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The Eschatological Theology of Martin Luther

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THE ESCHATOLOGICAL THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER PART I: LUTHER'S BASIC CONCEPTS

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As soon as one delves into the study of Luther's works, especially his sermons and expositions of the Bible, one is rather fascinated by the overwhelming presence of eschatological thought in what this great Protestant Reformer had to say and write. The crux of the matter is not to be found simply in his references to the papacy as the antichrist, nor in his clear warnings against the Turks, nor even in his expressions of a longing for the last day. Rather, it is to be found in the fact that the eschaton—the consummation of all things into the coming Kingdom of God—was a central and very compelling force that drove and motivated Luther as a person and as a theologian.

Historical studies on Luther have understandably tended to focus on the earlier period of the Reformer's life, since it was then that he was most active publicly.¹ One major implication of this trend to focus on the "early Luther" has been to emphasize the Reformer as the herald of justification by faith, which was indeed one of his most outstanding contributions to his own generation and to posterity. To limit Luther's accomplishments to the proclamation of faith versus works, however, would be to minimize both his theology and influence. Indeed, as we look at the whole of Luther's life and works, we may rightly marvel at the large extent to which his theology and practice were permeated by his eschatological concerns.

¹For a further discussion of this phenomenon, see the article "Current Issues and Trends in Luther Studies" by Kenneth A. Strand in *AUSS* 22 (1984): 127-156, esp. pp. 134-139. An even more recent study should also be noted here: Gordon Rupp, "Miles Emeritus?: Continuity and Discontinuity Between the Young and the Old Luther," in George Yule, ed., *Luther: Theologian for Catholics and Protestants* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 75-86. See also Johann Heinz, "The 'Summer That Will Never End': Luther's Longing for the 'Dear Last Day' in his Sermon on Luke 21 (1531)," *AUSS* 23 (1985): 181-183.

Before we proceed to our more detailed analysis of these concerns, it would be well at this point to summarize briefly some of the possible grounds for Luther's eschatological outlook. By doing this, we may also be reminded once again of the context in which the Reformer found himself, and of the importance of that context to his developing religious thought and conceptualization.

First of all—and foremost—in his early career Luther came to love the Scriptures and to give them priority in his studies. His familiarity with the Bible, enhanced both by his having gained competence in the biblical languages and by his own work in translating the Bible into German, certainly gave him an increasing awareness of the eschatological emphases revealed in the Scriptures. Corollary to this was the fact that he had a profound grasp of the concept of salvation, which in Scripture is closely tied in with eschatology. Furthermore, the very time in which he lived led him to feel that conditions in the world, in the church, and in society essentially called for a soon-return of Jesus. Particularly the situation in which he found himself in relation to the Roman Church contributed to a deepening of his eschatological concepts and convictions. Also, his own awareness of the task he felt himself being called to fulfill (a part of which was to meet the heresies of the papacy) contributed to his eschatological beliefs; and it may justly be said that Luther came to the place in his experience and in the concept of his vocation that he longed with his whole being for the ultimate consummation of all things earthly and for the coming of Christ that would bring about this consummation. Finally, in considering Luther's eschatological thought, we must not overlook the fact that he was aware of, and to a degree informed by, the tradition of prophetic interpretation of the early and medieval church.

As we recognize the contribution of factors such as the foregoing in structuring Luther's religious thought, and as we consider the "whole" Luther rather than only a limited period in his career, we may well become intrigued at how closely his convictions followed the eschatological mainstream of the Scriptures and how, in his later years, his thinking was so shaped by this trend towards an eschatological emphasis that his theology may rightfully be labeled as "eschatological."

In the present study of Luther's eschatology, we take notice in this article of certain basic components of that eschatology. Then, in a subsequent article we will turn our attention more specifically

to the Reformer's treatment of the prophetic forecasts in the two full-fledged biblical apocalypses—the OT book of Daniel and the NT book of Revelation.

