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Luther's Strange God

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Luther's Strange God

Five years ago I was fortunate enough to be able to spend a week in East Germany on an ecumenical study-visit. One day I absented myself from the official tour and took the train from Erfurt to Wittenberg, determined to see for myself the birthplace of the Reformation. Since Luther's time, Wittenberg has taken its fair share of destruction and restoration in the tides of warfare that have swept back and forth across the north German plain, but its buildings and its atmosphere are still essentially late medieval. The University in which Luther was professor, roughly like a single small Oxbridge college, is an obvious focal point of pilgrimage, with its rooms in which Luther lectured, and ate and drank — and talked — around the table.

So also of course is the Castle Church, to the door of which on that fateful day in 1517, Luther fastened his 95 theses. Inside lies Luther's tomb. As I stood there, two Russian soldiers were also sight-seeing. It was impossible not to feel that whereas I, a pilgrim from the Christian Protestant west was coming home to pay tribute to the spiritual grand-parent of my tradition, this place must have seemed almost meaningless if not completely foreign to them. What could be more antipodal than a British Baptist and a Red Army soldier? Protestant pride and possessiveness rose in my breast as their wondering glances tried to take in the reason for the seeming importance of this building.

Any real encounter with Luther, however, quickly dispels the pretentiousness of such feelings. No-one, be he ever so 'Protestant' in stance, can ever really feel comfortable and secure with Luther. What he discovered, or rediscovered, about the nature of the gospel can never be domesticated. It will always be strange and alien to us, even to us — and perhaps especially to us — who think we know it so well. Luther himself once remarked that the common people always stare at the doctrine of justification by faith like cows at a new gate. We may smile in knowing agreement at this, but do we actually preach it? Are not so many of our sermons, whether issued from conservative, liberal, radical or whatever pulpits, in the end a matter of telling people to try harder at being better Christians? Who dares really to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in all its outrageous clarity? And when we do venture to speak of the unutterable grace of God, do we not find ourselves standing at the church door afterwards, hoping for complimentary words on our fine performance? Luther was as fine a psychologist as he was a theologian (no accident that) and his words should be pinned on every minister's desk: 'If you are highly pleased when someone praises you in the presence of others; if you perhaps look for praise, and would sulk or quit what you are doing if you do not get it — if you are of that stripe, dear friend, then take yourself by the ears, and if you do this in the right way you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey ears. Then do not spare any expense! Decorate them with golden bells, so that people will be able to hear you wherever you go, point their finger at you, and say, "See, See! There goes that clever beast, who can write such exquisite books and preach so remarkably well"'. That moment you will be blessed and blessed

beyond measure in the kingdom of heaven. Yes, in that heaven where hellfire is ready for the devil and his angels. To sum up: Let us be proud and seek honour in the places where we can. But in this book the honour is God's alone, as it is said, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble"; to whom be glory, world without end, Amen.'

The explosive nature of Luther's theology was due, to a great extent, to its fusion of his personal, passionate spiritual striving for peace with God on the one hand, and his objective, scholarly biblical study on the other. The pious monk yearned to be right with God, yet not even the most rigorous system of spirituality seemed adequate to this end. How could he ever be meritorious enough in the sight of the all-holy God? The solution came, not through finding the answer to this question, but by seeing that it was the wrong question. God's way with men, he learned through Paul, was not to accept those who became righteous by their efforts, but to accept sinners into the sole righteousness of Jesus Christ. Hammering at the locked door of acquired merit, he found the door of grace already open. *By faith alone* became the key. Faith, said Luther, is a living daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times. This confidence in God's grace and knowledge of it makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all his creatures; and this is the work of the Holy Ghost in faith.

Such faith, however, as this last quotation itself makes clear, is not just a human exercise or quality in itself. It is faith *in God*, who himself enables faith through the Spirit. 'By faith alone' is therefore simply the other side of *by grace alone*. Faith is the unity with God in Christ, the only righteous one. Baptists have often questioned Lutherans as to why, in view of such a lively insistence on personal faith, they have steadfastly defended infant baptism. Lutherans have usually replied in terms, first, of Luther's own conception of a germinal faith on the part of the infant, and secondly, in terms of this insistence on the prevenient grace without which faith is in danger of becoming another form of meritorious work. Baptists have not always held the balance from their side. How often does one hear believers' baptism described as 'making one's commitment' or 'witnessing to one's faith' — terms which are difficult to justify from Scripture, to say the least?

