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MARTIN LUTHER IN HIS LATER YEARS

ALBERT HYMA

Editor's Note: This article represents an edited version of excerpts from the two final chapters ("Return from Wittenberg to Eisleben" and "A New Appraisal") in Hyma's *Martin Luther and the Luther Film of 1953* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1957), pp. 271-283. (The editing does not indicate ellipses from the original text, but a series of asterisks reveals where the chapter break occurs.)

A brief sketch of highlights in Hyma's academic career is provided at the close of this article.

In Luther's last few years he suffered from severe headaches and spells of extraordinary pessimism. It has been assumed by many biographers that Luther was irascible and disagreeable as compared with his earlier years. He is said to have antagonized many dear friends with his vehemence and unreasonable manners. But a close examination of the original sources indicates that he was superior in many ways to certain famous men who were shocked by his intolerance.

Let us begin with the problem of persecution. Wenzel Link had asked him whether a civil government may execute heretics. He answered as follows:

I hesitate to give capital punishment even when it is evidently deserved, for I am terrified to think what happened when the papists and Jews, before Christ, persecuted with death. Whenever and wherever it has been the law to put false prophets and heretics to death, in the course of time it has come to pass that none but the most holy prophets and most innocent men were slain by this law, for wicked rulers made it a pretext and judged whom they wished as false prophets and heretics. I fear the same will happen with us, if we ever allow ourselves to put men to death for opinions even in one just instance, as now we see the papists shed innocent blood instead of guilty [blood] by this law. Wherefore, I am not able to admit in any case that false teachers be put to death; it is sufficient to banish them, and if our posterity abuse

this penalty at least their sin will be less and will hurt only themselves. . . .

I should console those tempted by doubt and despair, first by warning them to beware of solitude, and rather to converse with others on the Psalms and Scriptures; and then—although this is hard to do it is a very present remedy—let them persuade themselves that such thoughts are not really theirs, but Satan's, and that they should strive with all their might to turn their minds to other things and leave such thoughts to him. . . .¹

Another problem needs further elucidation here. Those who have lightly assumed that Luther was unspeakably critical in his final blast at Rome in 1545 should compare this composition with those published about twenty years earlier. The title was *Against the Papacy in Rome Founded by the Devil*. Philip of Hesse read it carefully, and he liked it very much. King Ferdinand, the brother of Charles V, reported that it had been well written but regretted certain strong statements. It was promptly issued in a Latin translation. At the Council of Trent it attracted considerable attention.²

Very interesting is Luther's composition of six pages published in 1545 at Wittenberg by Joseph Klug. It was entitled *Against the XXXII Articles of the Theological Faculty at Louvain*. His reply contained 75 theses in the original Latin version, and 76 in the German. The first reads as follows: "That which is taught in the Church without the Word of God is a lie and heretical." No. 23 of the German version says that the mass is not a sacrifice, No. 24 that mass should not be said for the dead, No. 25 that the dead do not eat and drink. In No. 28 Luther attacks the Zwinglians for denying that during the communion service the believers receive in their mouths "the natural body of Christ."³ In No. 48 the author says that there is a holy Christian Church upon the earth but the heretics at Louvain are no part of it. Luther admits in No. 35 that penance

¹Preserved Smith and C. M. Jacobs, *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, 2 (Philadelphia, 1918): 447.

²Luther's *Werke*, Weimar Ausgabe (hereinafter cited as *WA*) 54: 195-202.

³The Latin text has: "Corpus et sanguinum Christi ore carnali sumi." The German text has: "Mündlich empfangen werde der warhafttge natürliche Leib und blut Christi." See *WA* 54: 427, 434.

is a real sacrament, as long as absolution and the faith of the believer are added. In No. 36 he says that the theologians deny the essence of faith, hence are worse than heathen, Turks, and Jews. Very important is No. 74, which states that kings and princes do not have the power to determine what is the proper creed. They must themselves be subject to God's Word and to God. They must serve God. Here we have a reaffirmation of the principle expressed by Luther in 1523 that the prince may not dictate to his subjects what their religious beliefs shall be. It has been widely assumed that Luther after 1528 gave up his belief in religious liberty. But here we see that in 1545 he had returned to his original position. And as for the invocation of saints, he said in No. 70 that the theologians in Louvain had created new gods by invoking the spirits of dead persons, whether they were holy or not. It is regrettable that Luther's final creed has received very little attention.