1. *The Existential Component in Luther's Eschatology*

It has been noted that the Reformation was actually born of a twofold discovery: (1) of Christ and his salvation as accessible only through faith, rather than by works, and (2) of the identity of the antichrist and his subversions.² With respect to the latter, it was not that Luther was the first or only person who in that general time period had come out with apocalyptic news, but he was the most notable person who dared to pinpoint the symbolic language of apocalyptic passages in Scripture as applying to contemporary figures and forces. Jaroslav Pelikan sums up well the general situation, as follows:

To be sure, ever since the transformation of the apocalyptic vision in the early church, the component elements of that vision had remained present in Scripture and in the creeds of the church. They may have seemed more or less quiescent for long periods, but repeatedly they had erupted when a historical crisis found a prophet to sound the alarm and issue the ancient summons: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." For some medieval believers (though perhaps not, it would seem from the sources, for as many of them as modern writers often suppose), one such apocalyptic moment had been the end of the first Christian millennium. Such a reawakening of the apocalyptic vision in the tenth century—or in the fourteenth and fifteenth—would not of itself belong to the history of the development of Christian doctrine, since, strictly speaking, the doctrine of the last things had always been on the books and apocalypticism was merely the application of the doctrine to a particular epoch. What made late medieval apocalypticism important doctrinally was the growing belief in this period that "the man of sin, the son of perdition," the Antichrist whose coming was to be the principal sign of the end, was not some emperor (Nero or Frederick II) nor some false prophet (Arius or Mohammed), but the noble head of Christendom himself.³

²See L. E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 2 (Washington, D.C., 1948): 241-265.

³Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 4: *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 37-38.

Concerning the existential connection between Luther's soteriology and eschatology, it may be pointed out that he seems to have had a burden on his heart to make it abundantly clear that there cannot possibly be a separation between salvation as an existential experience in "the here-and-now" and in the eschaton of "the hereafter." A large number of his rather strong statements give a clear indication, as well, that there was no doubt in Luther's mind as to the direct effect of the fast-approaching end upon the life which preceded it. Moreover, in its awareness of conditions inside the church and also in the world, Luther's eschatology reveals an undeniable salvation-historical accent in that it looked upon certain conditions as causes that would hasten the coming of the last day.⁴

This general outlook on the part of Luther led him to the vivid belief that the "teaching of the last things" is intimately related to the other facets of systematic theology, such as christology, the doctrine of justification, sanctification, the sacraments, and ecclesiology. Ulrich Asendorf has made a most helpful contribution to studies on Luther by providing a rather detailed overview of the eschatological connotations in Luther's theology.⁵ He traces the Reformer's eschatological thinking as it appears in all major lines of Luther's theological thought. Although only thirteen pages are devoted specifically to "the last things," Asendorf concludes that these "last things" are only part of a comprehensive eschatology in Luther—in a way, the last act.⁶

It seems particularly significant to note how closely Luther's eschatology was connected with his understanding of justification.

⁴See the *Weimar Ausgabe* of Luther's works, 10/1/2:93-120. Preaching on Luke 21:25-33 in his "Adventspostille" of 1522, Luther decries papal and worldly sins, declaring that Christ must soon come, inasmuch as such sins are so great that Heaven can no longer tolerate them. He concludes that if it were only unchastity of the kind at the time of the Flood or certain worldly sins as at Sodom, "I would not maintain that the last day would come on account of them." But God's worship, word, sacrament, children, and all that pertains to God have been "disturbed, destroyed, condemned, and calumniated," with the devil being substituted for God and "worshipped and honored, [and] his lies held to be God's word ["anbeten unnd ehren, seyne lügen fur gottis wortt hallten"] . . . (p. 97). (The *Weimar Ausgabe* will hereinafter be cited as *WA*, with additional abbreviations for the *Briefwechsel* [*WA-Br*] and the *Tischreden* [*WA-Tr*].)

⁵Ulrich Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther* (Göttingen, 1967).

⁶Asendorf, p. 280. See also Hans Ulrich Hofmann, *Luther und die Johannes-Apokalypse* (Tübingen, 1982), pp. 1-2.