Mention of Scripture brings us to another obvious key element in Luther's theology. It was via Scripture that Luther had, by 1517, become convinced that *by faith alone* and *by grace alone* expressed the heart of Christian truth. But an explicit formulation of the authority of Scripture had not yet arisen. It took shape under the pressure of events. Luther at first appealed to the Pope against the practice of selling indulgences, the crudest contradiction of his theology of grace. The Pope not only refused to intervene, but moved in condemnation against Luther. Luther then called for a general council of the Catholic Church as the appropriate voice of authority. In dispute with John Eck, however, Luther was forced to concede that the logic of his position queried even the authority of such councils, since it was just such a body which had condemned John Huss, the Bohemian reformer of a previous century with whom Luther was in obvious sympathy. What, then, remained as the supreme authority for Christian belief and practice? *Scripture alone.*

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Luther's doctrine of the authority of Scripture, like that of 'faith alone' and 'grace alone' is not however as simple as it sounds. Just as saving faith means faith in *Christ*, and as God's grace means union with the crucified and risen *Christ*, so too for Luther Scripture is authoritative in that it is the medium of *Christ*. 'Scripture is the crib wherein Christ lieth'. Scripture, paradoxically, therefore both contains the norm and is to be assessed by the norm, which is Christ himself. This enabled Luther to attach varying degrees of significance to different parts of Scripture, as in his famous (though usually only partly-quoted) comment that in comparison with the gospels and Pauline and Petrine epistles 'the epistle of James is an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical'. Such a doctrine will appear strange today, alike to those who identify the authority of Scripture with literal inerrancy (an issue which had not arisen either for Luther or his opponents in the 16th century) and to those who, in the wake of historical and literary criticism, will not allow Scripture to say anything on its own behalf.

If forced into the unwelcome task of summarizing Luther's theology, bearing in mind the immense wealth and range of his writing on biblical, doctrinal, sacramental, pastoral and ethical matters, I would say: God present for man in Jesus Christ. It is the sense of the immediacy of God in his Word which touches everything Luther said, not least in his advice to preachers, that they should preach as if Christ were crucified yesterday, risen today and coming tomorrow. God is not at the end of a ladder of philosophical speculation, nor in a remote realm of saintliness. He has come in the despised man Jesus, in the humility of the crib and in the humiliation of the cross. He is to be apprehended not in his naked majesty, but in the apparent weakness which offers to faith the forgiveness of sins. Still today, he is present in the earthly forms of bread and wine and in the brotherly love in which each is a little Christ to his neighbour.

He is in all these, because this is where *he has placed himself*. Put simply, to believe in and worship God means allowing him to be the God he wants to be. Men often desire a different God, a God in their own image, an idol of their lusts, whether sensual, intellectual, social, political — or religious. Through the gospel Luther discerned a God who will forever be strange to men. He perceived a God who in some sense always remains hidden from view, yet who makes himself accessible to faith in the place and in the form he chooses. While intellectuality cranes its neck to peer into heaven, Jesus is born in Bethlehem. While would-be powers invoke heavenly might to justify their claims, he has nowhere to lay his head. While the godly are anxious about their own righteousness, he hangs under judgement on the cross. Much of God is inscrutable — but never more so than as to how, when and where he emerges from his hiddenness. Such a God refuses to settle in the abodes we make for him. He has to be sought and received on the terms of his sovereign grace.

Today, we do no real honour to Luther by simply applauding what he did in the 16th century. Nor can we be faithful to the truth of his insights simply by trying to repeat, phrase for phrase, what he said then. History has moved

on, and theology with it. Above all, theology has been made increasingly aware, ever since the late 18th century, of the formidable questions arising from the peculiarly modern consciousness of history. If the human story, overall, is one of continual cultural shifts and changing perspectives on reality, what absolute meaning or value can be attached to any single cultural view, or an event occurring and interpreted with one culture? Religion is part and parcel of a drama in which there are many actors, many scenes, a variety of plots — all relative in significance, none absolute. In face of this, the Christian belief in the absolute significance of the New Testament story is not so much to be regarded as either true or false, as meaningless. To speak of the eternal significance of a piece of temporal history is of the same order as speaking of a perfectly square circle. No history, by definition, can be absolutely normative for the rest of history. So runs the post-Enlightenment argument.