Those 75 or 76 articles of faith indicate that Luther in 1545 was a very sedate theologian. He arranged his material with great care and showed a keen grasp of fundamental principles. But he was now sixty-two years old and no longer in possession of youthful vigor. He grew tired of the campus atmosphere, and his thoughts returned to the old ancestral home in Eisleben. Moreover, he wanted to settle a quarrel between the princes of Mansfeld. On January 28, 1546, Luther and his party arrived at the home of the Prince of Mansfeld in Eisleben. On February 17, 1546, the old dispute was finally dissolved, much to Luther's credit. He had become exhausted by the arduous trip in the middle of the winter and by the silly quarrels of the princes. Frequently he had complained about the hardness of people's hearts, both princes and peasants.⁴

Early the next morning he failed to recover from a severe pain in his chest. The doctor tried everything in his power to revive him, but it was all in vain. On Monday, February 22, 1546, his body arrived in Wittenberg. John Bugenhagen, who had officiated at the wedding, led the student body in the funeral procession. Directly behind the hearse followed his wife Catherine and some

⁴WA, *Briefwechsel*, 10: 23, 48, 61, 156, 401, 527, 553-554. On May 5, 1542, Luther wrote Philip of Hesse that Counts Gebhard and Albrecht of Mansfeld were quarreling again.

other ladies in a carriage, while the next contained the three sons, Hans, Martin, and Paul, besides their Uncle Jacob from Mansfeld. At the famous Castle Church the procession halted. The body was carried through the same door on which Luther had posted the *Ninety-Five Theses*. What a strange coincidence! Both Bugenhagen and Melanchthon delivered stirring addresses. The body was finally lowered in a grave directly in front of the pulpit. As was the custom, a stone tablet was placed above the spot where the body had been laid to rest.

* * *

Many faults in Luther's character have recently been exposed by Protestant historians and theologians. In the meantime the Catholic scholars have not ceased to defend themselves against unfair criticism on the part of Protestant writers. It has become very difficult to arrive at a proper evaluation of Luther's career and works. The latest theory has been to the effect that when Luther was a comparatively old man he made statements that do not compare favorably with those of earlier years.

But it would seem that Luther was no worse at the age of sixty than twenty years earlier. As a matter of fact, his behavior in the period from 1518 to 1526 was such that he lost numerous intelligent friends in those fateful years. The loss of the Rhine Valley and all European lands to the west of that river and south of the Alps was partly the result of his actions and thoughts before the year 1527. What he wrote about Erasmus and Zwingli, what he said against the peasants in 1525, the manner in which he condemned King Henry VIII of England in 1522 and the Pope before that, and his discussion of monastic vows in the year 1521—these and many other matters harmed his cause tremendously. In 1535 his most devoted friend of the past, Philip Melanchthon, gave up his belief in Luther's doctrine of the enslaved will and total depravity. He shuddered many times whenever the great master thundered forth with his violent language. But what nearly all biographers have consistently overlooked is Luther's remarkable doctrine and theories in his last three years.

What annoys Protestant writers the most at the present time is Luther's admission of his failure to improve the moral standards of both princes and subjects, high and low, rich and poor. Leon Francis in his booklet, *The Martin Luther Motion Picture*, devotes the

last two pages to quotations from Luther's own pen, written down near the end of his life, when he realized how hard it was for him to correct the evil ways of mankind. He said among other things: "We can then expect that after having driven away the monks, we shall see arise a race seven times worse than the former." Amazing to many readers must be this frank admission: "Men are now more avaricious, unmerciful, impure, insolent . . . than formerly under the Pope."