A balance in Luther's doctrine of justification is achieved by his use of the terms "iustus" and "initium." The "iustus" in his lectures on Romans in 1515-16 and then also in those in Galatians in 1531 includes the assurance of being led away from God's wrath to his mercy.⁷ This justification then sets in motion an eschatological process which finds its final culmination in the resurrection to eternal life. What will be perfected there has already started here and now. In his *Disputationes* on Rom 3:28 from 1535 and 1536 (the dates indicate how advisable it is to consider the later Luther), he repeatedly points to the eschatological facets of the process of justification.⁸ Asendorf has remarked in a forthright manner:

Justification is at first the anticipation of the Last Day and this insofar as the judging and saving decree of God is being received today as well as at the end of time. Besides this eschatological present there is the eschatological future of the consummation. In view of the latter, our justification is only a beginning. . . . The strong emphasis on the *simul* in the Luther research of the past must not be set up as something absolute. *Simul* and *initium* belong directly together.⁹

It may be noted at this juncture that Karl Barth has claimed in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* that eschatology—the hope and destination of human life through the coming Kingdom of God—had come off badly in the theology of the Reformers.¹⁰ Paul Althaus has challenged this contention, indicating that such could, at the most, be true for Zwingli and Calvin, but never for Luther! He goes on to say:

He [Luther] rejects all expectation of a millennium as a future reign of Christ: now Christ is reigning through his Word. Does the eschatological tension seem to be solved here already?

But this is only one side with Luther. At the same time eschatology comes out strongly. This is to be concluded from the whole of his theology, even if all of the eschatological statements of the Reformer were lost to us. Luther proclaims the *theologia crucis*. Christ's victory and kingship are still hidden. The enemies, death and Satan, have been imprisoned and judged by the Easter

⁷WA 40/2:86, lines 3-9.

⁸WA 39/1:83, line 20.

⁹Asendorf, p. 42.

¹⁰Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zürich, 1948), 2/1:5-712 and passim.

event, but not yet executed. The Christian has freedom and salvation in the faith, however, until now *only* in the faith and not in experience yet. . . . How should Luther not intensely look forward to the end of this life and of history! Therefore his faith is longing for the last things.¹¹

Althaus elsewhere, after speaking of the close and inseparable connection of eschatology with salvation and righteousness by faith in Luther's understanding, says:

Luther's theology is thoroughly eschatological in the strict sense of expecting the end of the world. His thoughts about the eschaton are not a conventional appendix but a section of his theology which is rooted in, indispensable to, and a decisive part of the substance of his theology. Luther did not merely repeat the old traditional answers to the central questions of eschatology. In this doctrine, too, he is the Reformer.¹²

In this respect it would be a distortion if we were to think of the explicitly "last things" in Luther's writings. His whole theology has to be regarded as essentially eschatological, so that we must agree with Asendorf in declaring that "the 'last things' are only the consequence and final stage of eschatology, not their actual theme. They are the prospective final point. In sanctification as well as in the consummation of the last things, elements of *Heilsgeschichte* are taken up again."¹³

This soteriological-eschatological confluence within Luther's religious thought is also elucidated by his treatment of the sacraments. In his "Sermon on the Holy and Worthy Sacrament of Baptism" in 1519 he argues that Christian life is nothing else than the commencement of dying, from the time of baptism until the grave; for God wants to create men anew at the last day.¹⁴ This *mortificatio* begins with baptism and is nothing else than its daily realization. Only at the last day will the real meaning of baptism be fulfilled and come true—namely, to be resurrected from death,

¹¹Paul Althaus, "Luthers Gedanken über die letzten Dinge," *Luther Jahrbuch* 23 (1941): 10.

¹²Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia, 1966), pp. 404-405.

¹³Asendorf, p. 294.

