diatribes on the Freedom of the Will, and Luther ignored it. He would have continued to ignore it if it hadn't been for his colleague, Melanchthon, and his wife, Katie, who insisted that he must reply. Finally he did, in 1525, but painfully so. As he wrote a friend while in the midst of composing On the

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Bondage of the Will, "I cannot tell you how difficult it is to respond to such an unlearned book from such a learned man."

Erasmus drew the line between the two, and Luther complimented him for it. Others, he said, had troubled him with trifles, but Erasmus went for the jugular. And where was it? Not really on the subject of the freedom or bondage of the will. The real point was whether one could know the answer to the question. Spiritus sanctus non scepticus est was Luther's reply. To Erasmus's admission that he was not really a theologian, Luther replied, "Is that ever the truth!" By refusing to make assertions on this critical matter Erasmus raised real questions as to whether he was a Christian at all. The Scriptural authors were absolutely clear on this central issue for salvation: human beings could contribute nothing, and it was entirely the work of God through Christ. All Christians could do was to trust the promises of God and the merits of Christ, and this trust was itself a gift of God.

Here is the true dividing line between Erasmus and Luther and the true point at which Luther was (I admit it) not a humanist even in 16th-century terms. He used all the tools of the humanists, but he used them to seek out and to teach true doctrine, life-giving doctrine. But please note, this doctrine was not what we may call the Spitzfindigkeiten, the small points, of the Scriptures, but the main issue: are human beings responsible for their own salvation or did Christ really do it, once and for all? For Luther, there was only one answer to this question, and it was based in the Scriptures themselves: "A Word shall quickly slay him!"

Hence, the answer to the question of whether Luther was a humanist is both yes and no, as is the answer to any question of some serious historical significance. Yes he was, when it came to the methods and the goal of

saying here that if we exercise our God-Given talents, we can manage our affairs here on earth. We might, in passing, very well ask ourselves how good a job we have done of it. When God gave us dominion over the earth, he did not tell us to be stupid about it.

There are, however, two problems yet to challenge us. In the first place—and perhaps most importantly—there is the problem of reason after the fall as it addresses the question of human reason coram Deo or in the presence of God. Here, and only here, is where "Reason is the devil's whore." As Luther remarked in the commentary on Genesis, "The knowledge of God is twofold, one general and the other proper. In general, all humans have a knowledge of God, that is, that God is, that he created heaven and earth, that he is just, that he punishes the impious, and so forth." Luther thus had a "natural theology" according to which everyone can know that there is an omnipotent God.

But for Luther, at least, this is not an important question and the answer to it is therefore perfectly trivial. The critical issue has instead to do with this omnipotent God's intentions regarding humankind. Here human reason has nothing to offer. To demonstrate his point, Luther picked a common theme of the time, namely, whether honorable figures from ancient Greece and Rome had anything to say on this subject. His answer was unequivocal. "Cicero is invicibly ignorant about God. For with him you see nothing about Him Himself in the disputations concerning the nature of the gods, and the ends of good and mad lawas, because by virtue of human reason . . . he is ignorant of what God wills, of what might be his intentions concerning us."

Here is true ignorance, but for Luther the problem went far deeper than mere ignorance. When it played with things divine, reason was not

penetrating to the meaning of a text, in this case the texts of the Scriptures. No he wasn't, when it comes to the matter of knowing what the doctrinal content of those texts might be. We therefore come, inevitably and finally, to Luther's understanding of human reason. As surprising as it might seem, we also come almost full circle to the question of the "autonomy" of human reason in the contemporary understanding of what the word, "humanism," might mean.

This is not an easy subject. It is particularly not easy to explain in the few minutes that remain this afternoon. So, I will present it under the three canonical headings: 1) reason before the fall; 2) reason after the fall, under two sub-categories—with respect to the world in which we live, and with respect to things divine; 3) illumined reason.

The first is easy. Before the fall (and this is a purely hypothetical category), human reason was such that "Adam had an illumined reason, true acknowledgement of God, and a will properly directed to God and the neighbor." But then came the fall.