Luther remembered, he said, that when he was young a nobleman was thoroughly ashamed of his immorality. But after 1525 things became most discouraging: "Drunkenness has spread among our youth so that now the greater part of the finest, most talented young men (especially among the Nobles and at the Court) undermine their health, their body and their life . . . before the time."

On July 25, 1542, Luther admitted that unspeakable crimes had been committed "in Our Church." This was obviously the work of Satan. On October 9, 1542, he told Jacob Propst in Bremen that Germany was full of scoundrels and tyrants.⁵ On August 31, 1543, he wrote to Christopher Froschauer at Zurich: "As for the arduous labors of your preachers, with whom I cannot have friendship, they are all in vain, since they are all going to perdition. . . . They will share the same fate as Zwingli." What worried him especially in the year 1543 was the alliance between the Turks and the French.⁶

Another remarkable episode was the imprisonment of Henry of Brunswick by John Frederick of Saxony and Philip of Hesse. Numerous persons had requested that Luther write these princes and persuade them to release their prisoner. So he finally released for publication his last printed work (1545),⁷ in which he said some interesting things about the political situation in Germany. He did not recommend that Henry of Brunswick be set free, for the latter had been condemned by God for his attempt to help the forces of the Counter-Reformation.

⁵See *ibid.*, p. 156.

⁶See *ibid.*, p. 553.

⁷WA 54: 389-411.

We are not, thanks to God, made out of stone, nor iron. No Christian must wish another man the infliction of God's anger, not even the Turks, nor the Jews, nor his enemies. No demon may wish such a thing to be done to another demon. It is too much, eternal anger. Against that, everybody must pray for everybody, and it is compulsory to do so. I would gladly have seen the Cardinal of Mainz saved, but he would not listen and has gone to damnation. May God protect all human beings against such a demise. Similarly, we must love our enemies and forgive them and be merciful, so that the love and mercy shall not be false. I wish that the prisoner from Brunswick were the king of France and his son the king of England, for what harm would that do to me? But to recommend that he be set free, I cannot do. He has lost the trust of others. Since God has inflicted punishment upon him, who would dare to release him? This could be done only after he had repented of his evil deeds and had shown improvement, lest we should tempt God.

Luther compares the recent event with the relation between Ahab and King Benhadad of Syria. The King of Israel set the latter free, which was all wrong. Benhadad was God's enemy, and so is Henry of Brunswick, for he had behind him "the Pope and the whole body of the papal power." At the Diet of Worms in 1521 these people issued their edict against the Gospel, which they refused to suspend at the Diet of Speyer, though the Emperor would gladly have done so. Again, at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 they combined against us. Since they failed to get the Emperor to execute their desires, they wrote to each other that they must seemingly support him and threaten him with dire results if he did not carry out their demands. They formed what they call a defensive league, as if powerful forces were bent upon an attack. But neither Emperor nor Pope showed any desire to hurt a hair on their bodies. We on our side begged without ceasing for the maintenance of peace, which we were never able to obtain. They were the people who started an offensive alliance against us. We, not they, were condemned through excommunication and edict. A defensive league is forbidden by imperial laws. But they are the dear children who cannot commit sin, even when they trample upon God and the Emperor. We are sinners when we offer our bodies and lives in the service of God and the Emperor. We are not merely dealing with Henry of Brunswick but with the whole Behemoth and forces of

the papacy. We know that the Pope and his satellites cannot be converted, and so all they can do is to comfort each other.

As for the clergy among the Roman Catholics, they had better do penance and ask for guides to show them how to do this. The sins committed by them are numerous, as has been shown at the Diet of Regensburg. Particularly bad was the invasion of Protestant areas around Goslar, where murder and destruction were rampant. The list of misdemeanors is very large and hellfire has been earned by many. In short, the papists want all the Protestants killed, in body and soul. On the other hand, we want them all to be saved together with us. "Which side will be justified before God can easily be determined."

