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# Lutheran Synod Quarterly

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ISBN 0360-9685

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# LUTHERAN SYNOD QUARTERLY

Theological Journal of the  
Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Edited by the faculty of  
Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary  
6 Browns Court  
Mankato, MN 56001

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Layout ..... Paul Fries, Terri Fries  
Printer ..... Ideal Printers Inc., St. Paul, Minnesota

Subscription Price: \$15.00 U.S. per year

*Send all subscriptions and other correspondence  
to the following address:*

BETHANY LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
ATTN: LUTHERAN SYNOD QUARTERLY  
6 BROWNS CT.  
MANKATO, MN 56001

## Foreword

In this issue of the *Quarterly* we are pleased to share with our readers the 2001 annual Reformation Lectures, delivered on October 25-26 in Mankato, Minnesota. These lectures were sponsored jointly by Bethany Lutheran College and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary. This was the thirty-third in the series of annual Reformation Lectures which began in 1967. The format of the Reformation Lectures has always been that of a free conference and thus participation in these lectures is outside the framework of fellowship. The views of the presenters do not necessarily represent the position of the *Quarterly*.

The lectures were presented by Dr. James G. Kiecker of Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He graduated from Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, in 1960, and from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, in 1964. He spent eighteen of his first twenty years after graduation in the WELS parish ministry, all in Michigan. In 1971 he received an M.A. in Religious Studies from the University of Detroit. In 1978 he received a Ph.D. in Religious Studies, with concentration on late medieval biblical commentary, from Marquette University in Milwaukee. He has been teaching European and Church History at Wisconsin Lutheran College in Milwaukee since 1984. He has written two books: *Martin Luther and the Long Reformation: From Response to Reform in the Church* and *The Postilla of Nicholas of Lyra on the Song of Songs*.

The topic of the lectures was: "Luther as a Historian." Dr. Kiecker presented the topic emphasizing three main themes: Luther in the context of previous secular and sacred historiography; Luther the historian at work; Luther at work continued, and an appraisal of him in the context of later historians.

The reactors to the lectures were The Rev. Dr. Cameron MacKenzie, who is a professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana (LCMS) and The Rev. Prof. Mark Harstad of Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, Minnesota.

The Rev. Dr. Cameron MacKenzie is a professor of historical theology and chairman of the department of historical theology at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and has been

there since 1983. Prior to coming to Concordia, Dr. MacKenzie was pastor for eight years of St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Detroit, Michigan, where he also served as headmaster of the parish school. He has served the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod as a member of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations and is presently the book review editor of the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*. Dr. MacKenzie has a B.A. in mathematics and history from the University of Detroit, an M.A. in history from the University of Chicago, an M.A. in classics (Latin and Greek) from Wayne State University, an S.T.M. in New Testament from Concordia Theological Seminary (Ft. Wayne), and a Ph.D. in history from the University of Notre Dame. His dissertation was on the controversial literature surrounding the English Bible in Elizabethan England.

The Rev. Prof. Mark Harstad is a graduate of Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin, and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary. He also holds an M.A. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has completed all the course work for the Ph.D. degree in Hebrew and Semitic Studies. He has been on the faculty of Bethany Lutheran College since 1980, teaching Hebrew, History and Religious Studies. Previously he served parishes in Madison, WI, and Brewster, MA. In the 1990s Prof. Harstad made five trips to Latvia, lecturing on confessional Lutheranism and teaching exegetical courses at the University of Latvia and biblical Hebrew at the Augsburg Institute in Riga.

We trust that our readers will find these lectures and the reactions to them to be interesting, instructive, and edifying.

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# Lecture One: Luther In The Context Of Previous Secular And Sacred Historiography

*by James G. Kiecker*

First of all, a thank you to my hosts for inviting me to deliver these lectures. When I accepted the invitation, I immediately asked to see a list of speakers and topics since these lectures began in 1965. As the kids say, it was awesome! I noted that many speakers were national class, and some were world class. I felt humbled, not to say out-of-place, in such an assemblage. I can only hope that with God's help I shall do as well as I am able, and not fall flat on my face.

For quite a number of years I have believed that a person can't understand any aspect of Luther's life and thought without becoming familiar with the life and thought of the people who preceded him. So in the case of Luther's use and later rejection of philosophy, one has to follow the course of philosophy from the ancient Greeks, through medieval scholasticism, to the late medieval nominalism in which he was schooled. In the case of biblical exegesis and interpretation one has to be acquainted with the methodology of Origen, through the four-fold sense of Scripture employed in the Middle Ages, to the literal-historical method which gained favor in the fourteenth century with Nicholas of Lyra. And so on. Similarly, one can never understand Luther as a historian unless one takes the time to review how history was done in the millennia which preceded him, especially the previous several centuries.

Having looked back over the broad scope of history, it has seemed to me that history could be schematized according to whether historians allowed space in their writings for the activities of the gods or God, and this will be the pattern in history which I have adopted in these lectures. I believe this methodology has great relevance to the proper understanding of Luther as a historian, and as I shall suggest at the end, it still has great relevance for historians today. So I hope you will not consider it a waste of time, or an avoidance of my assignment, if I proceed along these lines toward an understanding of Luther as a historian.

