

Reflections on Luther the Person, Part 2

Colleagues,

Here is the second half of Rudolf Keller's essay on Luther the human being, a sinner who trusted Christ. One of you wrote over the weekend to say that Part One was "the best thing I've read in the avalanche of materials on the 500th anniversary." I trust the rest of it will be just as satisfying. A reminder that the endnotes apply to last week's post as well as this one. Again our thanks to Ed and Marie Schroeder for both the translation and transmission of Dr. Keller's work.

To each and all, a Happy Thanksgiving!

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Luther "Personally" as the Reformation Unfolds: Insights Into His Life and Thought (Second of Two Parts)

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Reichenberg, Germany

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Nine years later (1530) came another Imperial Diet, this time in Augsburg where Emperor Charles V wanted to settle the religious conflict. Elector John of Saxony, now Luther's protecting

prince, would gladly have taken Luther with him to Augsburg. But that was not possible. Too dangerous. But John wanted Luther to be close at hand. He asked the Town Council of Nuremberg, now an “evangelical” city, whether Luther might reside there during the imperial diet. The Nurembergers, fearing the emperor, said no.

Luther was compelled to know that his life was still in great danger. At the Elector’s wish Luther accompanied the group going to Augsburg as far as the southern-most fortress in Saxony, Veste Coburg, and remained there for six months (April to October). In Augsburg it would be others, under the leadership of Philip Melancthon, who must advise the Elector and complete the work of formulating the evangelical Augsburg Confession.

From Coburg castle Luther kept close touch with what was going on in Augsburg with frequent letters and many visitors bringing the news. He told his colleagues back in Wittenberg about his stay at the Coburg. He would gladly have been present in Augsburg; life in Coburg was rather boring. Yet he described his situation with humor and confidence:

“There are some bushes right below my window, almost a small forest, where grackles and crows are holding their own imperial diet. There is such a coming and going, such noise day and night without end, as though they all were drunk, totally plastered. I would like to know whether such nobility and important issues are also present where you are. Seems to me they’ve gathered here from all over the world.

“I have not yet seen their emperor, but otherwise these high and mighty noblemen constantly soar through the air babbling before my eyes. They wear no fancy clothes, are all of one color, the same black, and all with the same gray eyes. They all sing the same song, though there is a pleasant difference between the young and the old, the big ones and the small ones. They are not

concerned about having a huge palace or hall, for their hall is the great arch of the beautiful wide heavens. Their floor is merely the field outfitted with lovely green branches, and the walls extend to the end of the world. They do not ask for horses and armor, but have their own feathered wheels with which they can escape the bushes and do combat. They are powerful lords. However, I can not yet tell what decisions they are making What I have heard from an interpreter tells me that they are planning to march out and do battle against wheat, barley (the raw as well as the malted), oats and every sort of grain. Many here will become knights and do great deeds.

“So we too sit here at an imperial diet. We hear and see with great joy and delight how the princes and lords together with the other estates of the empire sing with gladness, enjoying the good life. But we have special pleasure when we see how nobly they strut, wipe their beaks, and present their weapons for victory and honor over grain and malt. We wish them well, namely, that all of them would wind up skewered on a fence post.

“I expect, however, that in Augsburg it’s not much different with the scholars and Papists with their sermons and writings. I must have them all before me in one heap, so that I hear their lovely voices and sermons and see how useful they are, consuming everything on earth, audaciously preening themselves all the time.

“Today for the first time I heard a nightingale, one who had not wanted to trust the April weather. Till now it’s been marvelous weather here, no rain except yesterday a little bit ...”[ref]WA.B 5, S. 294, 7-44.[/ref]

This colorful and enigmatic language reveals that Luther here in his desert could still use humor—or is it gallows humor?—to cope with his unhappy situation. His personal view of the imperial

diet shines through his description. He's specifically skeptical about the church leaders there. They remind him of jackdaws or grackles.

At this time Veit Dietrich, later pastor at St. Sebaldus church in Nuremberg, was his assistant and colleague. Now and then Dietrich sent letters to Melanchthon at Augsburg. In one of these he offered a glimpse of Luther's faith-life in Coburg. He spoke of Luther's "cheerful faith" and described Luther at prayer. "Dear Master Philip, You don't know how concerned I am about your health. I ask you however, in Christ's name, to take Doctor Luther's letter to you seriously. I simply marvel at his incredible confidence, cheerfulness, faith and hope in these terrible times. Yet he nourishes himself constantly doing hard work with God's word. Never a day passes in which he does not spend at least three hours—hours that are actually the best for doing study—hours he instead devotes to prayer.

