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Luther's Teaching on Death and Resurrection

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The Christian's victory over death is set in the context of the faith that justifies. Death is the awful consequence of sin and disobedience, but it is the gateway to fuller life for those who accept the gospel. There is certainty of resurrection: for the believer, union with Christ; for the unbeliever, rejection. Basic to the resurrection of believers is the resurrection of Christ who is Lord and God.

Two well-attested experiences when he was a student at Erfurt brought Martin Luther face to face with the reality of death. The impression they made on him is reflected in the fact that he recalled them with vivid intensity many years later, as the record of his *Table Talk* reveals.

In April 1503 he was setting out with a friend for his home in Mansfeld for the spring vacation, when he accidentally struck his shin on his short sword and severed an artery in his leg. He tried to stem the bleeding with his finger, but his leg swelled alarmingly until a surgeon was eventually brought from Erfurt and bound up the wound before more damage was done. Knowing he was in danger of death, the young Luther cried out, 'Mary, help!' 'I would have died', he afterwards explained, 'with my trust in Mary.'[1] That night in bed the wound broke open and he almost bled to death. Again he prayed to the Virgin.

In June 1505 Luther paid another visit to his parents. On his return journey, he was overtaken by a violent electric storm as he approached Erfurt. He was not far from the village of Stotternheim when a thunderbolt darted past him with a blinding flash and threw him to the ground. This time he appealed to the mother of Mary, the patron saint of the mining community in which he had been brought up: 'Dear St Anne, I will become a monk!'[2] That vow took him to the Augustinian monastery.

Throughout his life Luther never seemed to be far from death, for he suffered from chronic ailments. He also faced bereavement on more than one occasion. He lost his father Hans in 1530 and his mother Margarethe the following year. In 1542 his fourteen-year old daughter Magdalena died of fever in his arms. When Luther came to preach and teach and write on the subject of death, he knew what he was talking about.

He lived in an age when the expectation of life was critically low. As a result, the literature dealing with death was correspondingly extensive. Manuals on the art of dying were published at all cultural levels — in Latin for the learned and in German for the less educated. Visual aids in the form of woodcuts were supplied for the illiterate. Luther himself wrote specifically on the theme of death at the request of Mark Schart, a counsellor at the Court of the Elector, Frederick the Wise. His treatise *On Preparing to Die* was published in 1518. Throughout his voluminous writings he frequently touched on the subject, sometimes at length, and in this presentation we propose to let Luther speak for himself with only the minimum of note or comment.

While we will be careful to record the dating of the excerpts, we do not intend to enter into the debate concerning the relationship between the earlier and later Luther. A measure of development can undoubtedly be traced, but Gordon Rupp's conclusion commands our assent when he claims that in all essentials Luther's theology was in existence before the opening of the Church struggle.[3] Following Regin Prenter, in the introduction to his study of Luther's doctrine of the Holy Sprit, 'we shall not, as a rule, ask *whence* Luther's thoughts came or *how* they developed, even though these historical questions may be ever so important. We shall ask only *what* he thought.'[4] In so doing, we shall discover that a pastoral and practical concern is to be discerned throughout.

The Problem of Death

Luther's approach to death was always realistic. He avoided the kind of sentimentalism which later sugared the Victorian treatment of the subject here in Britain without at the same time succumbing to the almost inhuman heartlessness which marred the comments of certain eighteenth-century writers. He realized that death represents a universal conundrum.

While expounding John 14:6, in a sermon preached at Wittenberg in 1537, Luther conjured up a picture in the minds of his congregation. Death is 'like a person who faces a wide ditch or a body of deep water which he must cross, and yet sees no path and no bridge. Thus the children of Israel were terrified by the vast and turbulent waters of the Red Sea when they heard that they could not cross anywhere but must either go through or remain in the hands of the enemy. They may have been tempted to say, "Is this what you call escape from death and danger, hedged in on all sides as we are by high mountains and with nothing but waves and water before us? Yes, it would be different if we were birds or fish and could fly over or swim across the sea!" '[5]

