

Reflections on Luther the Person, Part 1. (With Quick Notes on the Forthcoming Conference, and on Matthew 25)

Colleagues,

Today's main event is the first part of recent essay by [Professor Rudolf Keller of Regensburg University](#). Dr. Keller, a friend of Ed and Marie Schroeder, spoke at one of our early Crossings conferences. Ed and Marie served as translators for the presentation here. We offer it as a worthy chaser for the rich three-part piece we sent you last month about Werner Elert's approach to the theological task. Dr. Keller shares Ed's profound appreciation for Elert's work, and for the great confessors who preceded him, Luther above all.

Before we get to this, a couple of quick notes—

First, now is the [time to register](#) for the [Seventh International Crossings Conference](#). It launches two and a half months from now at our usual site in Belleville, Illinois. The topic is urgent. It could not be more pressing. Christians, after all, are as scared, angry, and at odds with each other as any other batch of citizens in America right now. We dare to assert that the Gospel is God's best gift ever. Then why are we making so little use of it as we respond to the miseries that tumble from our newsfeeds day upon day? Why our fractured participation in the "siege mentality" that David Brooks described in his [New York Times column](#) last Monday? What would God have us see and believe in Christ crucified that would bring us to life and light for the sake of our neighbors? What will it take for Christians as a

group to start showing up as the people Paul describes in Philippians 2:15, “children of God without blemish in the midst of crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world”? Dare one hope for so impossible a miracle?

Such will be the thinking, talking, and praying that happens when we get to Belleville. God grant that you can make it.

In case you haven't heard, one of our key presenters, Kit Kleinhans, has recently been appointed Dean of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, now enfolded within the administrative structure of Capitol University. Matthew Becker and Stephan Turnbull will also play major roles in cracking open our theme, “The Power of the Gospel for Times Like These.” David Zahl, Executive Director of Mockingbird, is among the speakers who will help us name and discuss these times of ours. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia (enough said). Here's a [sample of his work](#).

Second. At church these days we're in the middle of one of the great stretches of listening that that crop up from time to time in the Revised Common Lectionary. The centerpiece is Matthew 25, all three pieces of it read in a row. At a pericope study last week a colleague surprised me by hauling along a piece I wrote three years ago about this chapter. I had forgotten it. I looked, scanned, and decided to share again. [Here it is](#), addressing the central question: where is good news in that story of the sheep and the goats?

With that we move to Dr. Keller, and to some ongoing thanks to God for the gift of the Reformation.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Luther “Personally” as the Reformation Unfolds: Insights Into His Life and Thought

By Professor Rudolf Keller

Reichenberg, Germany

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Do we want to celebrate Luther? Has he become problematic for us? Are we perhaps even a bit ashamed about him?

Four years after his death the pastors of the city of Magdeburg had this to say “. . .even though Luther is now dead, yet he still lives on, and the work which God has begun through him . . . will . . . yet remain forever to the Last day and move out into more countries and peoples.” (1)

Luther himself was very reserved in his self-reflection. In 1522 he put it this way: “First of all I ask that my name would not be used, and that people call themselves Christian and not Lutheran. For what is Luther? The teaching is not mine. I was not crucified for anyone. Saint Paul (I.Cor.3) would not tolerate anyone calling themselves ‘Pauline’ or ‘Petrine,’ but only ‘Christian.’ How then could I, poor stinking bag of maggots, qualify for having the children of God call themselves by my wretched name? No, dear friends, let us remove the party names and call ourselves Christians. What we have is His teaching” (2)

Later it became necessary for the sake of clarity to use the term “evangelical-Lutheran” to signal the distinction with the “Reformed.” In the Habsburg territories the same distinction was correctly designated with “Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession.” But Luther himself sought to lead us away from his

own person to his message.

In these 500th anniversary days (in Germany) Luther is showing up a great deal in the press, in radio and on TV. For many people that is just too much. Many are pleased that the Roman Catholic church is patently involved in this jubilee year, actually participating in joint celebration. For the Pope himself made a personal journey to Sweden to join leaders of the Lutheran World Federation for a joint celebration at the opening of the jubilee-year on Reformation Day 2016. The Pope readily accepted from the hands of Bishop Bedford-Strohm, spokesman for German Protestants, a copy of the Luther Bible. That is significant.

Today, however, I do not wish to repeat the generally well-known data about Luther and put it on display again. Instead I will try to focus my attention on Luther's own personality by examining his own words—above all passages from his letters.

It continues to be debated just how the posting of the 95 theses in Wittenberg took place, also how the 95 theses on indulgences became so publicly widespread. It is clear that Luther was not intending to grab for a hammer. And it may well be that there was no pounding hammer at all, allegedly shocking the world.