¹⁴WA 2:728, lines 27-29.

sin, and all evil, and to live renewed in body and spirit for eternity.¹⁵

In several places Luther mentions the inner connection between baptism and communion. Both are essentially related to each other as beginning and continuation of the eschatological process. What was begun in baptism needs to be constantly strengthened.¹⁶ Both belong together in order to foster a strengthened belief in that which shall be accomplished spiritually and ultimately eschatologically by taking part in the communion.¹⁷

2. *Allegorical Application of Apocalyptic Language and Symbols*

What also rather typically belongs to Luther's eschatology is his allegorical application to the present era of certain well-known end-time expressions of Scripture. The darkening of the sun, for example, means that Christ's light does not shine in Christendom any more and that the gospel is not being preached. The falling of the stars is the loss of faith on the part of those who want to become monks or priests in order to earn their salvation. Christ, Luther says, is the Sun, the church is the moon, and the Christians are the stars. The rush and brawl of water and wind is the discord of the world, and the lack of discipline that has gained so much ground. The term "the day breaks" means that the gospel will "rise" and be preached in anticipation of the last day! And rather pessimistically, but with unrestrained intrinsic hope, Luther says of the world that it has become a senile old man (*Greis*) now that goes to his grave. Admonitions are worthless, because—and one can almost hear the Reformer's indignation—in the villages they do not want to support the sacristans anymore. Therefore the world is ripe for destruction. Because all hope for improvement has vanished, there is nothing more than the anticipation of the last day, and this Luther longs for with all his heart.¹⁸

Luther's interpretation of apocalyptic symbols and prophecies agrees, of course, to a certain extent with the interpretation of his time. Naturally, he took over some of Augustine's teachings in this respect—so, for example, the latter's allegorizing of last-day events

¹⁵WA 2:728, lines 30-37.

¹⁶WA 2:746.

¹⁷WA 2:751, line 31, through 752, line 3.

¹⁸WA 29:617-624; and cf. Asendorf, p. 281.

and the belief that the millennium of Rev 20 was already being fulfilled in the present age (commonly called the "amillennial view"). In Luther's interpretation of the OT book of Daniel we find clear traces, as well, of Joachim of Floris, in addition to his own innovative concepts, such as pointing to the Turks as the historical fulfillment for the last beast in Dan 7. However, to make the Reformer simply either a product of his own time or an interpreter who merely harped on the ideas of his forebears would cause us to miss (to a great extent, at least) the real thrust of Luther's apocalyptic stance. He proved to be very original and daringly revolutionary in his interpretive approach.

In Luther's view of the millennium and end-time—one of the major facets of his teaching on the last things—he was a follower of the basic Augustinian amillennial view, as we have already noted. In his exposition, he rejected chiliasm and forcefully pointed out that the "thousand years" of Rev 20 began at the time when the book of Revelation was written. The end of this time period, the release of Satan according to Rev 20:7, he viewed as being the papacy's becoming the antichrist when Gregory VII became pope in 1073 and signaled his desire for world dominion. A second event causing Luther to think that Satan had been released and thus that the end of the millennium had already come was the Turkish threat to the Christendom of Europe.

3. *Setting the Time for Christ's Return*

In his interpretation of apocalyptic symbolism, Luther was influenced by various ideas that prevailed in his day and was nurtured by a number of people who tried to work out the time of the last day. In 1499, for example, the mathematician Johannes Stöffler had predicted an eschatological flood (on astronomical grounds) for the year 1524. Luther supported the basic idea and hoped that this then would indeed be the last day.¹⁹ The mathematician Johann Carion, who later became a friend of Luther, supported the same theory, adding that there would come a change in the church and great bloodshed among the Christian peoples in conjunction with this flood.²⁰

¹⁹WA 10/1/2:108, lines 1-4. Cf. the summary in A. Modalsli, "Luther über die letzten Dinge," in H. Junghans, *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526-1546* (Berlin, 1983), p. 335.

²⁰WA 10/1/2:108, n. 1.

Although Luther viewed Stöffler's theory as a serious confirmation of his own expectation, he nevertheless was strictly against anyone's predicting the exact date of Christ's coming. As a case in point, we may note that another mathematician, Michael Stiefel, set the date for the second advent of Christ as October 19, 1533, at 8 a.m. Luther rejected this outright, and called Stiefel's idea "all his [Stiefel's] own." Luther gave two reasons for his objection: first, Christ's proclamation in Matt 24:36 that no one except the Father knows the day and hour; and second, Stiefel's approach would invalidate the literal meaning of Scripture. However, Luther considered this fanaticism on the part of his friend as being only "a little temptation" (*ein Anfechtlein*)—a matter having no serious danger for the church.