In the same way, death flings a barrier across man's path which in himself he is not equipped to surmount. For man as man, death appears to be a terrifying obstacle. But God has provided a passage through the waters by means of Christ who is the Way. Even though all that can be seen is that which points to the dreadfulness of death, Christ is nevertheless a bridge on which those who believe in him can set foot and walk across without fear or hesitation. Such is the dramatic difference Christ makes to the appearance of death. 'Seek yourself only in Christ and not in yourself,' Luther urged in his treatise *On Preparing to Die*, 'and you will find yourself in him eternally.'[6]

The Context of Faith

It is clear that Luther's reinterpretation of the Christian hope stemmed from his definitive insistence that justification by faith provides the essential clue to a comprehensive understanding of theology in all its ramifications. For him, this 'article of a standing or falling Church', as he himself regarded it, was not simply the primary doctrine of the gospel.[7] It also controlled and illuminated all others. It was from this standpoint that each Christian belief was to be viewed. Here was the yardstick whereby error could be exposed and genuine biblical truth established. The inadequacies and, as Luther saw it, the deviations of much medieval teaching about death were made apparent as this fundamental criterion was applied. More positively, he was able to show

that the Christian's victory over death at the end is anticipated by faith as even now he lays hold of eternal life.

In a sermon on the Gospel lection for the main Christmas service preached in 1521, Luther expounded the statement of John 1:4 concerning the Logos, namely, that 'in him was life'. He explained, on the basis of Acts 17:28, that even natural life is part of eternal life and is indeed its beginning. It ends in death, however, since it does not recognize or honour the One from whom it comes. Sin cuts it off, so that it must die eternally. 'On the other hand,' Luther continued, 'those who believe in him, and acknowledge him from whom they have their being never die. Their natural life will be stretched out in life eternal, so that they never taste death, as he says in John 8:52 "He who keeps my word, will never taste death", and in John 11:25 "He who believes in me, even if he dies, will live". These and similar matters are understood well, if one rightly learns to know Christ, how he slew death and brought us life."[8] That second quotation from John 11:25 recurs again and again in Luther's writings. The Christian's conquest of death is firmly set in the context of the faith which makes and keeps a man right with God.

'Those who believe in him and acknowledge him from whom they have their being.' That is crucial to any understanding of Luther's teaching on death and resurrection. As Heinrich Bornkamm observes, it is the Reformer's 'simple summary of all reflections on living and dying'.[9] The Christian believes and trusts in God, both in life and death. He has no confidence in the flesh. There is nothing in himself on which he can place any reliance. Alike in life and death, he leans only on God's mercy. Worthiness does not depend on works. 'Belief makes you worthy', Luther insisted: 'unbelief makes you unworthy.'[10] Then he added (this again is from his treatise *On Preparing to Die*): 'God gives you nothing because of your worthiness, but out of sheer grace he establishes you, unworthy one, on the foundation of his word and signs.'[11]

Inadequate Views of Death

Luther's developed theology of death found clear and compelling expression in his lectures on Psalm 90, delivered between October 1534 and May 1535 and significantly punctuated by bouts of illness when his life seemed to be in danger. Luther deplored the fact that the natural man fails to realize the seriousness of death. He regards it merely as a normal event, related to the transiency of creaturely existence and thus not to be treated in too intense a fashion. That was the outlook of some of the classical writers whom Luther quoted, like the Roman poet Martial who advised men neither to fear nor to long for the last day.[12] Others, however, recommended an Epicurean recipe as reflected in the epitaph of Sardonapalus, the last king of Assyria: 'Eat, drink, play; there is no pleasure after death', while others yet again treated death with an exaggerated bravado.

Luther complained that unfortunately some contemporary theologians copied these pagan examples and suggested in their funeral discourses that the mourners should not grieve over death as if it were an evil. Instead, they claimed, it should be treated as a kind of refuge in which we are eventually sheltered from all the troubles and mishaps to which life exposes us. This comfortable idea, put forward by Cicero in his *Tusculan Disputations*, was revived by some of the Italian humanists who had rediscovered the classics

and, in particular, Pietro Pomponazzi whose treatise *On the Immortality of the Soul* had sparked off a controversy on the subject.