"I once had the good fortune to overhear him at prayer. Good Lord, what a spirit, what a faith is in his words. With such reverence he prays, addressing God with such hope and faith in the way that one would speak with his own father. 'I know,' he says, 'that you are our God and father. So I am confident that you will eradicate the tormentors of your children. Were you not to do so, then you are in danger just as we are. The whole business is your business; you have pushed us into it. Therefore you, dear father, may take care of it. Etc.'"

"As I heard his words of prayer from a distance, coming with a clear voice, my own heart within me burned for joy. He is so intimate, so intense, so respectful with God as he speaks. In prayer he presses the promises of the Psalms so hard as though confident that everything he is seeking simply must happen. So I doubt not that his prayers will have great consequences for this otherwise 'lost cause' at the imperial diet." [ref] *Ich zitiere*

eine Übersetzung des lateinischen Briefs [I cite a translation from the Latin Letter] (WA.B 5, S. 420f) nach CR [as it appears in Corpus Reformatorum] 2, Sp. 159, *hier nach* [translation here by] Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (Hg.): Martin Luther, *Briefe von der Veste Coburg* [Letters from Veste Coburg], München 1967, S. 7f.[/ref]

Dietrich also wrote to Luther's wife, who was very concerned when the news came that Luther's father had died in Mansfeld. His friend from his school days in Mansfeld, Hans Reinicke, had notified him on June 5 that his father Hans Luther had died in Mansfeld on May 29, 1530. That made him the oldest member of the family. Luther told this to Melanchthon.[ref]WA.B 5, S. 350f. *Veit Dietrich berichtet Frau Käthe über die Art, wie Luther diese Todesnachricht aufgenommen hat* [Veit Dietrich reports to Mrs. Katie how Luther received this death notice (of his father), WA.B 5, S. 79.[/ref] No way could he make the long trip to Mansfeld for the funeral. What did Dietrich tell Katie about Luther's reaction? "Dear Mrs. Doctor! I ask you not to despair about Herr Doctor. Praise God, he is well and healthy. He didn't think about his father the first two days, although his father's death was a heavy burden for him. When he read Hans Reinicke's letter, he said to me, "Well then, my father too is dead." And immediately thereafter he took his Psalter, went into his room and cried, cried so much that the next morning you could still see it on his face. Since then he has not shown any more signals of grief."

How existential for him was the news of his father's death is no surprise, but he cried a great deal and comforted himself with the Psalms, the prayerbook of the Bible, where lament and praise appear in exemplary format so that he would and could find himself present there.

Frequently scholars claim that Luther had a bad relationship

with his father, and that this was a major factor in shaping his personality. When I reflect on the words above, how he cried at his father's death, I conclude that we must be very cautious in making such psychologizing judgments about him.

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In getting a picture of "Luther personal" I want to look at the "personal" element in the hymns he wrote. Frequently in his hymn texts he describes salvation. As though he were an eye-witness of the original Christmas event, his hymn "O Jesus Christ, All Praise to Thee" describes what, what all, is praiseworthy about Christmas. The personal element comes at the end.

"For us His love these wonders wrought,
Love surpassing all our thought.
Then let us all unite and raise
Our song of glad unending praise."

His hymn "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice" becomes personal in a surprising way. Here we hear of God's Son:

"He spoke to me: Hold fast to Me,
I am thy rock and castle;
I wholly give myself to thee,
For thee I strive and wrestle;
For I am thine, and thou art Mine,
Henceforth My place is also thine;
The foe shall never part us."

There we see the firm hold on Jesus Christ, who presents himself as the true vine with whom and from whom the branches grow.

Also in the hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God" Luther's deepest convictions surface clearly:

"With might of ours can naught be done,

Soon were our fall effected;
But for us fights the valiant one
Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye: Who is this?
Christ Jesus it is,
Of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God;
He holds the field for ever."

"A Mighty Fortress is our God" is often treated as the "national anthem" of Protestantism, frequently sung at many and widely diverse occasions as "required rations" for the event. Not the least is its place in the music of Bach and also Mendelssohn whereby knowledgeable ears have come to know it.