After the fall, reason is pictured in two ways. With respect to the world in which we live, Luther regarded reason as "the most important and the highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things in this life, the best and something divine. It is the inventor and mentor of all the arts, medicine, law, and of whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory men possess in this life. By virtue of this fact it ought to be named the essential difference by which man is distinguished from the animals and other things. Nor did God after the fall of Adam take away this majesty of reason, but rather confirmed it." Please note the last sentence, "Nor did God after the fall of Adam take away this majesty of reason, but rather confirmed it." Very simply, Luther is

only ignorant but also profoundly wrong-headed. As he put it in a different place, "Our reason knows that God is. But who and what He is, who actually is God, that reason does not know. Reason plays blind-man's-bluff with God and always makes mistakes, and misses every time, calling that God which is not God, and again not calling Him God who is really God. Therefore, in trying so hard, reason gives God's name an honor to whatever it considers is God, but never finds Him who is really God, but always the devil or its own vanity, which is ruled by the devil." In this respect, we might simply ask ourselves how often we have preferred our own rules or our own doctrines over the love of God in Christ.

There was for Luther, however, another kind of reason, the illumined reason or the ratio illuminata. This was not the sort of reason that understood the Law, "Because reason knows nothing except the law, according to which it necessarily attributes righteousness as occurring through the Law." Indeed, it did not even really know the law, for "no one knows the Law or can explain it as such; this is the work of the Gospel."

Reason that has been enlightened by the Gospel is an entirely different matter. Indeed, it sees the entire world in a new light. One clue to the truly revolutionary character of this reason comes from an apparently odd source. How, one might ask, could Luther compose "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" in the midst of one of his own deepest depressions? And why should he give such apparently odd pastoral advice, such as that to a man who was concerned about predestination? He told the man to rejoice that he was being attacked by Satan on this subject. All by themselves such doubts and fears were evidence that this man, suffering though he was, belonged to Christ. After all, Luther said, "Satan does

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not bother those, like Erasmus, that he already has in his grasp." Luther thus, with his illumined reason, could wring assurance out of despair.

My favorite—and I think the most telling—illustration of this use of illumined reason by Luther is the following. On one occasion a student had managed—as students sometimes do—to impregnate a young woman from Wittenberg. The student wrote Luther about it, and informed him that although he was inclined, as a matter of honor and doing the right thing, to marry her. But his mother opposed this move on the grounds that the young lady was beneath her son's station. The student should give up his studies, come home, flee the situation, and go to work in the family business. A suitable marriage would be arranged.

There are all sorts of obvious pastoral responses to this situation. The student suggested one of them: the honorable thing would be to marry the woman he had made pregnant. Another was to invoke the law by saying that it was his obligation to do so; after all, they had committed adultery and the only way to atone for it was with a marriage. Yet another was to say that he should not add sin to sin by failing to honor his mother and her wishes; hence, he should not marry the young woman, because his mother was forbidding it. Still one more would suggest that he was in love with the young lady, so why not marry her?

I cannot believe that anyone in this room would second-guess Luther if he had chosen any one of these options, with the possible exception of the last. I certainly wouldn't. But Luther took none of them. To be sure, he urged the young man to marry the girl even in defiance of his mother's wishes. But the question is, "Why or on what grounds did he give this advice?" Here is illumined reason, that is, reason informed by the Gospel, at work. Luther wrote back, "If you don't marry her, you will

have a wounded conscience. And you know what a worm the conscience can be."

Here was reason that was captivitas in obsequium Christi. Luther was concerned not with the law, with the mother's wishes, or with custom. He was concerned for the young man's conscience and in particular with his experience of the grace of God in Christ. Do the honorable thing, to be sure, he said in essence, but above all do not let Satan start to work on your conscience.

To my mind, this was good pastoral advice. But see how far away it is from either the humanism we know or the humanism that Luther knew. The simple fact of the matter is this: Luther could use all the tools of the humanists of his time, and use them to understand the Gospel. But humanists then and humanists now come mightily armed with the Law but, as Luther put it, are "invicibly ignorant" of the Gospel. Thus, regenerated reason is not a reason that believes all sorts of things that it knows are not so; it is instead a reason that is "captive to Christ" and Him alone.