Though Will Durant, in discussing primitive religion, suggests that “some peoples have apparently no religion at all,”<sup>1</sup> he then goes on to show that the ancient western world was alive with gods who were very active in the affairs of human beings. Leaving aside the many minor gods who governed the wind, weather, growth of crops, and everyday events, there were the major gods who created all things, and thus initiated history. Outstanding is the Babylonian account of creation. In the beginning was chaos, personified by the female Tiamat. The gods, already in existence, chose the male Marduk to bring order out of chaos by destroying Tiamat. Her end is grizzly:

The lord [Marduk] spread out his net and enmeshed her;  
 The evil wind following after he let loose in her face.  
 When Tiamat opened her mouth to devour him,  
 He drove in the evil wind, so that she could not close her lips.  
 He shot off an arrow, and it tore her interior;  
 It cut through her inward parts; it split her heart.  
 When he had subdued her, he destroyed her life;

After vanquishing the gods who sided with Tiamat,

He split her open like a clamshell in two parts;  
 Half of her he set in place and formed the sky as a roof.  
 He fixed the crossbar and posted guards;  
 He commanded them not to let her waters escape.  
 The other half of her he set in place and formed the earth.

Chaos now defeated, Marduk turns his attention to human beings: the god Ea, the father of Marduk, has some advice about raw materials. Kingu, Tiamat’s leading general, will do.

They bound him and held him before Ea;  
 Punishment they inflicted upon him by cutting the arteries of his blood.  
 With his blood they created mankind;  
 Ea imposed the services of the gods upon them and set the gods free.<sup>2</sup>

Thus we have the account of how all things began, including thereby history, and the gods are very much involved in both. And the

gods remain involved in the affairs of people, as we learn from a document which we can date with some confidence about 1750 B. C., the Code of Hammurabi. While the entire code is fascinating, containing laws covering virtually every aspect of human society, our main interest here lies in how the code purports to originate. The seven-foot stele depicts at the top Hammurabi receiving the law from the god of justice, Shamash. The gods were not only the sources of history, but were continually involved in the events of history.

Turning from the ancient Mesopotamian world to ancient Egypt, the same situation prevails. Though one could show dissimilarities between the gods of Mesopotamia and Egypt, our concern here is simply to show that for both areas the gods are very much involved in man's everyday history. The outstanding example of this is furnished by a pharaoh of the mid-fourteenth century B.C. whose name was Amenhotep IV. He was quite conventional in his beliefs, worshiping the sun, Amen-Re, as one of many gods. But for some reason he began to consider the sun not just a god, but the one, true god. The name of this god was Aton, and changing his name to Akhnaton to reflect this, he zealously sought to rid Egypt of its polytheism and make it monotheistic. While this attempt ultimately failed, and Egypt reverted to polytheism, he left us a remarkable document, the Hymn to Aton. In highly lyrical poetry the themes of Aton as universal god, creator and preserver of all life are repeated:

You shine out in beauty on the horizon of heaven, O living Aton, the beginning of life... You are beautiful and great... Although you are far away, your rays are on earth; although you are visible to man, no one knows your going.

... You make the seed grow in women... You are the one who gives breath to all that he has made, to preserve life...

... How manifold are your works! They are hidden from the face of man, O sole God, like whom there is no other! You have made the earth according to your desire... The world is in your hand as you have made it.<sup>3</sup>

Neither the Babylonians, nor the Egyptians, can imagine life—can imagine history—without the involvement of the gods. The gods are in.



For the Jews, the gods are out of history, but God is definitely in. It is not the “good” god Marduk who creates the world and inaugurates history by his victory over the “bad” goddess Tiamat, but it is God who creates the heavens, the earth, and man. It is not the gods in the Epic of Gilgamesh who, apparently because they find mankind too noisy to let them sleep, decide to send the Flood,<sup>4</sup> and later decide to save Utnapishtim and his family for no particular reason, but God who in justice decides to punish an unrepentant world, and yet in mercy decides to save Noah and his family, since, as he later tells Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” (Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:14 and 18).<sup>5</sup> It is not the gods, nor simple nomadic wanderlust, which prompts Abraham to set out from Ur of the Chaldees, but the call of God. It is not the gods who lead Israel out of Egypt, but God through his servant Moses, for the Jews, as the Christian historian Herbert Butterfield says, “concentrated their attention not primarily on the god or the gods of nature, but on the God of history—the God who had brought His people out of the land of Egypt.”<sup>6</sup> It is not Shamash the god of justice who provides the law to Hammurabi, but God who declared his will to Moses.

Living by the will of God became the cornerstone of Jewish life. As H. and H. A. Frankfort say in the conclusion to their book, *Before Philosophy*,

Not cosmic phenomena, but history itself, had here become pregnant with meaning; history had become a revelation of the dynamic will of God. The human being was not merely the servant of the god as he was in Mesopotamia; nor was he placed, as in Egypt, at a pre-ordained station in a static universe which did not need to be—and, in fact, could not be—questioned. Man, according to Hebrew thought, was the interpreter and the servant of God; he was even honoured with the task of bringing about the realization of God’s will.<sup>7</sup>

Will Durant grudgingly comments:

After making every deduction for primitive legend and pious fraud, after admitting that the historical books are not quite as accurate or as ancient as our forefathers supposed, we find in them, nevertheless, not merely some of the oldest historical writing known to us, but some of the best...<sup>8</sup>

Or, perhaps, simply, “The Jews saw the hand of God in human affairs.”<sup>9</sup>

With the people of the ancient near east and with the Jews, the gods and God were very much in history. With the Greeks, the gods are still in, but gradually they get squeezed out.

To begin with, the Greeks were polytheists. The gods and goddesses were taken for granted as a part of peoples’ everyday histories. Above all of them was Zeus, the king of the gods and the sky, Hera, Zeus’ wife, queen of the gods, and Poseidon, Zeus’ brother and god of the sea. All lived a very earthly and not too moral a life on Mt. Olympus in far northern Greece.<sup>10</sup>

All the gods, however, were subject to μοῖρα (Fate), or the Fates, who were the three daughters of the union of Gaia (the earth) and Ouranos (the heaven). The daughters were pictured as sitting and knitting the course of human events. The Fates decided everything, who would live, who would die and when, who would conquer, who would be defeated, and so on. Even the gods, even Zeus himself, had to go along with what the Fates declared. The Greeks, shall we say, were fatalistic.