Luther must, however, have been quite intrigued by the time-calculating efforts of his friends and contemporaries, for he began some calculations of his own. He says that he did this work "*per otium*"—"in his spare time"—, perhaps to play down its significance, even though he did not seem to regard it as unprofitable.²¹

What is known as his *supputatio annorum mundi* (1541) allows us a fairly good insight into Luther's thinking along these lines. Starting from the ancient Jewish idea that earth's history would last 6,000 years, he was convinced that the fifth millennium comprised the time from Christ to the eleventh century. This fifth millennium, Luther apparently believed, was the "thousand years" of Rev 20. In the sixth millennium, the world-year 5500 in his calendar was in the year A.D. 1540. In his reckoning, he felt himself supported by the epistle of Apostolic-Father Barnabas, which speaks of the seventh day in an eschatological sense, as the seventh millennium and coming day of rest. Also, Joachim of Floris had already made the statement that in the coming millennium, the "everlasting Gospel" of Rev 14:6, which is the spiritually interpreted Bible, would reign in this world. Finally, Stiefel understood Luther to be the apocalyptic angel with the everlasting gospel, and Luther must have felt the support of this idea for his own calculation, in that he did not object to the designation given him by Stiefel. (It is interesting to note that Rev 14:6 later even became a pericope of the Reformation festival.)

However, the foregoing calculations did not mean for Luther that the end of the world could not be expected until another few

²¹WA 42:245, lines 16-19.

centuries had gone by, because the end of the sixth millennium was still far off. The sixth millennium, Luther said, would not be fully consummated, just as the three days of Christ's death had not been completed. (Here, obviously, he missed the significance of inclusive reckoning.) Christ's second coming should, on such grounds, be expected around the middle of the sixth millennium. The Lord, he added, will certainly come "before the time" and will hasten the end. Thus, Luther firmly believed that the last day was right at hand—and all the more so in that the world as he saw it was ripe for judgment.²² (See the chart on the facing page.)

4. *End-Time Signs*

There is one aspect in Luther's eschatology which is so strong and vivid that it seems responsible for the impetus and energy of his belief and teaching on the last things. This is his amazing ability to see events and developments outside and inside the church as signs of the end. Luther was of a very practical nature when it came to the observance and interpretation of things that were going on around him. And he was fearless in pointing his finger at contemporary events and developments in the ecclesiastical and political realms, and in loudly proclaiming them to be a definite sign of the nearness of the end. He also observed natural phenomena that he considered as end-time signs, and called attention, as well, to social decrepitude.

Luther once remarked that a whole book could be filled with the signs that happened in his day and that pointed to the approaching end of the world.²³ He thought that the "worst sign" was that human beings had never been so earthly minded "as right now." Hardly anyone cared about eternal salvation.²⁴ Also, natural occurrences, such as storms and floods, were certain signs of the time, and Scripture was the only key for the interpretation of phenomena in the sky and astronomical conceptions.²⁵ There had been signs in the sun and the moon, comets had appeared, etc. In his approach here, Luther vigorously fought the idea of Aristotle