Luther would have none of it. 'This is not the way to talk about death. It is rather, so to speak, pagan blindness and the result of original sin when one defends one's own evils as if they were no evils, while one feels and experiences the very opposite'.[13] The calculated evasion which characterized the approach of those who were misled by such false philosophy contradicted not only what was unambiguously disclosed in God's Word, but also what was ratified in man's deepest consciousness.

Death and Sin

Scripture, declared Luther, opens our eyes to what really happens when we die. Death is no children's game. It is grim and actual. It is not merely the conclusion of a biological process. It is nothing short of a catastrophe. Man is not to be equated with the animal creation. He was not meant to die. He was made in the image of God to live for ever in obedience to the Word. In his case death was ordained as a punishment for sin. God warned Adam about the tree of knowledge: 'In the day that you eat of it you shall die' (Genesis 2:1). 'The death of human beings is, therefore, not like the death of animals. They die because of a law of nature. Nor is man's death an event which occurs accidentally or has merely an aspect of temporality. On the contrary, man's death, if I may so speak, was threatened by God and is caused by an incensed and estranged God.'[14]

For man, then, death is the inevitable and deserved consequence of sin and disobedience. Here is the supreme tragedy of the universe — that a being designed to dwell with God is by his own folly destined to death. Luther was unusually aware of this 'truly aweful revelation', as he described it, and by means of it sought to shake men out of their complacency on the one hand, and on the other to show them the real reason why death holds such terrors for the impenitent and unbelieving.[15] As Paul Althaus points out, Luther argued that 'we must understand our mortal fate theologically within the relationship between God and man; for this relationship is the decisive and all-embracing destiny of man'.[16] It is a consistent feature of Luther's approach that he should consider every matter *coram deo*, in the presence or in terms of God. The truth about man and his future is bound up with the fact that he is a being created by God for eternal life.

What makes death so dreadful, then, is man's rebellion against God. As Paul reminded the Corinthians — and this was a text Luther frequently quoted — 'the sting of death is sin' (1 Corinthians 15:56). That is why, although death was decreed by God for the disobedient in his contingent will, Scripture also attributes it to the devil. The passages Luther adduces here in his excursus 'Concerning the Contempt of Death' were in fact drawn chiefly from the Apocrypha. It is almost as if God were disclaiming responsibility since the fall of man. Death was not his original design and cannot therefore be classed among the works listed at the beginning of Genesis which he pronounced to be good (Genesis 1:31). According to the Wisdom of Solomon (1:13,14) 'God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things that they might exist'. Death is to be destroyed at the end of the age, along with all the works of the devil (1 John 3:8).

Before death is done away, however, it performs its last act, so to speak, on the devil himself. He too is exterminated and cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10). Luther made much of the ironical situation in which eventually the devil will be disposed of by means of death which is one of his own weapons. More than this, it is through another death, the death of Christ, that the defeat of Satan has already been achieved, so that even now his doom is certain. Luther saw here the evidence that our Lord's conquest was decisive.

The Gospel and Death

What determines a man's attitude to death is his reaction to the gospel. If he rejects it, death remains a terrifying threat. If he accepts it, death is transformed and can even be welcomed as the gateway to fuller life in Christ. The wrath of God, expressed in death as well as in sin and law, is turned aside and he is now seen as gracious.

The effect of the gospel on the believer's conception of death was foreshadowed even in the Old Testament. In his exposition of Psalm 118 dating from 1530, the year of the Augsburg Confession, Luther claimed that the true worshipper 'feels death, and yet he refuses to feel it or to call it death but clings to the gracious right hand of God. He does not deny that God sends him death, but he and God have an understanding. Neither will he call it death or let it be death; it is a father's rod and a child's chastisement.'[17] The 118th were Luther's favourite Psalm from which he adopted verse 17 as his personal motto — 'I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.'