Worship for the Greeks was not a very emotional experience. It was sort of a matter of “I’ll scratch your back, and then I expect you to scratch mine.” I’ll do my duty to the gods, and then they are under contract to produce for me (if the Fates okay it, of course).

Since worship of the gods was so formal, the Greeks, being affective as well as reflective people, sought more personal encounters and emotional experiences with the gods. Hence there developed the Oracle at Delphi. Above a crack in the earth, from which the rotten egg smell of sulfur emerged, sat a priestess who would answer your questions, careful however, to be ambiguous and thus keep her job. At least she offered divine help in a personal way. Watching over their wild, emotional moments was the irrational Dionysus, god of wine, women, and song, followed by wild goddesses called maenads. For their more restrained emotional moments there was the rational Apollo, god of music. For Greeks wanting still more emotion there were the mystery cults, imported from the East, such as the god Mithras, who slew a raging bull. Such folks were on the weird fringe of Greek religion, about like faith healers and Ozark snake handlers are on the weird fringe of Christianity.

Even when the gods were still so involved in human history, the Greeks had a more reflective, humanistic side. It was summed up in a phrase like γνῶθι σεαυτόν (“know yourself”), i.e., know who you are and what you’re capable of doing, and then live accordingly, or in a word like σωφροσύνη (“moderation,” “nothing in excess”), i.e., don’t overdo the good things in life and steer clear of the bad things. If one failed to live a well-balanced, self-controlled life, be careful. The opposite of σωφροσύνη was κόρος (a feeling of satiety) which often led to ὑβρις (overweening pride), which was sure to lead to ἄτη (destruction, an experience of divine vengeance). Recall the Proverb, “Pride goes before destruction” (16:18) and Paul’s reminder, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). These latter reflections are already concerned with one’s personal history, and they are only a step from wider, national and human history.

That there was an Ilium (Troy) on the coast of Asia Minor seems well attested since Schliemann’s day. That a great battle took place there about 1250 B.C. between the Trojans and the Greeks is certainly possible. But the semi-legendary Homer, about 800 B.C. cannot tell the story without the involvement of the gods.

Paris of Troy judged the goddess Aphrodite’s beauty greater than that of the goddesses Athena and Hera. Flattered, Aphrodite allowed Paris to carry off to Troy the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, who happened to be married to the Greek Menelaus. Thus Helen became “the face that launched a thousand ships.” According to Ernst Breisach, “[G]ods and goddesses interfered in the war according to their preferences by participating actively in battles, directing and deflecting weapons, scheming against others, persuading Zeus, influencing mortals, or quarreling among themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Though Zeus did not start the war, still “the will of Zeus was accomplished.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the gods weave in and out in the account of the return of the Greek hero Odysseus to Ithaca.

But already with Hesiod, about 700 B.C., the gods begin to retreat. In his *Theogony* only “sketchy genealogies of gods and goddesses [are] established.”<sup>13</sup> He divides the human past into five ages: Golden, in which people lived like gods; Silver, when people revolted against all things divine; Bronze, peopled by strong men and

continual warfare; Heroes, filled with noble humans and half-gods; and Iron, Hesiod's own time, when common men suffered injustice, aging, and death.<sup>14</sup> Where were the gods when they were needed?

For the rest of Greek history, most Greeks continued to think of the gods' involvement in human affairs as the natural order of things. Even Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) was obsessed with them, and finally came to believe he was one of them. But beginning at the end of the seventh century B.C. some Greeks, as far as our knowledge of world (not just western) civilization goes, struck out in a new direction which left the gods behind. With Thales of Miletus on the coast of Asia Minor, born about 640 B.C., the Greeks invented rationalism. One historian has described the change as follows:

In one of the Babylonian legends it says: "All the lands were sea. ... Marduk bound a rush mat upon the face of the waters, he made dirt and piled it beside the rush mat." What Thales did was to leave Marduk out. He, too, said that everything was once water. But he thought that earth and everything else had been formed out of water by a natural process, like the silting of the Delta of the Nile... It is an admirable beginning, the whole point of which is that it gathers together into a coherent picture a number of observed facts without letting Marduk in.<sup>15</sup>

Thales and the thinkers who followed him are often called the "nature philosophers," since their "love of wisdom" centered more on physical rather than human problems. Their goal was to find the ἀρχή [beginning] of things without reference to the gods.<sup>16</sup> In many respects they resemble those modern scientists who begin their work with matter and energy as eternal givens, and are not concerned about the origin of these givens, certainly not in an eternal God who created these givens. We shall have time to mention only a few of these thinkers.<sup>17</sup>

Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 530 B.C.) denounced Homer and Hesiod for ascribing to gods all deeds that are a shame and a disgrace among men—thieving, adultery, and fraud. He himself was a skeptic. He said:

There never was, nor ever will be, any man who knows with certainty the things about the gods... Mortals fancy that gods

are born, and wear clothes, and have voice and form like themselves. Yet if oxen and lions had hands, and could paint and fashion images as men do, they would make the pictures and images of their gods in their own likeness; horses would make them like horses, oxen like oxen. Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed; Thracians give them blue eyes and red hair.

If there is a god, it is the universe. All things are derived from earth and water by natural laws.

Xenophanes' contemporary Pythagoras of Samos (c. 530 B.C.) who is credited with the mathematical theorem " $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ ," said men were not to swear by the gods, "for every man ought so to live as to be worthy of belief without an oath." Nor were men to offer sacrifices, though they might worship at altars unstained with blood.

Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 500) was captivated by the ceaseless change of fire. "This world" he said, "was made neither by a god nor by man, but it ever was, and is, and shall be, ever-living Fire, in measures being kindled and in measures going out."<sup>18</sup>

Greek materialism appeared with Leucippus of Miletus and his most famous pupil Democritus (both near the end of the fifth century B.C.). Leucippus assumed a division of Being into an infinite number of minute, individual particles which he termed atoms (from ἄτομος, that which is "uncut-able" to a smaller size). Surrounding Being (matter) he assumed the existence of Void (empty space), in which the atoms moved. Gravitation, a strictly physical force, either attracted or repelled the atoms. With Being, Void, and Gravitation, he proceeded to explain the formation of the world, the processes of nature, and even feeling and thought in a purely mechanical way. This theory was denounced by the ancients already as materialistic and therefore demoralizing. And so it was, for no one was responsible for anything. Everything, every action, just happened, by accident. No god was necessary.

Somewhat more congenial to Christianity, while nevertheless pagan, was the counter-thought of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (c. 500-428 B.C.). For Leucippus' purely physical force of Gravitation, Anaxagoras substituted an infinite and omniscient Force or Intelligence (νόος or νοῦς) which orders all things. He did not think of this Force as a person or a deity, but regarded it merely as a directing Intelligence

or Idea, on the later order of Kant and Hegel. Thus was born idealism, setting the stage for the debate between materialists and idealists to our own day. Granted that there is no God or god, is the universe and all in it the result of pure accident, and really didn't have to turn out this way or any other, or is there within the universe a great plan always at work, guiding things to be as they are?

To this list of the more or less godless I will add quickly two more names. The first is Protagoras of Abdera (c. 485-410 B.C.) who said that "Man [note: not God or a god] is the measure of all things,"<sup>19</sup> the progenitor of all humanists, and the still much revered Hippocrates of Cos (c. 460-377 B.C.), the father of medicine, who began the scientific study of human anatomy, combining careful observation with reason to make possible the understanding, prognosis, treatment, and cure of disease. Besides his famous principle, "First, do no harm," he also declared, "Every illness has a natural cause, and without a natural cause, nothing ever happens."<sup>20</sup> This does not appear to leave room for the death of David and Bathsheba's son.

History writing, as we more or less still know it, is an invention of the Greeks. The word itself comes from ἵστωρ, a term applied to a learned man who settled disputes. Ἱστορία was learning by inquiry in any field, and so could be applied to the inquiries of the nature philosophers we just mentioned. Later, the equivalent Latin word *scientia* came into use for natural phenomena, and ἵστορία was reserved for human affairs.<sup>21</sup> It is true that archeologists have found royal inscriptions, king lists, date lists, chronicles, accounts of military campaigns, and biographical details among the writings of the ancient Near East and Egypt.<sup>22</sup> But it was the Greeks who applied this rationalistic approach to history, as to nature.

Though Herodotus is often called "the father of history," the term could be applied to one of his predecessors, Hecataeus of Miletus (b. 550 B.C.). He foreshadowed two important developments of scientific historical method by setting up truth as the test of his statements, and assuming a critical attitude toward conventional Greek creation accounts. In the opening paragraph of his *Genealogies* he writes, "What I say here is the account which I considered to be true: for the stories of the Greeks are numerous, and in my opinion ridiculous."<sup>23</sup>

The pages of Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c. 484-425 B.C.), who wrote about the Persian Wars, teem with gods, goddesses, superstitions, miracles, oracles, omens, and auguries. It's just that Herodotus was skeptical about the whole thing. Early in his *Histories* he says, with some embarrassment, "I am not anxious to repeat what I was told about the Egyptian religion, apart from the mere names of their deities, for I do not think that any one nation knows much more about such things than any other; whatever I shall mention on the subject will be due simply to the exigencies of my story."<sup>24</sup> Near the end of his *Histories* he makes a similar statement: "My business is to record what people say, but I am by no means bound to believe it—and that may be taken to apply to this book as a whole."<sup>25</sup> As Mark Gilderhus sums up:

He ... departed from the custom of explaining human events as the outcome of divine will. To be sure, he never succeeded in rendering a completely secular account of history. The deities still had a role to play in human affairs. But Herodotus, more than any predecessor, interpreted the course of human affairs as the product of human wills.<sup>26</sup>

Herodotus' skepticism turns to unbelief in Thucydides of Athens (c. 471-400 B.C.), who wrote about the Peloponnesian War. At the opening of his account he grants that there were portents of disaster—eclipses of the sun, great droughts, famines, and the plague—all of which in former times might have indicated the wrath of the gods. But Thucydides dismisses the hand of the divine. As he says: "The real cause I consider to be the one which was formerly most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of the Athenians, and the alarm which that inspired in Lacedaemon made war inevitable."<sup>27</sup> Oracles and gods occasionally turn up in his account, because he is faithful to record what people believe. For example, on the occasion of the Greek people fleeing for safety in Athens, all available land is used for housing. The final vacant plot, called the Pelasgian, lies below the Acropolis. But building on it "had been forbidden by a curse; and there was also an ominous fragment of a Pythian oracle which said—

'Leave the Pelasgian parcel desolate,  
Woe the day that men inhabit it.'