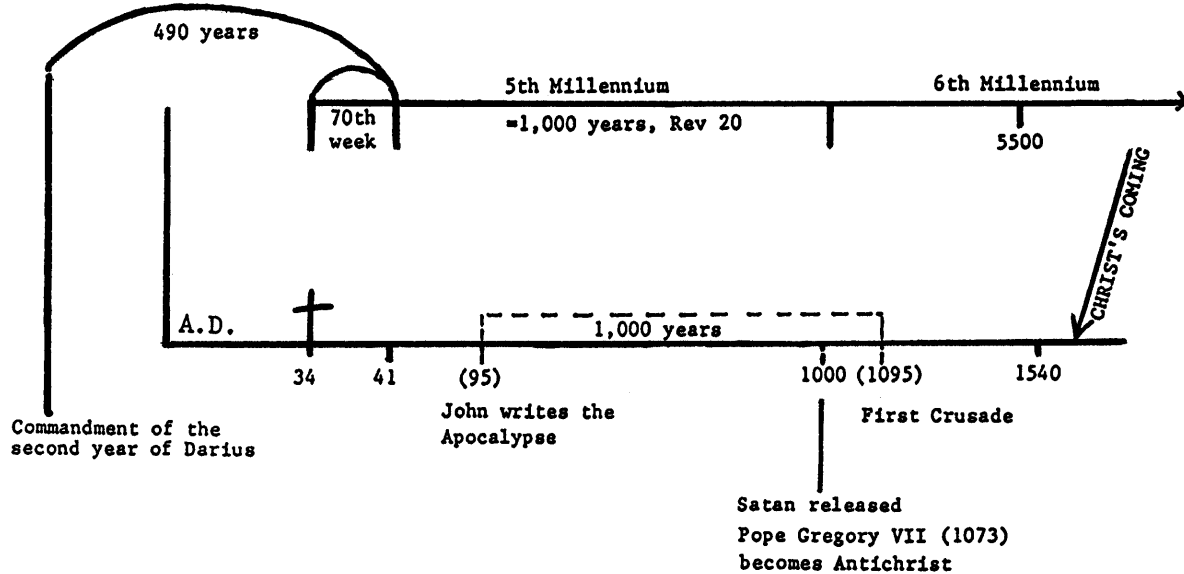
²²WA 53:13, lines 22-23.

²³WA 32:228-231.

²⁴WA 29:616, lines 9-12.

²⁵WA 10/1/2:104, line 3, through 105, line 12.

DIAGRAM OF LUTHER'S CHRONOLOGY FOR THE MILLENNIUM
(Prepared by Winfried Vogel)



in treating such things as simply natural and insignificant phenomena.

However, there are also miraculous events, Luther says, that are "against all reason" ("*wider alle mathematica*"): crosses that fell from the sky,²⁶ and the beast (*Untier*) which came out of the Tiber in Rome in 1496, which "means the papacy."²⁷ It is interesting to note that there is evidence that Luther did understand this "pope ass" to be a literal beast that was retrieved from the river. (See the woodcut on the facing page.) But he also gave warning not to expect all sorts of miracles ("*allerlei Mirakel*"). In fact, the increased number of natural occurrences are the promised signs, which only faith can perceive.²⁸ Particularly uncanny signs of the nearness of the end, he felt, are the two beasts of the Apocalypse (chap. 13:1, 11). These, he suggested (and here again Luther made forceful application to his own day) were present already—the first one, the Turk; the second one, the Pope. Both, he said, have in common that they oppose the church of Christ, use force, and will find their downfall and end shortly before the last day.²⁹

In one place, Luther declares that the surest sign of the end is the "abomination of desolation." This, for him, was the perversion of the divine service and the Word of God ("*Gottesdienst und Gotteswort*").³⁰

5. *The "Beloved Last Day"*

Probably the most crucial point of contact between Luther's soteriology and eschatology is to be found in his view of the last day, a view which underwent dramatic change at the same time that his understanding of salvation changed. The question of the

²⁶WA 10/1/2:104, n. 4. Here reference is to elucidative accounts of historians that point out the significance of these crosses in conjunction with a mania for miracles.

²⁷WA 10/1/2:105:1-12: "Also how many signs and wonders have appeared in the sky in these four years, as in the sun, moon, stars, rainbow and many other strange images? Let it be signs, great signs, which are of great significance, and of which the astronomers ["*Sternmeister*"] and Lady Hulde ["*Frau Hulde*," referred to in the apparatus as "*domina Agape Physiologika*"] also may not say that these result from natural causes, for they have not known or prophesied about them before. . . ." (Then Luther goes on to describe in detail the terrible beast, "which the Tiber at Rome cast out dead only a few years ago.")

²⁸WA 17/1:481, lines 13-18; 10/1/2:93, lines 21-28.