'We should regard this verse as a masterpiece', Luther affirmed. 'How mightily the Psalmist banishes death out of sight! He will know nothing of dying and of sin. At the same time he visualizes life most vividly and will hear of nothing but life. But whoever will not see death, lives for ever, as Christ says: "If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death" (John 8:51). He so immerses himself in life that death is swallowed up by life (1 Corinthians 15:55) and disappears completely, because he clings with a firm faith to the right hand of God.'[18] Under the law, then, the prospect of death engenders only fear and dread. Under the gospel it is seen in an entirely new light as an avenue of life. As Thomas McDonough brings out in a perceptive study, this law-gospel tension lies at the heart of Luther's theology.[19]

The Intermediate State

It is noticeable that, as his thought developed, Luther paid increasing attention to the intermediate state both of the Christian and the non-Christian between the moment of death and the trumpet call of resurrection. In his lectures on Genesis, begun in 1535 and probably not completed until several years later, he showed that he had already reached some conclusions about what happens to man as soon as this present life comes to a close.

The body is obviously destroyed by putrefaction and the invasion of earthworms, but what, Luther asked, becomes of the soul before the Day of Judgment? He explained that he was touching on this controversial issue only in order to forestall and hopefully to foreclose the prying questions and arguments of others. He appealed to the affirmation of our Lord as recorded

in Matthew 22:32 — 'God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.' Such an authoritative saying assures us that those who have died are in fact still alive and that moreover, as he understood it, they are not racked by any purgatorial tortures. He went on to add that many passages of Scripture can be adduced by way of corroboration.

As Luther was well aware, the intermediate state was the subject of endless discussion in the Middle Ages. Traditional teaching dealt with the most intricate details and even provided maps and charts. Five locations were listed in this curious exercise in eschatological geography — the hell of the damned, the hell of unbaptized infants, purgatory, limbo or the abode of the patriarchs, and the open heaven. Luther firmly repudiated all such artificial schemes and insisted that all certainty about the situation beyond death rests on the word of God. 'My Word is eternal,' the Almighty assures us, 'and in this Word you are eternal.'[20] That is the theological foundation for the Christian hope. Topographical considerations which have no clear basis in Scripture are irrelevant and indeed misleading.

Luther's reforming approach enabled him to realize that, once death has intervened, it is inappropriate to talk in terms of either space or time. In this he anticipated more recent philosophical interpretations as well as the profound insights of Augustine. Luther realized that death and resurrection are so intimately linked that the gap is closed and the interval disappears. 'In this connexion', he claimed, 'we must put earthly time completely out of our minds, for in that world there is neither time nor hour but all is one eternal now.'[21]

The certainty of Resurrection

The overwhelming certainty of resurrection captured Luther's imagination and dominated his approach to death. The medieval preoccupation with gloom and terror was replaced by a joyful realization that for the believer there lies ahead nothing but a more abundant life. In expounding John 6:35, in which Jesus announced that he himself was the living bread, Luther spoke of union with Christ as a preservative against death. When anyone is so identified, he is immune. 'Therefore even if all deaths were combined into one and attacked such a man fiercely, they would not be able to consume and devour him, for Christ will resurrect him on the Last Day. Even if he lay buried a thousand ells under the sod or were dismembered by wolves, eaten by fish, or burned to ashes by fire, he would still live again.'[22]

Although Luther focused primarily on the future of the believer and set the certainty of resurrection in the context of the gospel, he nevertheless kept close to the New Testament in recognizing that even the unbelieving dead will be raised. Whereas for the Christian there is even now no condemnation (Romans 8:1) and will therefore be no fear of judgment at the end, for those who do not know Christ resurrection will not lead to acceptance but to final rejection and separation from God. That indeed is the difference between death and resurrection under the gospel and death and resurrection under the law. In his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528) Luther declared his convictions on the matter. 'I believe in the resurrection of all the dead at the Last Day, both the godly and the wicked, that each may receive in his body reward according to his merits. Thus the godly will live eternally with Christ and the wicked will perish eternally with the devil and his angels.'[23]

Luther rejected the idea, first mooted by Origen in the third century AD, that Satan and his attendant demons would eventually be saved. Such a heretical suggestion was condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople in the year 553 but reappeared early in the sixteenth century. A universalism which even dared to hold out hope for the devil was repugnant to the Reformer.

