

## THE FRUITFUL READING OF LUTHER'S WRITINGS

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### Thesis I

**I**n order to obtain the desire and love for reading and studying the writings of Luther, it is above all necessary to realize that Luther is not like the other pure theologians; he was chosen by God himself as the reformer of the Church to reveal and destroy the Antichrist (2 Th 2:8; Rev 14:6,7).

Luther is the only theologian who is prophesied in Scripture. He is beyond all doubt the angel of which Revelation 14:6 is speaking. He is beyond doubt the one who according to 2 Thessalonians 2 was to reveal and destroy the Antichrist. Everyone who still believes that the pope is the Antichrist admits that Luther has revealed the Antichrist. Many, of course, do not admit that he has destroyed him, but there is no doubt that he has done it. Of course, he has not put an end to the papacy; but whoever now still lets himself be misled by the pope must first reject Luther. Luther has so clearly identified the pope as the Antichrist that a person would have to close his eyes if he did not want to believe that the pope is the Antichrist. Whoever does not want to be misled by the pope cannot be misled. Through Luther God has opened the eyes of thousands and millions who before had blindly honored the pope as the successor of Peter and the vicar of Christ.

After the apostles and prophets, Luther has no equal in the Church. Let someone name even one doctrine which Luther did not set forth most clearly and gloriously. Would it not be unspeakable ingratitude to God who sent us this man, if we would not listen to his voice? Then we would not have recognized the time of God's coming to us [Luke 19:44]. What wrath of God would follow we can presently see in modern German theologians who care nothing about Luther—

(Perhaps this article and the next can best be read as contributions to the "reception history" of Luther's Works within the Synodical Conference. Here one might find hints that Luther was appropriated by the Missouri and Wisconsin synods in slightly different ways.—*Ed.*)

<sup>1</sup>*Das fruchtbare Lesen der Schriften Luthers* originally appeared in the Missouri Synod's theological journal *Lehre und Wehre* (33:305-14) in November, 1887, six months after Walther's death on May 7, 1887. The article was translated by David Juhl and edited by James Langebartels. The reader can disagree with some of the more extreme statements Walther makes in this article and still profit from it.

even really despise him—because he did not set forth the truth in a scholarly way. If modern theologians do once cite him, they always have the definite intention of not portraying him as a witness for the truth. In contrast, an old theologian called Luther's writings "the cloak of Elijah that he dropped at his ascension" [2 Kg 2:13], while [Johannes] Bugenhagen [1485–1558] saw Revelation 14:6,7 expressly fulfilled in Luther.

This first thesis is of great importance. God holds Christianity responsible if it does not recognize this man as the reformer of the church. We dare not think with reference to Luther: "We also can do this; as Luther found the truth, we will also find it just as well by diligent study." No, when God fills His prophets with spirit and light, He does this for the common good of the church; and woe to the church if it does not want to use God's tool, but passes by on the other side [Lk 10:31,32]. A church in which Luther's writings are not studied first by the pastors, and then also at their encouragement by the common Christians, definitely does not have Luther's spirit—and Luther's spirit is the pure evangelical spirit of faith, humility, and simplicity.

The other dogmaticians of our church are not at all to be put on the same level with Luther. Behind him [in history] Luther had nothing but the errors of hell. He had to go into Scripture alone and drag out the truth. No one can understand how that was possible. Perhaps it looks easy, but it could not possibly happen without the very special illumination of the Holy Spirit.

## Thesis II

**In order to obtain a desire and love for reading and studying the writings of Luther, it is further necessary to read the judgments and testimonies which the greatest theologians of our church, and even the enemies themselves, have given about the high value of Luther's writings.**

The testimonies are certainly well known, but they cannot be sufficiently taken to heart. [Philip] Melancthon [1497–1560] says:

Dr. Pomeranus [Bugenhagen] is a grammarian, who investigates the words of the text. I am a dialectician and take into consideration the order, the connections, the individual members, and the conclusions that are drawn. Dr. [Justus] Jonas [1493–1555] is an orator and understands how to shed light on things with oratorical charm. *Luther is everything*. None of us can be compared to him.