²⁹WA 39/2:62, lines 1-2 (on Matt 19:21, in the year 1539).

³⁰WA 10/1/2:97, lines 9-26.

iustitia Dei ("God's righteousness"), with which he wrestled and to which he found the answer in his *Turmerlebnis* ("Tower Experience") while thinking on Rom 1, has been given wide attention. But at the same time he also found a new relationship to the endpoint of human history. Albrecht Peters refers in the following way to the tension of the *simul iustus et peccator*, which Luther felt and even suffered in his very own experience:

The eschatological movement of Scripture has been endured anew by a human heart and thus has disclosed its inner form. The pathway the church has walked from the Old Testament to the witness of Christ is here being accepted by a Christian in the innermost parts of his soul and consciously reenacted. Luther does not describe this tension from the outside as a passive observer; neither does he silence it by way of a systematic artistry; he endures it consciously to the brink of his own being shattered and by this very act carries it in prayer through into the eschaton. And here the real secret of his theology has its basis; it is a theology of the eschatological way.³¹

The discovery of the tension of being fully justified and yet at the same time of being a sinner awaiting the consummation of Christ's victory at Christ's second coming became the solution to Luther's trembling in view of the last day. Looking back to his early days, he said in 1545 that "I was terribly afraid of the last day."³² But with both the assurance of salvation and the acute awareness Luther always had of his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the church, he could write in 1540, "Come, beloved last day, amen."³³ Or some years earlier, in 1532, he could preach that "with the right hand and with all our hearts we should anticipate this day, when He will come in His glorious majesty."³⁴ And in

³¹Albrecht Peters, "Luthers Turmerlebnis," in Bernhard Lohse, ed., *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther* (Darmstadt, 1968), p. 278. In n. 16 on this page, Peters especially points to WA 18:784-785 as a reference to this aspect of Luther's thought.

³²WA 54:179, line 32.

³³WA-Br 9:175, line 17 (no. 3512). It is hardly possible to render the phrase "lieber jüngster Tag" in such a way as to bring out its full meaning in English. Even "jüngster Tag"—literally "youngest day"—has a special ring to it, which is somewhat lost in the widely used English term "last day." Johann Heinz in his recent article (see n. 1, above) speaks of the "dear last day," but I prefer the term "beloved" in order to convey an idea of the tender emotion with which Luther undoubtedly used this expression.

³⁴WA 36:379, lines 28-30.

1544, two years before his death, he expressed in a letter to Joachim Mörlin: "Come, come, Lord Jesus, come!"³⁵

Thus, Luther longed for the day when Christ would make an end to all corruption and strife and death. This utmost desire cannot possibly be separated from his other theological thinking, for it is the lifeblood of his theology, fixing ultimate hope and meaning to his teaching on both justification and sanctification.

6. *The Condition of the Dead*

Luther also was a reformer in his teaching on the condition of the dead and on the question of their resurrection on the last day. According to Paul Althaus, Luther reinstated the resurrection to its significant position by speaking of death as a "sleep" which affects the whole man, not only the body. However, Althaus claims that Luther also shared "the dualistic definition of death as separation of soul and body; accordingly, he also teaches that the souls enjoy a bodiless existence until the Last Day."³⁶ But Althaus has to admit that "Luther generally understands the condition between death and the resurrection as a deep and dreamless sleep without consciousness and feeling"³⁷ and that Luther "says nothing about souls without their bodies enjoying true life and blessedness before the resurrection. They sleep in 'the peace of Christ.'"³⁸

The designation of death as "sleep" is probably emphasized by Luther not so much for the sake of a detailed description of man's condition in death as to show the certainty of the resurrection.³⁹ Almost all researchers have to agree that Luther's statements in this area are rather ambiguous. One of the most recent, Modalsli, speaks of different "tendencies" in Luther's view on this subject—one of these in the direction of the total destruction of man in death, and the other as "only a part of man is dead."⁴⁰ On the one

³⁵WA-Br 10:525, line 22 (no. 3966).