Yet this too was now built over in the necessity of the moment.”<sup>28</sup> Taking a crack at the notorious ambiguity of oracles, Thucydides comments: “... [I]n my opinion, if the oracle proved true, it was in the opposite sense to what was expected. For the misfortunes of the state did not arise from the unlawful occupation [of that plot of ground] but the . . . occupation from the [misfortunes of the state].”<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, in the ill-fated Athenian attack on Sicily, Thucydides reports that the Athenians were ready to withdraw, “when an eclipse of the moon, which was then at the full, took place... Nicias, who was somewhat over-addicted to divination and practices of that kind, refused from that moment even to take the question of departure into consideration, until they had waited the thrice nine days prescribed by the soothsayers.”<sup>30</sup> The delay proved disastrous. Attempting to back up his soldiers in the face of defeat, Nicias says, “... my life has been one of much devotion towards the gods... I have, therefore, still a strong hope for the future.”<sup>31</sup> But Thucydides is all too eager to show the futility of the gods, for Nicias and the Athenians are forced to surrender, the prisoners sent to labor as slaves in the quarries, and “Nicias . . . butchered.”<sup>32</sup>

Summing up Thucydides’ historiography, Gilderhus says, “He . . . departed from the custom of explaining human events as the outcome of divine will... [T]hings happened not because the gods willed them but because of human activities.”<sup>33</sup> Durant adds, “[T]he gods . . . have no place in his history... He recognizes no guiding Providence, no divine plan... In him the conflict between religion and philosophy is decided; and philosophy wins.”<sup>34</sup>

As in so many other ways the Romans followed the Greek lead in history, so in the interest of saving time and space I shall pass over their achievements. I might say, however, that the Roman historians, in general, were moralists, decrying the venality, selfishness, and evil habits which wealth, luxury, and power had brought to their society. Such was Tacitus (c. 55-117). Livy (59 B.C. - 17 A.D.) frequently included gods, extraordinary events, and omens in his narratives, since those were included in the accounts he was recording. Yet, “he had been infected by the skepticism towards the gods and auspices which he found so corrosive for the Roman spirit.”<sup>35</sup> Plutarch (c. 46-120), writing in Greek, frequently showed the role that τύχη (



*fatum* or *fortuna*) played in human lives, but shied away from the intervention of gods. The gods were out.

But God was not dead. God was still involved in history for both Jews and the early Christians. Josephus (37- c. 100), an upper-class Jew visiting Rome, returned to fight against the Romans in the Jewish War, but eventually sided with the Romans and lived the last thirty years of his life in Rome. As he tells us in *The Jewish War*, he places the blame for the Jewish defeat on the Jews themselves: “[D]o you hope to have God, whom you have bereft of his everlasting worship, for your ally in this war?”<sup>36</sup> Commenting on the burning of the temple he writes: “The flames, however, owed their origin and cause to God’s own people.”<sup>37</sup> Later, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus affirmed that God guided all of history systematically and directly, and “that the main lesson to be learned from this history by any who care to peruse it is that men who conform to the will of God, and do not venture to transgress laws that have been excellently laid down, prosper in all things beyond belief, and for their reward are offered by God felicity.”<sup>38</sup>

But our main concern is with Christian historians in the early church, and then with those of the Middle Ages. A distinctly Christian view of history evolved among the church fathers. Though it is often said that the change was from a cyclical to a linear pattern of development, it actually was a combination of both. That is, within a basically linear *Weltanschauung* (creation-Jesus-end of the world) Christians acknowledged a repeated cyclical pattern (sin-judgment-retribution-restoration) among individuals and groups. Revived was the Old Testament view that God worked his ways in history. The story of the Jewish tribes showed a divine design behind observable events.

While it seems that Sextus Julius Africanus’ *Chronography* was the first Christian history, it is customary to regard Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-340) as the father of church history. One can hardly read a page of his *Ecclesiastical History* without finding God praised for his marvelous actions, and for the defeat of his enemies, with comparisons to biblical events, and with biblical quotations. Here is Eusebius on the end of the Galerian persecution

... which came completely to an end, by the grace of God, in the tenth year, though indeed it began to abate after the eighth year. For when the divine and heavenly grace showed that it watched over us with kindly and propitious regard, then indeed our rulers also, those very persons who had long time committed acts of war against us, changed their mind in the most marvelous manner, and gave utterance to a recantation, quenching the fire of persecution that had blazed so furiously, by means of merciful edits and the most humane ordinances. But this was not due to any human agency nor to the pity, as one might say, or humanity of the rulers. Far from it... But it was due to the manifestation of the Divine Providence itself, which, while it became reconciled to the people, attacked the perpetrator of these evils, and was wroth with him as the chief author of the wickedness of the persecution as a whole. For verily, though it was destined that these things should come to pass as a divine judgment, yet the Scripture says, "Woe, through whomsoever the offence cometh." A divinely-sent punishment, I say, executed vengeance upon him, beginning at his very flesh and proceeding to the soul.<sup>39</sup>

Eusebius then reviews the gruesome details of Galerius' death.

Here is Eusebius' account of the confrontation between Constantine and Maxentius:

Constantine, the superior of the Emperors in rank and dignity, was the first to take pity on those subjected to tyranny at Rome; and, calling in prayer upon God who is in heaven, and His Word, even Jesus Christ the Saviour of all, as his ally, he advanced in full force, seeking to secure for the Romans their ancestral liberty. Maxentius, to be sure, put his trust rather in devices of magic than in the goodwill of his subjects, and in truth did not dare to advance even beyond the city's gates, but with an innumerable multitude of heavy-armed soldiers and countless bodies of legionaries secured every place and district and city that had been reduced to slavery by him in the environs of Rome and in all Italy. The Emperor, closely relying on the help that comes from God, attacked the first, second and third of the tyrant's armies, and capturing them all with ease advanced over a large part of Italy, actually coming very near to Rome itself. Then, that he might not be compelled because of the tyrant to fight against Romans, God Himself as if with chains dragged the tyrant far away from the gates; and those things which were inscribed long ago in the sacred books against

wicked men—to which as a myth very many gave no faith, yet were they worthy of faith to the faithful—now by their very clearness found faith, in a word, with all, faithful and faithless, who had the miracle before their eyes. As for example, in the days of Moses himself and the ancient and godly race of the Hebrews, “Pharaoh’s chariots and his host hath he cast into the sea, his chosen horsemen, even captains, they were sunk in the Red Sea, the deep covered them”; in the same way also Maxentius and the armed soldiers and guards around him “went down into the depths like a stone,” when he turned his back before the God-sent power that was with Constantine, and was crossing the river that lay in his path, which he himself had bridged right well by joining of boats, and so formed into an engine of destruction against himself. Wherefore one might say: “He hath made a pit, and digged it, and shall fall into the ditch which he made. His work shall return upon his own head, and his wickedness shall come down upon his own pate.”<sup>40</sup>

It’s not necessary to sample Eusebius any farther at this time. One thing in general should be added. Eusebius located the Christian Church within the context of the Roman Empire. But as we shall see momentarily, Augustine, only a few years later, found it necessary to separate Christianity and Rome.