So writes the *Doctor Germaniae*, the greatest scholar of that time. Melancthon would not at all have been capable of saying anything out of flattery.

[Johann] Brenz [1499–1570] filed the following testimony about Luther: “Luther alone lives in his writings. Compared to him, we are all almost a dead letter.”

Urbanus Rhegius [1489–1541] writes:

Luther is such a great theologian that no age has had a similar one. . . . I will say what I think: We all certainly copy down and promote the Scriptures, but compared with Luther we are only students. This verdict does not flow from love; rather, love flows from this verdict.

However, even enemies of our church write the same thing. When in 1544 Luther had again written a polemical writing against the Zwinglians,<sup>2</sup> the Swiss in their wrath hoped for once to be able to pillory Luther. [John] Calvin [1509–1564] wrote:

I want to remind you, first, what kind of great man Luther is; with what great gifts he is distinguished; what courage, steadfastness, aptitude, and penetrating teaching power he has so far devoted to overthrowing the kingdom of Antichrist and at the same time to spreading the doctrine of salvation! I have often said: even if he should call me a devil, I would still do him the honor of acknowledging him to be a distinguished servant of God.

Calvin says in another place, writing about Isaiah 57:1:

Above all, it was my opinion that I had to cite this (example), both because it happened recently and because it should be clearer in such a distinguished herald of the Gospel and prophet of God.

We must present such passages to modern Lutherans who fault us for calling Luther “the second Moses” or “Elijah.”

[Theodore] Beza [1519–1605], another Reformed teacher, writes: “Luther was truly a man worthy of admiration; whoever does not perceive the Spirit of God in him does not perceive anything.”

John Bunyan [1628–1688], the well-known English Baptist, says about Luther’s explanation of Galatians [LW 26,27]:

I must say in plain words that I have to put Luther’s book on Galatians above all other books (except Holy Scripture) I have ever seen, because it is so gloriously suitable for a wounded conscience.

Even [Desiderius] Erasmus [1466–1536] of Rotterdam joins in this praise of Luther and writes:

Luther is too great for me to be able to write against him. Luther is too great for me to understand. Yes, Luther is so great that I

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<sup>2</sup>*Brief Confession Concerning the Holy Sacrament*, LW 38:279–319.

learn more and gain more advantage from reading one page in Luther's writings than from all of Thomas [Aquinas, 1225–1274].

Melanchthon writes in his preface to the third part of the Wittenberg edition of the Luther's Latin writings [1549]: "I remember that Erasmus of Rotterdam used to say there was no more capable and better exegete among all whose writings we have after the apostles."

The papal scholar Masius similarly says: "There is more basic theology on one page of Luther than sometimes in a whole book of a church father."

Johann Georg Hamann [1730–1788] recommended to his friend Lindner, who wanted to devote himself to theology, as he expressed it, "three favorite books," namely the Bible, a good old hymnal, and

the third is the collection of Luther's shorter writings which Rambach published. In this book you will find the choice thoughts and explanations, at the same time both polemical and practical, of this father of our church on the chief doctrines of our faith. What a shame for our time [1759] that the spirit of this man who founded our church is in ashes! What force of eloquence, what spirit of exegesis, what a prophet! How good the old wine will taste to you, and how we should be ashamed of our corrupt tastes! What are [Michel de] Montaigne [1533–1592] and [Francis] Bacon [1561–1626], the idols of witty France and thoughtful England, compared to him!

Leopold Ranke [1795–1886], the famous historian, writes:

There has never been in any nation of the world a writer more authoritative and powerful. No other needs to be named who combined the most perfect clarity, popularity, and simple common sense with so much animation and genius.<sup>3</sup>

[Johann Albrecht] Bengel [1687–1752] writes: "Luther's writings should certainly be read more diligently; what Moses was to the Israelites, Luther is to a certain extent at least to Christians."<sup>4</sup>

[Johann Franz] Buddeus [1667–1729] says:

It is well-known that Luther's writings are found among very few people who want to be scholars and theologians; among the unlearned, however, there are many copies of the Church Postils or House Postils of the blessed man; the other writings, in which there is so much good, are unknown.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Leopold von Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation* (2nd edition), 1:349.