Resurrection of Christ

For Luther the entire question of a future life hung on the resurrection of Christ. This for him was 'the chief article of Christian doctrine'.[24] To deny it is to reject the gospel, as he put it, 'in a lump'.[25] He saw the resurrection as the lynch-pin of the faith. If it were to be removed, the fabric would collapse. It is not that the resurrection of Christ is dependent on some general principle of human immortality. It is that the certainty of resurrection rests on the supernatural miracle of Christ's resurrection.

Christ is interpreted by Luther in Pauline terms as the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20). 'We must view him in this light,' he argued in his classic commentary on 1 Corinthians Fifteen (1534), 'that this dying and rising again were for your benefit and mine. As he died and lay under the sod as you and I must die and be buried, thus he also rose again for our sakes and made an exchange with us; and as he was brought into death through us, we shall be restored from death to life through him. For by his death he has devoured death, so that we all will also arise and live as he arose and lives.'[26]

Luther appealed to the analogy of babies being born head first as he sought to demonstrate how Christ is 'the first born among many brethren' (Romans 8:29). Where the head is the members will follow. Indeed, heart and conscience have already passed through death and the grave and are in heaven with Christ. 'In that way we have the two best parts, much more than half, of the resurrection behind us. And because Christ animates and renews the heart by faith, he will also surely drag the decomposed rascal after him and clothe him again, so that we can behold him (i.e. Christ) and live with him.'[27]

In a similar passage, Luther claimed that the Christian already has one leg out of the grave. Only the left foot remains there. 'For his sin is already remitted and expunged, God's wrath and hell are extinguished, and he already lives fully in and with Christ with regard to his best part, which is the soul, as he partakes of eternal life. Therefore death can no longer hold him or harm him. Only the remnant of the old skin, flesh and blood must still decay before it, too, can be renewed and follow the soul. As for the rest, we have already penetrated all the way into life, since Christ and my soul are no longer in death.'[28]

The reality of Christ's resurrection and therefore of our own is incapable of rational demonstration. Ultimately it is perceived only by faith. Human reason is incompetent to arrive at a conclusion. It can examine the external evidence relating to clinical death. But as to the possibility of life beyond, it is altogether at a loss; and likewise with the resurrection of Christ. So many new and strange ideas surround the subject that the thinking man decides that there is nothing in it. How modern Luther's observations sound! 'Reason cannot and will not remain within the Word or be captive to it,' he

went on (this is still from his exposition of 1 Corinthians Fifteen), 'but it must also give its cleverness a voice, and thus insists on understanding and mastering everything. And because reason sees this running directly counter to its understanding and to all senses and feeling, and contrary to all experience too, it departs from it and even denies it. Or when it cannot get around the Word, it twists it and trims it with glosses, forcing the Word into agreement with reason. Then faith no longer has any room but must give way to reason and perish.'[29]

In an age when the Easter miracle is in danger of being dismissed as a myth under the pressure of fashionable rationalism, Luther's warnings assume an unusual relevance. To dehistoricize the resurrection of Christ is to jeopardize our resurrection too. Unless the Christian hope is to melt before our eyes, we need to recognize in Christ, as Luther did, 'the person whom death could not devour'.[30]

The Conquest of Death

In Luther's view, the believer's victory over death is only assured by Christ's own conquest. 'Since the Word sets before us Christ, it sets before us the one who has triumphed over death, sin and Satan. So the man who by this means grasps and holds Christ has eternal deliverance from death — it is a Word of life.'[31] Christ is graphically depicted as the 'sin-slayer and death-devourer'.[32] He has trampled underfoot the devil, sin, death and hell in his own person and by his own power and authority. Hence death is as it were de-deathed. 'Through Christ, therefore, death is conquered and abolished in the whole world, so that now it is nothing but a picture of death. Now that its sting is lost, it can no longer harm believers in Christ, who has become the death of death, as Hosea sings (13:14): "O death, I shall be your death!".'[33]