Luther was putting his theses out for discussion in his university context. He did so on the Eve of All Saints Day, knowing that on this high festival of medieval Christianity many people would be seeking comfort through indulgences. The theses became an item of public knowledge quickly because the topic itself was of public interest and thus people sought to publicize them.

Already by mid-November the first printing of the theses was available, but not in Wittenberg. Instead it was Nuremberg, a city ten times the size of Wittenberg, a city already peopled

with friends of Luther. Printer Hieronymus Hoelzel was the one who published the theses on a (single-page) placard. Triggering the publication was Nuremberg-council-consultant Christoph Scheurl who had received a copy of the theses from a Wittenberg canon.⁽³⁾ When we remember how in those days texts could be sent and move from one place to another, namely, via a messenger on horseback, we get an even clearer picture of how great the interest was in Nuremberg. Scheurl, at this time already working in Nuremberg, had been professor of canon law in Wittenberg from 1507-1511, so he had close connections.

There existed at that time in Nuremberg a group of humanists who were very open to Luther's activity. [For us living today in Franconia in Nuremberg's shadow that's well worth mentioning. But back to the topic of the theses in Wittenberg.] So the theses very quickly became known far and wide.

Whether they were actually nailed to the church door seems to me to be of little importance. Yes, there are marvelous pictures from the 19th century presenting the Wittenberg monk climbing the ladder with hammer in hand. If they were nailed anywhere in the university, then it would have been some university employee whose job it was to do that. Like many such theses for disputation in those days they were discussed in Wittenberg University. And that is why—as was self-understood at that time—they were written in Latin. There is no controversy about that. And it happened on October 31, 1517.

The issue in the theses was indulgences, the “business” that Johann Tetzel was promoting in order to raise money. Luther's most important thesis is, of course, thesis 62: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God.” Luther put his own person far behind this message and placed the Gospel itself at the center, a Gospel—as we've already heard—of whose power he was convinced.

It was with these theses that the Wittenberg monk and theology professor first became known in wider circles. On his way to being interrogated by Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg Luther passed through Nuremberg, staying with his fellow Augustinian monks at the cloister there. Thereby his Nuremberg friends got to know him.

Events became more and more aggravated. The Pope threatened excommunication and later carried through on the threat. That meant exclusion from the church and exclusion from receiving the sacraments. The jolt of excommunication struck Luther hard, but he did not retreat. Instead he did something outrageous on December 10, 1520. He organized a "burning at the stake" outside the Elster gate of Wittenberg and burned both the bull of excommunication and one volume of canon law. That was a much more drastic demonstration than posting the theses. And that occurred not in the protected space of the university but out in public before one of the city gates. The upshot thereof was Luther being summoned to appear before the imperial diet in Worms.

Everybody knew that the young emperor stood on the side of the "old-guard" critics of Luther. The emperor sought to compel Luther to recant, but Luther saw himself incapable of doing so. Only if he were convinced with clear grounds from Holy Scripture could he recant. Under this pressure and facing this danger he uttered his famous words: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

From these words people have later made Luther into a heroic figure, a hero of faith defying the emperor. In my judgment Luther spoke these words with fear and trembling, for he could not recant because he had no grounds for doing so. Thus the emperor's imperial ban was added to the papal excommunication. Luther was now an outlaw and could expect no protection at all

as he began his journey home from Worms.

His electoral prince Frederick the Wise reached for an action specifically fitting for the situation and well thought out. As soon as Luther crossed the border into Thuringia, Frederick organized Luther's "capture" whereby the Wittenberg monk "disappeared" into the Wartburg castle. Earlier I often said that it was "protective custody." But that is not accurate, for Luther was not actually imprisoned; rather he became an unknown Junker Joerg simply removed from the stage, taken out of circulation.

Frederick the Wise, who had never publicly taken sides with Luther, was a careful realist. He knew that this was the only way to protect Luther, to guarantee his safety from attack. We all know how Luther made use of his time at the Wartburg translating the Greek New Testament into German.

Today when so much is being made of Luther's translating the Bible, we need to make it clear how he used being "out of circulation" to do what he could do in such circumstances. This would eventually achieve world-historical significance, namely, rendering the Bible available for every Christian to read. For it is only by free access to God's Word, as it is conveyed to us in the Bible, that a Christian can learn what God's will is and how God's promises and the gift of forgiveness by grace alone through faith are to be understood.