<sup>4</sup>Cited in the *Erlangen Zeitschrift*, November, 1872, p 261.

<sup>5</sup>Preface to the Halle Supplement to the Altenburg Edition of Luther's works, XIV, 766.

[Melchior] Zeidler [1630–1686], the publisher of this supplement, says: “Thus, some twenty years ago I saw no one who paid attention to these things; rather, they laughed at me and thought that I should not disturb Luther with the stench of his writings and not carry owls to Athens” [or coals to Newcastle]. (Introduction to the Supplement).

### Thesis III

**In Luther studies, it is better not to follow chronological order.**

Naturally, if you want to get to know Luther’s course of development, you must read Luther chronologically. However, whoever still has no genuine esteem for Luther or no genuine appetite for the food in his writings should not read him chronologically. It is obvious that in the first writings of Luther much is still obscure. For example, whoever now reads the *Ninety-Five Theses* [LW 31:17-33] is surprised that they could cause such a great uproar, since obscurity is still so dominant in them; however, because these theses contained the doctrine of justification, they made a tremendous impression on the children of God who sat in darkness. Nowadays Luther is the subject of historical research; people are not seeking pure doctrine in him; rather, people think that theology has now advanced far beyond him.

### Thesis IV

**We should not begin our Luther studies with those writings which Luther did not compose himself, but which were only copied down in haste by hearers of his oral lectures.**

Even now, with the help of shorthand, it is still difficult to copy down a speech exactly as it was delivered; at that time they had no idea at all of this skill.<sup>6</sup> That is why it happens that those writings of Luther which were recorded by hearers are not nearly equivalent to those writings which Luther himself composed. Here perhaps a sentence has been omitted, there a different word is used than Luther would have used, here what Luther did not at all say has been added, etc. In such writings we never know with complete certainty whether we have the pure Luther or not. In his language, however, Luther is inimitable; he has written the most glorious, sweetest, simplest German, so that even Grimm<sup>7</sup> says that we are all students of Luther.

<sup>6</sup>Georg Rörer (1492–1557) had developed his own kind of shorthand.

<sup>7</sup>That is, Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859) Grimm, authors of the encyclopedic *Deutsches Wörterbuch*.

That is why we should always read the introductions that give information about the composition of the writing. Above all his other amanuenses, Luther preferred [Caspar] Cruciger [1504–1548]; even Melancthon praised Cruciger.

#### Thesis V

**We should not begin our Luther studies by reading the writings originally written in Latin and translated into German.**

The translations can still be good, but even if the original was especially good, the translation will never equal it. Therefore, the beginner in Luther studies would be disappointed if he would read such translations first. Luther's writings have here and there been disgraced by inferior translations, particularly the oldest writings. The best translation we have of Luther's writings is the commentary on Genesis done by Basilius Faber [1538–1575/1576] and Johann Guden [of Magdeburg], along with the exposition of Galatians.

#### Thesis VI

**There are few of Luther's writings the reading of which would so grasp this or that reader that afterwards he would make the reading of them part of his regular reading alongside God's Word. However, the one who still has no insight into the glory of these writings and thus is still to develop a taste for this food is not advised to begin with the exegetical and homiletical writings.**

#### Thesis VII

**The best way to be stimulated to read the writings of Luther and to get a genuine appreciation and insight into these incomparable writings is to begin by reading the polemical writings. Above all, begin with these writings: *That These Words of Christ, "This is My Body," Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics* [1527, LW 37:3-150]; *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528) [LW 37:151-372]; as far as the papacy is concerned: *On the Papacy in Rome* (1520) [LW 39:49-104], and *Against Hanswurst* (1541) [LW 41:179-256].**

This list is based on my own experience. The polemical writings of Luther are now very much despised, but they are the noblest things that have been written by human hands. Here we find the scriptural truths proven with certainty; here we see Luther's heroic faith and his spiritual joy. Everything supports that. Luther speaks so roughly because he is doing battle either with the Antichrist or with the miserable fanatics. Not every sickness can be cured with buttermilk and honey; there must also be bitter medicine. Luther had before him a

thousand-year-old oak tree of enormous size; he could not cut it down with a pen-knife, but had to use mighty axes and sharp saws. But at the same time his heart was on the point of melting with distress for the poor souls who sat in darkness. Whoever takes offense at his ardent zeal, takes offense at God, who chose such a tool.