In all this Luther recognized the centrality of Christ and the need to safeguard and maintain the biblical doctrine of his deity. He complained that the medieval philosophers largely lost sight of it and the radical extremists of his day were obliterating it again. When Arius denied it he was compelled also to deny the reality of redemption. 'For to conquer the sin of the world, death, the curse and the wrath of God in himself — this is the work not of any creature but of the divine power. Therefore it was necessary that he who was to conquer these in himself should be true God by nature.'[34]

In the last analysis, as Luther envisaged it, the conquest of death was bound up with the Lordship of Christ. It was only in this role of supremacy that he was able to prove himself to be the victor. As Gustav Aulén has effectively reminded us, Luther revived the old classic or dramatic theory of the atonement which interpreted the cross (and, of course, the resurrection too) as heralding Christ's victory over the tyrants which threatened man's ultimate freedom — sin, Satan, the law and death.[35] It was in these saving events of Calvary and Easter that Jesus was shown to be Lord. To confess his Lordship now is to recognize what he has done and to appropriate a share in his victory.

'What is it now to be a Lord?' Luther asked. 'It is this, that he has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death and all woe. For before I had not yet had any Lord, nor King, but had been held captive under the devil's power, doomed to death, ensnared in sin and blindness . . . Now, therefore, those tyrants and gaolers are crushed, and in their place comes

Jesus Christ, a Lord of life, righteousness, all good and holiness, and he has snatched us poor lost men from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and brought us back to the Father's goodness and grace.'[36]

In this sense, the Christian has conquered death already. When he confesses Christ as his Lord and Saviour, he enters into a life that lasts for ever. Luther shifted the crisis of death and brought it forward to the moment of new birth. For him, as we have already seen, the destiny of man was tied up with his justification by faith. In short, Luther faithfully echoed the affirmation of the apostle Paul at the outset of Romans 5. 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God' (Romans 5:1,2).

Abbreviations

LW —*Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols (Philadelphia and St Louis, 1955–).
WA —D. Martin *Luther's Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. J. F. K. Knaake, *et al.* (Weimar, 1883–).
WATR—*Tischreden*, ed. Karl Drescher (Weimar, 1912–21).

References

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2 WATR 4. 440. No 4707.
3 E. Gordon Rupp, *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* (London, 1951), p. 38.
4 Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator* (ET Philadelphia, 1953) p. x.
5 LW 24. 46. (WA 45. 502).
6 LW 42, 106. (WA 2. 690).
7 Articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae (Schmalkald Articles II. i.).
8 LW 52. 55 (WA 10^1. 200).
9 Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought* (ET St Louis, 1958) p. 124.
10 LW 42.110 (WA 2. 694).
11 *Ibid.*
12 LW 13. 76 (WA 40^3. 485). Martial, *Epigrams* X 47. 13.
13 LW 13. 77 (WA 40^3. 486).
14 LW 13. 94 (WA 40^3. 513).
15 *Ibid.*
16 Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (ET Philadelphia, 1966), p. 405.
17 LW 14. 90 (WA 31. 160).
18 LW 14. 87 (WA 31. 153).
19 Thomas M. McDonough, *The Law and the Gospel in Luther* (Oxford, 1963) pp 1–7 *et passim*.
20 LW 14. 134–5 (WA 31. 456).
21 WA 10^3. 194.
22 LW 23. 41–2 (WA 33. 58).
23 LW 37. 372 (WA 26. 509).
24 LW 28. 94 (WA 36. 524).
25 *Ibid.*
26 LW 28. 109 (WA 36. 546–7).
27 LW 28. 110 (WA 36. 548).
28 LW 28. 133 (WA 36. 581).
29 LW 28. 70 (WA 36. 493).
30 WA 45. 585; 47. 80.
31 WA 35. 456.
32. WA 21. 217.
33 LW 26. 281 (WA 40^1. 438–9).
34 LW 26. 282 (WA 40^1. 440).
35 Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor* (ET London 1931) pp. 119–38.
36 WA 30^1. 186.