God has given us a great triumph over our enemies, Luther continues, but we may not assume that we have earned this triumph. No, we have not done so very well. Among us there are many who despise the Word of God and show great ingratitude for their blessings. The thirst for capital gain is so strong now that even among the most humble beings a person with only 100 *gulden* wants to invest this and expects to make 15 or 20 in no time at all. Common laborers have become so vain and so worldly that they all engage in usury, take advantage of their neighbors, steal, cheat, and lie. "It is a wonder that the earth still carries us. Yes, I say it, we have not earned these blessings, nor our recent political triumph, nor God's protection against the devil and his cohorts." But we have one advantage, that is, God's pure Word, unadulterated; also the Holy Spirit. There must be among us a few genuine Christians who have real faith. Such faith cannot be without good works. For Christ says in John 15: "He who dwells in Me and I in him, shall bring forth many fruits." And He says in John 14: "If you dwell in Me and My word in you, pray for what you wish and it shall be given unto you." And in Mark 11: "All things are possible to those who believe."

Such an advantage the papists do not have, for among them there is not only a contempt of God's Word but also persecution of those who accept that Word. . . . Where the faith is not right, there can be no good works, and everything that people try is damned and altogether in vain, including suffering, fasting, prayers, alms, and all other forms of asceticism and garments worn. For this reason we need not worry about their prayers, just as Elijah did not

have to worry about the prayers offered by his enemies to Baal. The same is true of all the labors in the monasteries and convents. The monks and nuns do not know how to pray and do not want to pray as long as they do not have the saving faith.

At the end of his treatise Luther refers once more to political developments. Maurice of Saxony, the son-in-law of Philip of Hesse, is now entitled to the territories which Henry of Brunswick wanted to seize, notably the former archbishopric of Magdeburg and the former bishopric of Halberstadt. The concluding sentence is the famous statement by Jesus in John 14: "He that believes in Me shall do the works that I do."

This curious mixture of politics and religion is a good summary of Luther's career. He continually quoted the Scriptures and used the sacred text to show how certain Lutheran princes were entitled to their recently acquired possessions. In his opinion, millions of fellow-Protestants were plainly heading for eternal damnation, while nearly all Roman Catholics were in serious danger of the same fate.

His final publication was not very different from those that had appeared some twenty years earlier. It showed that he knew "how to play ball" with the secular rulers whose aid he needed. The reader may well wonder how Luther wished to apply the inspiring words of Jesus to the effect that "greater works than these shall you do." Those were obviously spiritual works, not political victories.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ACADEMIC CAREER OF ALBERT HYMA (by the *AUSS* Editor)

Albert Hyma (d. September 22, 1978, at the age of 85) was one of the most renowned Renaissance-and-Reformation historians of our era. His major books, which include a Renaissance-Reformation textbook and some world history textbooks, number more than forty, and he has written hundreds of articles and book reviews that have been published in numerous scholarly journals here and abroad. He was one of the founding editors of the *Journal of Modern History* in 1929, and he served as editor for the medieval and Reformation articles in the *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, published in 1955.

Hyma's academic career included instruction in German at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1916-17, followed by a doctoral program at the University of Michigan (Ph.D. in 1922), and then history teaching at the University of North Dakota from 1922-24 and at the University of Michigan from 1924 until his retirement in 1962 as Professor of History. His scholarly awards and distinctions and his guest lectureships are too numerous to mention here.

Among his contributions to Luther studies, his biography entitled *Martin Luther and the Luther Film of 1953* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1957) and reissued the following year as *New Light on Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1958) stands out for its insightfulness on various issues that have been too frequently overlooked or given inadequate attention by other biographers. The well-known Reformation specialist Harold J. Grimm (author of the standard textbook *The Reformation Era*) has included Hyma in a list of distinguished scholars he considers to be among the first in America "to arouse an interest in the Lutheran Reformation by their lectures and publications" (Grimm, "Luther Research Since 1920," in *The Journal of Modern History* 32 [1960]: 111). (The others are Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Williston Walker, Henry Eyster Jacobs, J. M. Reu, and Preserved Smith.)

Further information on Hyma's remarkably productive scholarly career has been given in the necrology prepared by the present writer for *The American Historical Review* 85/1 (February 1980): 279-281.