### Thesis VIII

After the polemical writings, we turn to the so-called Reformation history writings, such as, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* [1520, LW 36:3-126], along with the defense of this writing [LW 36:127f.], further: *To the Christian Nobility* [1520, LW 44:115-217], etc., etc.

These are chiefly important for the beginner; he must read the writings in which Luther laid the basis for his work of reformation.

### Thesis IX

This is followed by doctrinal writings in the more narrow sense of the word, such as, *The Keys* (1530 [LW 40:321-377]); *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power*, etc. (1523 [LW 39:301-314]); *Concerning the Ministry* (1523 [LW 40:3-44]); *That Preachers Should Preach against Usury* (1541 [1540; StL 10:860-911]); *The Bondage of the Will* (1525 [LW 33:3-295]); *On Marriage Matters* (1530 [LW 46:259-320]); *Temporal Authority, to What Extent it Should Be Obeyed* (1523 [LW 45:75-129]); *Admonition Concerning the Sacrament* (1530 LW 38:91-137); *On the Councils and the Church* (1539 [LW 41:3-178]), etc.

### Thesis X

As far as the exegetical writings are concerned, we should begin with the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount [1530-1532, LW 21:1-294], and then read Luther's interpretation of the Last Words of David [1543, LW 15:265-352], and the interpretation of Psalms 2 [LW 12:1-96], 37 [LW 14:207-229], 45 [LW 12:197-300], 82 [LW 13:39-72], 110 [LW 13:225-348], 111 [LW 13:349-387], 117 [LW 14:1-39], and 118 [LW 14:41-106].

Everything in the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is interesting for the reader who is interested in the divine truth. Everything there is explained simply and very clearly. Likewise, the interpretation of the last words of David is a precious work.

### Thesis XI

As far as the homiletical writings are concerned, at least before composing each sermon on the pericopes, we should

**reread the respective sermons in the Postils [LW 75-82], as well as *Short Sermons Given to a Friend for Instruction* [WA 45:421-464; StL 12:1858-1927].**

In the early years of ministry, we should not completely lay aside the homiletical writings of Luther. Although we might not otherwise find much in a sermon of Luther, we should, when working out a sermon, take note of what an abundance of thoughts and even of phrases Luther had at hand. The *Short Sermons* are not to be overlooked, since many things are found in them which are not in the pericope sermons.

### **Thesis XII**

**As far as Luther's letters are concerned, read above all the letters written in preparation for and during the Diet of Augsburg, as well as those relating to the Imperial Recess [LW 49]; basically, all the letters that refer to what was going on in the church.**

More beautiful letters have not been written. His courageous faith, joyousness, and certainty of victory are beyond comparison. We first get a genuine understanding of what happened when we read what Luther wrote about it.

### **Thesis XIII**

**Do not endeavor to extract everything you read in Luther's writings, but only take note of when an important explanation is given, whether in exegesis, or in dogmatics, or in homiletics, or in biblical and church history. You can add headings with accurate details about where it is located and from what time it comes. At minimum, note the passages you do not want to forget by underlining them or by an exclamation point in the margin and the like, unless the passage is short and distinguished by its excellent form; then you should note it down word for word. You should especially collect the countless axioms, household words, rules, proverbs, and the like, which often contain a whole world of divine thoughts. Passages for which you simply cannot find the meaning you should give a question mark, or copy it onto a scrap of paper and bring it along to conference.**

The detailed excerpting of Luther is not especially productive, for Luther does not operate in such a way that he goes forward in a strict line of thought; rather, he advances to the attack. That is why when you try to excerpt him, you often copy down passages which are of no significance at all when taken out of their context. We should



operate according to the rule given in the thesis. In particular, short passages are often so magnificent, because when Luther has lived through a matter, the words and meaning are like body and soul which cannot be without each other.—With the help of marks in the margin, one can without much trouble assemble a great treasure in a short time.—We should not economize too much on our copies of Luther's works. Whoever wears out an Erlangen Edition in his lifetime has not wasted anything.<sup>8</sup>—The passages in which we absolutely cannot find the meaning often contain the deepest theological thoughts. When you come to such passages, you should not rest until you have gotten to the bottom of its contents.—An especially practical help for Luther study is an *Index Rerum*.