Luther's hiding place was to be kept very secret so that no one could reach him and lay hands on him. Initially some people thought that with this arrest Luther could already have been killed. But before long there were letters to him and from him, discussions with his friends in Wittenberg and a flow of news.

It was in April 1521 that Luther was brought to the Wartburg. At Christmas-time that year he made a secret short visit to

Wittenberg. However later, back at the Wartburg when he heard of the turmoil that Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt was causing with his iconoclasm in Wittenberg, he just had to leave the Wartburg. Early in March 1522 he was in Wittenberg and on Invocavit Sunday (First Sunday in Lent) he began a series of sermons, the "Invocavit Sermons" as we now call them, whereby he brought the turmoil in Wittenberg to an end. It was in this context that he spoke those words about himself that I cited at the beginning.

I have summarized this much of the historical data in order now to present to you a document wherein we encounter Luther at a very personal level. Frederick the Wise wanted Luther to stay at the Wartburg. He feared that Duke George of Saxony, ruler of the neighboring "catholic" Albertine segment of Saxony, would seek to carry out the imperial mandate against Luther the outlaw. But Luther had asked Frederick for permission to return to Wittenberg and resume his calling there. Already on his journey from the Wartburg to Wittenberg he wrote a letter to his electoral prince, a letter that has always amazed subsequent readers, for it is a document of the very heart of his faith. Vis-a-vis his prince he spoke with such frank honesty "in plain German," which is simply extraordinary.

I call it "Luther personal." He begins with thanks, initially using all the appropriate formal terms to address his patron and supporter. Yet he points out to Frederick that he stands responsible to God and to the gospel. Were that not the case he would lose heart.

"But concerning my situation, most gracious Lord, I answer in this way: Your Electoral Grace [Hereafter "Y.E.G."] knows, or may not know, so let it here be known that I did not receive the gospel from humans but solely from heaven through our Lord Jesus Christ. That I could well take praise (which I will now do) as a

servant and evangelist praises and writes. That I have offered myself to examination and judgment, which has now happened. Not that I ever doubted, but I did it with excessive humility to attract others.

“However, now I see my excessive humility has led to the Gospel’s reduction and the devil has taken over the space where I allowed him but a handbreadth, so I must now from the poverty of my conscience do otherwise. I have satisfied Y.E.G. by retreating for this year in Y.E.G.’s service. For the devil knows quite well that I did not do this because of timidity. He indeed saw my heart as I entered Worms, that had I known how many devils were lying in wait for me—as many as were the tiles on the roofs—I would nevertheless have jumped with joy into the midst of them.

“Granted, Duke George is hardly comparable to any single devil. And because the Father of boundless mercy has made us bold lords over all devils and death by the Gospel and given us the riches of confidence, we may dare to say to him “Dearest Father!”

“Y.E.G. can reckon for himself that with such a Father it would be the highest insult were we not to trust that we also are lords over the wrath of Duke George.

“That I know from experience: If the Leipzig issue (Duke George) were like what is now going on in Wittenberg, I would still want to ride in even if (Y.E.G. pardon my foolish speech) it simply rained Duke Georges for nine days and each Duke George were nine times as mad as he is. He considers my Lord Christ to be a man of straw. My Lord – and I too – can cope with that for quite a while.

“I do not wish to conceal from Y.E.G. that I have never prayed nor shed tears for Duke George that God would open his eyes. I want to do that now one time – pray and shed tears – but after

that not again. And I ask that Y.E.G. would also help ask and have others ask whether we can rescue him (please, dear Lord!) from the judgment that presses upon him unceasingly. I would quickly with one word pray Duke George dead, if that would be allowed.

“I write this to Y.E.G. from the perspective of having Y.E.G. know that I am coming to Wittenberg under a much greater protection than that of the Elector. It is also not in my mind to seek protection from Y.E.G. In fact, I believe that I would have greater protection for Y.E.G. than you could have for me. Actually, if I knew that Y.E.G. could and would protect me, I would not come back. In this matter no sword should nor can give aid and counsel. God alone must do that here, apart from any human involvement and assistance. Therefore whoever has the most faith is the one who will do the most protecting here. And because I now sense that Y.E.G.’s faith is still weak, there is no way that I can look to you as the one who could protect and rescue me...” (4)

Frederick the Wise remained anxious. He enacted policies to implement his will to protect Luther in Wittenberg. So Luther had to send another letter. Luther viewed himself as an instrument in God’s hand, and thereby trusted that God could protect him.

The condemnation from both church and empire were not removed from Luther. Even so, he could continue to work in Wittenberg and also in neighboring places in the realm of his Electoral Prince.

To be continued. Endnotes will be supplied at the end of next week’s second and final installment.