This hymn is Luther's rendering of Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Of course, we must remember that there are people for whom the words of this hymn do not easily pass over their lips. A Christian professor once said that he could no longer sing the words of stanza 4: "And take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife, let these all be gone" And for this reason: At the very end of the Second World War bombs had killed almost his entire family. Wife and children were dead. Only the youngest child sitting on mother's lap survived, still protected by the dying mother's body and thus still alive within the ruins. We can understand that someone with such experience will choke at these words, despite his Christian faith.

Completely different was my own experience at a Reformation festival in a Lutheran congregation in 1999. That was the year of the signing of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" by both Lutheran and Roman Catholics leaders. I was scheduled to give a lecture after the worship service. Given the ecumenical atmosphere of the time, members of the church

council from the local Roman Catholic congregation had been invited to attend and were present. The pastor conducting the service apologized to the catholic guests that this hymn was to be sung, given its pervasive anti-catholic polemic. Gladly would I have shouted out an objection, but one just doesn't do that. In my own lecture after the liturgy I added a previously unplanned section about Luther versifying Psalm texts in his hymns, how the certainty of faith in "A Mighty Fortress" is taken from Psalm 46 and recast into German poetry. The confidence expressed in this hymn is the confidence of faith, nothing anti-papal in it at all.

This event comes to mind every time I am dealing with this hymn. The pastor at that time, intent on being ecumenically friendly, had taken the wrong road. So I had to correct that with evidence in my presentation. Whether he himself got the message, I do not know.

Luther was no superficial elitist immune to doubt. In 1540 he wrote: "Yes, I am a theologian and have in many dangerous times done some reading of the holy Scriptures and I do have some experience. Yet I do not consider myself so superior on account of these gifts that I do not every day, as do the children, pray the catechism, that is, the ten commandments, the Apostles creed and the Lord's Prayer. I do so from the heart, not simply rattling off the words, but reflecting on what the individual words want to say For God gives us that Word so that we may—as it says in Deut. 6:6ff—"keep them in our heart" and "practice" them. Without such daily practice rust grows on the heart, and by that rust we destroy ourselves." [ref]Aland, Luther-Lexikon, S. 186, WA 40 III, S. 192, 16-25 (lat. Text)[/ref]

Luther was not only a wise professor in the public arena, he was also our brother in the faith.

Shortly before his death his wife was worried about him. He had been called to Mansfeld and was now present there. From Mansfeld eleven days before he died, he wrote to her: "Let me be at peace and cease your worry. I have a better one to worry about me, better than you and all the angels. My worrier lies in the manger, nursing at the Virgin's breasts, and at the same time sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. So be at peace. Amen." [ref]WA.B 11, S. 286, 8-12[/ref]

In Luther's last documentable words of 16 February 1546 he spoke of the difficulty of understanding classical texts—Vergil, Cicero, and even more so, the Bible—without corresponding lived experience. There are different versions of these last words. The Latin can be translated something like this [ref]Vgl [Cf.]. Brecht, Martin Luther, Band [Vol.] 3, S. 369f. [/ref]: "No one can understand Vergil's *Bucolica* and *Georgica* (poems about the life of shepherds and farmers) who has not spent 5 years as shepherd or farmer. Cicero too in his letters, so it seems to me, no one understands unless for 20 years he has played a major role in civil government. Let no one believe he has tasted the Holy Scriptures unless for 100 years he has pastored congregations with the prophets." Another version of these final words adds to the prophets the words "John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles." Understanding the Bible goes beyond human capabilities.

Luther died in his 63rd year. And then in that text above come these words in German: "We are beggars. That is true." [ref]WA 48, S. 241. [/ref]

One of Luther's biographers writes: "This final confession of one of the greatest Bible interpreters is by no means meant as resignation over his life-long vocation. The miracle of understanding does indeed occur. But the Bible interpreter who is 100% focused on the people of God while doing his work knew

that he exercised his craft humbly, reverently and prayerfully, dependent on God's marvelous presence. Interpreting the Bible, as was his whole life, was a gift." [ref]Brecht S. 368. [/ref]

Granted, it is not fitting for us at a Reformation jubilee only to look with pride at our fathers in faith. Surely it is important that we constantly check to see if we have rightly understood them. When I open a newspaper, I often get the impression that the writers imagine that they know everything and thus can pass verdict on everything. Therefore we have considerable criticism of Luther these days. Of course, he was not without his faults, and he never claimed to be. But he was a very significant witness to the Gospel as the true treasure of the church. We can learn much from him. He himself was captured by the project into which he knew God had placed him. And thereby he could also be fearless, knowing that he stood beneath the protection of the highest Protector.