#### Thesis XIV

**Whenever you bump into a difficult theological question, seek to obtain Luther's view on that from all the relevant passages with the help of an index volume to Luther's works [LW 55,83; StL 25].**

You must make this into a law. A Lutheran preacher should certainly know Luther's verdict on important theological questions. He is no oracle, but his verdict is of the utmost importance to us. You should read all the passages in which he deals with the matter in question. Whoever diligently does this will soon grow fond of Luther and know that he can find no better adviser. Whoever does not do this, does not make the most of Luther.

#### Thesis XV

**You should make a collection of the passages you want to quote in your sermons, but they must be just as important in content as classic in expression. Merely appealing to Luther's opinion is dangerous, since in that way you make it appear that you desire faith to be based on Luther's authority. The preacher must already have proved the matter out of God's Word before Luther steps forward as a witness.**

It is not enough to intend to make use of a beautiful passage; you must copy it down, preferably in a special book set aside for this purpose. Such passages make an extraordinary impression on people. Of course, the passages selected must be applied in content and form to

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<sup>8</sup>At the time Walther wrote this article, the Erlangen edition was the latest edition of Luther's works available to him; it had been prepared in 1826–1857, and the second edition had appeared in the years 1862–1885 just before he wrote this article. The St. Louis edition of Luther's works, also called Walch 2, was just beginning to appear. The Weimar edition and the American Edition were still in the future.

the understanding and heart of the listener. You should treat the quotations from Luther in the same way you do hymn verses: you do not cite them until you have brought the thoughts to a head; then the citation makes a forceful conclusion.

### Thesis XVI

**Beware of taking offense at Luther's simple language, or tautologies [unnecessary repetition], or apparent contradictions. Luther's language had to be simple; he was called to reform not the scholarly world, but Christian people. The alleged tautologies are means intended to make the truth clear to the reader and force it into his heart. The contradictions people criticize are either only apparent, or are explained by the fact that Luther did not get the whole truth at once as if by magic.**

It is great blindness if someone takes offense at Luther's simple language. How are people benefited if they receive what Luther gives in lofty words? How are the scholars harmed if it is served to them in a simple form? Luther's highest principle was that he would be understood.—By frequently repeating the same thing (tautology) with somewhat different words he wants after all to bring the truth into the understanding and the heart. Johann Jakob Rambach [1737–1818] says about that:

It is true that when Luther comes to an important point, he cannot be satisfied with explaining it once, but he usually repeats and drives it home several times in a row. However, this reveals his mastery, namely, that he can always express the same things in different words, so that his repetitions can in no way be regarded as empty and superfluous tautologies, but rather must be compared with repeated hammer blows by which the nail is driven all the deeper into the wall (Preface to Luther's sermons on love, etc., on 1 John 4:16-18).<sup>9</sup>

Luther himself explains the contradictions in his writings.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>*Several Beautiful Sermons on 1 John 4, On Love* (1532/1533), LW 78:363-405.

<sup>10</sup>Luther's July 27, 1530 letter to Melancthon: "The adversaries assemble a list of the contradictions in my writings to demonstrate the glory of their own wisdom. How can these asses judge the contradictions of our doctrine when they understand neither part of these contradictions? In the eyes of the godless our doctrine can be nothing but contradictions, since works are at the same time demanded and rejected; customs are at the same time abolished and re-established; the government is at the same time honored and rebuked; and sin is at the same time upheld and denied. But why should I carry water to the sea?" WA Br 5:499; StL 16:1455.

**Thesis XVII**

We should make it a rule to read something in Luther's writings every day. We should especially take refuge in them when we feel dull, tired, despondent, sad, at a loss, and miserable. Then we should especially choose his letters for awakening, strengthening, and refreshing. We should become so familiar with our edition of Luther's writings that we can find each writing without wasting time looking it up.