I’m quite sure that all in this audience know the background to Augustine’s (354-430) writing of *The City of God*. In 410 the Visigoths sacked and burned the no-longer-mighty Rome. Many pagans, reverting to the arguments raised in previous centuries for the weakening of Rome, blamed the Christians, whose turn-the-other-cheek attitude had softened Roman resolve. Eusebius had gloried in the blessed union of Christianity and Rome. Now it turned out that Rome really didn’t want this union.

For Augustine, God was involved in history all right, but more in terms of government than marriage. God had created the state, “the city of man,” which was fallen into sin just like men themselves, and thus subject to good times and evil. On the other hand God had created the “city of God,” which was not fallen into sin but righteous. The Christian lived in both cities simultaneously. While living in the city of man the Christian experienced whatever was God’s will for this world, the same as his unchristian neighbors. But by living in the city of God through God’s grace the Christian lived a forgiven life of

peace and righteousness. Eventually, according to God's will, the city of man would come to an end and Christians would die along with it. But according to God's will the city of God would go on forever, and risen Christians would live in it eternally. Christians had nothing more to do with the rise and fall of the city of man than with their own physical birth and death. Similarly, Christians had nothing to do with the eternity of the city of God or their citizenship in it, which was strictly by God's election and salvation by God's grace. All of history, the visible city of man and the invisible city of God, was in the hands of God.

Something often overlooked in Augustine, which I wish to draw attention to briefly, is the missionary thrust of *The City of God*. He writes, with a concern for lost souls:

This, rather, is the religion worthy of your desires, O admirable Roman race... This rather covet, this distinguish from that foul vanity and crafty malice of the devils... Choose now what you will pursue, that your praise may be not in yourself, but in the true God in whom is no error... [B]y the secret providence of God, the true religion was not offered to your choice. Awake, it is now day... Do not listen to those degenerate sons of thine who slander Christ and Christians, and impute to them these disastrous times... Lay hold now on the celestial country, which is easily won, and in which you will reign truly and forever.<sup>41</sup>

A long time before Anselm wrote "Credo, ut intelligam," this was Augustine's motivation. Throughout *The City of God* Augustine accepts uncritically the statements of Scripture, and it is Scripture which inspired Augustine's view of history. "[T]he inspired Word of God gave Augustine the form and content necessary for his historiographic purposes. Erudite as he was, his enormous learning was put not to a critical inquiry into the process of human history, but rather into the expounding of a received and revered doctrine. Not the activities of men but the unfolding of God's plan formed the basis of history."<sup>42</sup> It need hardly be said that Augustine's view of God active in history made a strong impression on Martin Luther.

Augustine gave the task of enumerating the evils of the city of man to a younger contemporary, Orosius (385-420), who produced the *Seven Books of Histories against the Pagans*. Strongly influenced

by Augustine, Orosius also adopted the biblical view of God's involvement in history. However, he also was influenced by Eusebius, seeing a link between Christianity and Rome from Constantine's time forth. Perhaps the city of man and city of God were not so estranged after all, as long as Christianity kept a strong influence over the state. This was a departure from pure Augustinianism, but since Orosius was so closely aligned with Augustine not much attention was paid to their dissimilarity. Thus actually two strands of thought about the relation of church and state moved in tandem through the Middle Ages.<sup>43</sup> Influenced as he was by Augustine, Luther could also be influenced by Orosius when the state, or a particular principedom such as the one in which he lived, became Lutheran. A sanctified state could do much to help the evangelical cause. Calvin, it could be argued, was even more influenced by Orosius, but that falls outside this paper.

The belief that God was active in history, established by the early Christian historiographers, continued on throughout the Middle Ages. Time constraints allow us to mention only a few individuals.

One such who traditionally cannot be overlooked is the English Benedictine monk named Bede (673-733), invariably identified as "the Venerable" (which means simply "distinguished" or "honorable," and has no particular religious significance).<sup>44</sup> His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, it seems, was written simply because "it has always been my delight to learn or to teach or to write" as he himself said.<sup>45</sup> And while the word "ecclesiastical" might give the impression that the book would deal only with the church, Bede realized the entanglement of church and society and therefore it includes much of what some would call "secular" history. Bede would probably argue that, since God is involved in history, there is no such thing as "secular" history. Bede's account of the martyrdom of St. Alban may serve as an example of his work. Eager to reach the hill of execution, a river lay in his path. Alban raised his eyes toward heaven. Thereupon the river bed dried up at that very spot, and he saw the waters give way and provide a path for him to walk in...

When he reached the top of the hill, St. Alban asked God to give him water and at once a perpetual spring bubbled up, confined within its channel and at his very feet, so that all could see that even the stream rendered service to the martyr...