Now it is no coincidence that the theologians who have made the most conspicuous responses to this challenge, have been in the Lutheran tradition. It is this tradition which, more than most, has fastened on to the particularity of God's Word in Christ and been open to wider cultural activity. Perhaps the roots of this ambivalence go right back to Luther's debates with Erasmus, the great humanist. Of course the responses have been very varied. Søren Kierkegaard deliberately impaled himself on the horns of the dilemma of whether a universal truth could come through a particular event. Yes, he said, God came on earth in the man Jesus. Faced with the seeming absurdity of the incarnation, reason gives way to faith, the supreme human passion. Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing programme, for all its apparent negativity, was in fact a deeply devout attempt to distinguish the message of divine forgiveness (which for him was *not* myth) from the culturally-conditioned cosmological framework of the first century, and to allow it to engage with modern human self-understanding. Paul Tillich embraced a universal vision of all cultures and religions, expanding the Lutheran emphasis on judgment and grace into a 'Protestant principle' which, he argued, is an essential safeguard against idolatry in any sphere. Most strikingly of all, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's prison writings explore the possibility of a 'non-religious' interpretation of the gospel. Of the reality of God in Christ, and of the sovereignty of the gospel of grace, Bonhoeffer was never in a shadow of doubt. What he became aware of — to a great extent through reading 19th century analyses of history and more recent works on the growth of scientific understanding — was the inexorable tide of change in human understanding of our place in the universe. What has often been understood as 'religion' in the west, Bonhoeffer argued, might simply be another ephemeral feature of the human story. Christianity as faith in the God and Father of Jesus Christ need not and cannot any longer be wedded to this 'religion'. 'What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today', he wrote. So Christianity has to recover its own peculiarity: not a God of might to buttress the privileged or to prop up the immature, but the God who brings life to all men: not a God beyond the world we know, in

shadowy corners or ethereal remoteness, the *deus ex machina* brought in as a last resort, but the beyond-in-the-midst, existing in and for the world he has made and loves; not a God who cowed men into submission but a God who condescends to suffer the pain of the world on the cross; not a God enjoyed in a private life of pious superiority, but a God encountered through following Jesus in the life for others.

In all this, Bonhoeffer writes with Luther looking over his shoulder, seeking God as God wishes to be, not as we would like him to be. But *can* Christianity in the long run be isolated from the changing cultural forms in which it has found expression? Is not even the 'God of the Bible' as time-conditioned a concept as any other in history? And so on, right to Jesus himself and the gospel? Can the scandal of particularity be borne any longer? It can be borne, not as a burden but as a liberating gift, if we remember where the particularity actually lies. It lies not in the claim that here in the first century is a piece of human history which is completely out of the ordinary compared with all other parts of history. It lies, rather, in the claim that in this history — which is ultimately of a piece with all history — the eternal Word became one with human birth and life and death. The uniqueness is claimed for the self-giving condescension of God in that story, not for any absolute remarkableness in the story itself as human history. Here in the crib and there on the cross, God decided to be.

So Luther's theology of divine condescension, a theology of the cross, does not panic in the face of the relativizing historical consciousness of today. In fact it points to a way of taking history seriously — far more seriously in fact than the anxious brooding of the philosopher of history and culture, who is faced with choosing either an abstract meaning to be distilled out of all history, or a despairing acceptance of the meaningless relativity of chance and change. By choosing to place himself in the lowly story of Jesus, God shows his true majesty and sovereignty over all history. Precisely in his unique self-giving at a particular point, God reveals how desperately he cares for the human story as a whole. If it is asked why God should do this in such a particular way, it has to be replied that the only way into real history is via the particular. There can be no greater demonstration of the divine love for all, than the Word living the life and dying the death of one real person.

This is the strangeness of God which Luther discerned, the strangeness which is his freedom to place himself where we least expect him to be, or want him to be. Men — especially religious men — will forever be constructing abodes for him. They want to keep him at a distance, or they feel the need to protect him from a godless world. The task of theology and preaching is, over and over again, to demolish the false pedestals on which we place God, and to allow him to be himself. 'He is worth calling a theologian', says Luther, 'who understands the visible and hidden parts of God to mean the passion and the cross ... Therefore in Christ crucified is the true theology and the knowledge of God'.

Keith W. Clements

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