³⁶Althaus, *Theology*, p. 414. He refers to WA 36:241 and 39/2:386 to support his claim.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., p. 415.

³⁹WA 46:463-471, alluded to in Asendorf, p. 288.

⁴⁰WA 36:241, lines 8ff.; quoted in Modalsli, p. 335.

hand, Luther thinks it ridiculous that the soul in heaven would long for the body, and he characterizes the belief in the separation of a living soul from a dead body as "garbage."⁴¹ On the other hand, he adheres to the church's teaching that the soul (*anima*) is separated from the body in death.⁴²

But Luther does reject the statement of the Fifth Lateran Council (1513) on the immortality of the soul. Here a very interesting dispute has arisen between Althaus and Carl Stange.⁴³ Whereas Althaus claims that Luther rejected the Council's statement because he did not deem it necessary at all to mention a very usual and commonly held belief of the church (Althaus tries to support his position by pointing out that Luther employs the style of ridicule for his rejection), Stange is convinced that Luther did so because the Reformer had realized that the immortality idea was deeply pagan and totally unchristian. Althaus's arguments on this question are, frankly, not very convincing, and I would tend to agree with Stange, who has argued for a whole new anthropology of Luther (and who, in this, is now also supported by Modalsli⁴⁴).

As to Luther's general ambiguity on the state in death, perhaps we may venture a possible reason for it. On the one hand, Luther shunned the idea of an immortal soul for fear of weakening the belief in a literal and soon-coming resurrection and because he rejected the Greek philosophical origin of it, while on the other hand he was reluctant to speak of the total death of a person when at the same time strongly believing in the certainty of this person's being awakened by the voice of God at the last day.⁴⁵ Therefore, Luther's emphasis lay rather on the Bible's own description of death as "sleep" and on the *verbum Dei*, which can and will penetrate the ears of the "sleeping." Similarly, Luther goes to great

⁴¹In the original: "die *distinctio* ist ein dreck!" *WA-Tr* 5:219, lines 12-17 (no. 5534).

⁴²*WA* 39/2:354, lines 9-11, 25-26; also p. 386, lines 5-7. These references are noted by Modalsli, p. 335.

⁴³Paul Althaus, "Die Unsterblichkeit der Seele bei Luther," *ZST* 3 (1925), pp. 725-734.

⁴⁴Modalsli, p. 335.

⁴⁵See also Paul Althaus, "Retraktationen zur Eschatologie," *TLZ* 75 (1950): 254-255.

length to bring clarity to the question of the death and resurrection of the wicked.⁴⁶ Also, he is clear and unambiguous in treating the biblical term that has generally been translated "soul."⁴⁷

7. *Antichrist*

It is well known among those who have read and studied Luther that the figure of the Antichrist played a significant role in his eschatology and had a direct impact on his theology. This subject will be taken up again in my next article, but a few observations may be made here as to his understanding of the antichrist. Modalsli has summed up the matter well by pointing out that Luther mentions both the pope and the Turks together as the manifestation of the antichrist, the former working from within the church, the latter from outside and threatening the whole of Christianity. However, it is only the pope who is to be considered as the *real* antichrist, because the most dangerous enemies are those who deceive the soul (Luke 12:4-5) and it is the sign of the antichrist to sit in the temple of God, which is the visible church (2 Thess 2:4).⁴⁸

It is not surprising that Luther connected these two powers—the papacy and the Turks—in his interpretation of the antichrist, for they prevailed in his day and the Reformer watched their development very closely. However, it is interesting to note with Mark Edwards that Luther obviously saw the two as more intrinsically connected than just because of a historical coincidence. Edwards even holds that Luther's central conviction regarding the Turks for the rest of his life was that "they were God's punishment on a sinful Christendom that, among other sins, tolerated the papal abomination."⁴⁹

(*To Be Concluded*)

⁴⁶See D. Carl Stange, "Zur Auslegung der Aussagen Luthers über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele," ZST 3 (1925): 779-780.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 773-774.

⁴⁸Modalsli, p. 332.

⁴⁹Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther's Last Battles* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), p. 98.