And so in this spot the valiant martyr was beheaded and received the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. But the one who laid his unholy hands on the holy neck was not permitted to rejoice over his death; for the head of the blessed martyr and the executioner's eyes fell to the ground together.<sup>46</sup>

God's activity in history was continued by Otto of Freising (1113-1158) who set out to write *The Two Cities*, claiming, "In this work I follow most of all those illustrious lights of the Church, Augustine and Orosius, and have planned to draw from their fountains what is pertinent to my theme and my purpose."<sup>47</sup> This he does, showing the interrelation of the city of God and the city of man, with the city of God, by God's favor, gradually subsuming the city of man, until Otto is finally forced to conclude, "I seem to myself to have composed a history not of two cities, but virtually of one only, which I call the Church."<sup>48</sup>

While accepting uncritically what is recounted in Scripture, Otto departs from most other medieval historians by becoming critical of extrabiblical sources, not accepting blindly what these "authorities" tell him. He indicates where his sources are weak or contradictory, and he shows skepticism concerning some legends and notes the incredible bases of others. Here is Otto dealing with the baptism of Constantine:

According to traditional practice of the Romans, Constantine was baptized by [Sylvester] in the Church which is called St. John's. The cause of his conversion is as stated above [i.e., Constantine's belief that God gave him victory over Maximian]. Accordingly we have read in the Life of Saint Sylvester about his leprosy and [Constantine's] conversion is seen to be apocryphal. However, the Tripartite History [the continuation of Eusebius' history] states that he was baptized in Nicomedia toward the end of his life.<sup>49</sup>

And here is Otto on the Donation of Constantine:

As the history of the Romans has it, his Most Serene Highness not only granted his consent to these things but also, setting an example to others, so greatly exalted the Roman Church that

he handed over the imperial insignia to Saint Sylvester, pope of that city, and withdrew to Byzantium and there established the seat of his realm. This is why the Church of Rome claims that the Western realms are under its jurisdiction, on the ground that they had been transferred to it by Constantine, and in evidence thereof does not hesitate to exact tribute to this day—except from the two kingdoms of the Franks. But the advocates of empire affirm that Constantine did not hand over his kingdom in this way to the Roman pontiffs... And to prove this they adduce the fact that Constantine himself, when he divided the kingdom among his sons, handed over the West to one, the East to the other; and thus Rome with the West fell by lot to Theodosius and to others in succession... They say that never would so devoted a ruler have left to his sons what he had previously handed over to the Church, nor would so Catholic an emperor as Theodosius have appropriated what was not his, if it belonged to the Church. To settle definitely all these matters is not the purpose of the present work.<sup>50</sup>

Some of you will note that these arguments against the Donation were employed by Lorenzo Valla three hundred years later. And it should be noted that Otto's historical methodology was strongly adhered to by Luther.

It was not unusual for Christian and medieval historians, who found God active in history, to see patterns in history, i.e., to write what we now call "speculative history." No one seems to have done this better than Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202) an Italian monk and visionary. His examination of the Old and New Testaments revealed to him a three-fold division of history, the age of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Not being an expert in medieval apocalypticism, I turn to someone who has specialized in this, Bernard McGinn, of the University of Chicago, for his overview of Joachim's theology of history.

The proper exegesis of scripture reveals not only the grand plan of the two Testaments, but also a scheme of three periods of time (*tempora*), or what Joachim says are more properly called states (*status*). These three states are complex, organic, progressive, and interlocking in character. The first began with Adam and lasted to Christ. It was ascribed to God the Father and was the time of the order, or way of life, of the married.

The second started with King Josiah, began to bear fruit in Christ, and lasts until the present. It is ascribed to the Son and is the time of the order of clerics. The third *status*, the time of the monastic order, is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. It began with Saint Benedict and will bear fruit in the last times down until the end of the world.<sup>51</sup>

According to McGinn, “Joachim did not put himself forward as the prophet of a new revelation, but as the exegete to whom God had granted the gift of understanding the truth already revealed but hidden in the Bible.”<sup>52</sup> While Joachim’s vision of history impressed readers during the rest of the Middle Ages, and still proves fascinating to visionaries today, its speculative nature has no place among either Christian or secular historians today.

Though of course we are skipping many historians of note in this summary, still we may take Joachim in the twelfth century as sort of a high water mark in the inclusion of God in history.

By the fourteenth century a change begins to come over historians. We are at one of those sea-changes in human thinking which occur at least every few centuries. We are at the beginning of the rebirth of scholarship called the Renaissance, which was inspired by humanism, which may be defined as a concentration on man, and what man can accomplish. In this way humanism harked back to the time of the Greeks, and thus the trend was again away from God’s involvement in history. Yet it must be pointed out that these early humanists still left room for God, and are not to be equated with modern, secular humanists.

John Froissart (1337-1404) is the historian of the first part of the Hundred Years’ War. At the beginning of his *Chronicles* he politely tips his hat to Christ.

[B]efore I begin, I request of the Savior of the world . . . that he will have the goodness to inspire me with sense and sound understanding to persevere in such manner, that all those who shall read may derive pleasure and instruction from my work . . . I will first beg the grace of God and the benign Virgin Mary, from whom all comfort and success proceed . . .<sup>53</sup>

In his account Froissart duly notes the piety of the kings and soldiers involved. But his main interest is in military maneuvers, battles,



and human bravery and cowardice. The editors of the above excerpt are more sanguinary in their estimation.

In Froissart, a superstitious but thoroughly secular man, even the idea of Providence is muted. More dominant in his history is the pagan idea of Fortune ruling the destinies of men... The shift of emphasis from Providence to Fortune . . . foretells the move of Western man and his historiography from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.<sup>54</sup>

The much less well-known historian Thomas Basin (1412-1491), writing about fifty years after the war ended, was puzzled over the respective roles of God and human beings. He ended up seeing history as a grand human drama for which God devised the plot but humans played a fairly independent role. Should historians even concern themselves with a divine plot? He answered: "For myself, I shall be content with a true account of events and leave to people who think they are able to do so the task of discussing the secret workings of divinity."<sup>55</sup>

By the time of Lorenzo Valla (c. 1406-1457), who was alluded to earlier, Renaissance humanism is in full swing. Though his writings are wide-ranging, he is especially remembered for his *Discourse on the Forgery of the Alleged Donation of Constantine*. While not strictly a work of history, Valla's use of textual criticism made the later writing of critical history possible. We include him here as an example that, for humanists, nothing anymore was sacred and off-limits to scholarly investigation, even so sacred a document as the *Donation*. Valla gives an overview of his work:

First, I shall show that Constantine and Sylvester were not such men that the former would choose to give, would have the legal right to give, or would have it in his power to give those lands to another, or that the latter would be willing to accept them or could legally have done so. In the second place, if this were not so, though it is absolutely true and obvious, [I shall show that in fact] the latter did not receive nor the former give possession of what is said to have been granted, but that it always remained under the sway and empire of the Caesars. In the third place, [I shall show that] nothing was given to Sylvester by Constantine, but to an earlier Pope (and

Constantine had received baptism even before that pontificate), and that the grants were inconsiderable, for the mere subsistence of the Pope. Fourth, that it is not true either that a copy of the Donation is found in the Decretum [of Gratian], or that it was taken from the History of Sylvester; for it is not found in it or in any history, and it is comprised of contradictions, impossibilities, stupidities, barbarisms and absurdities. Further, I shall speak of the pretended or mock donation of certain other Caesars. Then by way of redundance I shall add that even had Sylvester taken possession, nevertheless, he or some other pontiff having been dispossessed, possession could not be resumed after such a long interval under either divine or human law. Last [I shall show] that the possessions which are now held by the supreme pontiff could not, in any length of time, be validated by prescription.<sup>56</sup>

Luther and the other reformers hailed Valla as a precursor in their denunciation of the institutions of the Roman Church as historical fictions.

The trend to limit if not totally exclude God from history continued with Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). “Although God was still acknowledged as the first cause of all events, his will was seen as unknowable and his direct interventions as too occasional to matter,” according to Breisach.<sup>57</sup> In place of God, Machiavelli, like Greek and Roman historians, was more apt to speak of Fate or Fortune, and, especially like the Romans, look for the lessons of history, an exemplary or pedagogical approach. One realizes how much the doing of history has changed when one compares Machiavelli’s famous statement in *The Prince* with that of a committed Christian such as Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543). Here is Machiavelli:

This leads us to a question that is in dispute: Is it better to be loved than feared, or vice versa? My reply is one ought to be both loved and feared; but, since it is difficult to be both loved and feared, I maintain it is much safer to be feared than loved, if you have to do without one of the two.<sup>58</sup>

Momentarily compare this with Benedict in his *Rule* for monks. In describing how the abbot should deal leniently and patiently with his monks, Benedict says, “[W]e shall strive rather to be loved than feared.”<sup>59</sup>

Machiavelli's younger contemporary Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540) continued along the lines set by Machiavelli, finding lessons in history while criticizing Machiavelli for setting up the Romans as models for imitation. Similarly, while not rejecting God's role, he tempered that with the larger role of fate and chance. His *History of Florence* and *History of Italy* focus mostly on events and persons, without reference to God.<sup>60</sup>

With Guicciardini, an almost exact contemporary of Luther (1483-1546), we conclude laying the necessary groundwork for an evaluation of Luther as a historian.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, Part I, "Our Oriental Heritage" (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore J. Hartwig, *The Past Speaks for Itself*, vol. 1, "The Ascendancy of Religious Naturalism" (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern, 1986), pp. 9-11, quoting from *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, tr. James Prichard (Princeton University Press, 1950, 1955), pp. 265-266.

<sup>3</sup> Hartwig, quoting from *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, tr. Beyerlin and Bowden, (S C M Press, 1978), pp. 16-19.

<sup>4</sup> *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tr. N. K. Sandars (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 105, reads as follows: "In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamour. Enlil heard the clamour and he said to the gods in council, 'The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel.' So the gods in their hearts were moved to let loose the deluge."

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> H. and H. A. Frankfort, et. al., *Before Philosophy; The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 245.

<sup>8</sup> Durant, *op. cit.*, pp. 339-340.

<sup>9</sup> Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Plato once said that poets who sang about the gods should be banned, because the tales about the gods corrupted human morals.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1983]), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *The Iliad of Homer*, tr. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976 [1951]), p. 59, l. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Breisach, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Farrington, *Greek Science: Its Meaning for Us* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Frankfort, p. 251.

<sup>17</sup> Much of the material on the nature philosophers is gathered from Durant, pp. 136f. and 161f., and Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 19f.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Durant, p. 144. See also George Botsford, *Hellenistic History* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 256f.

<sup>19</sup> Botsford, p.258.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>21</sup> Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* (New York: Knopf. 1966 [1950]), p. 41. See also Gilderhus, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Fitzsimmons, *et. al., eds. The Development of Historiography* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1967 [1954]), p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Harry E. Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937), p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, tr. Aubrey de Selincourt (Boston: D. C. Heath, Penguin Books, 1954), p. 103.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.

<sup>26</sup> Gilderhus, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, tr. Richard Crawley, into. John H. Finley (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1951), p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94-95.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 446.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 452.

<sup>33</sup> Gilderhus, pp. 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> Durant II, p. 435.

<sup>35</sup> Breisach, p. 64.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Guy and Gerald J. Cavanaugh, *Historians at Work* (Harper and Row, 1972), vol. 1, p. 193.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>38</sup> Breisach, p. 70.

<sup>39</sup> Guy and Cavanaugh, vol. 1, pp. 256-7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264-5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 288-9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 316-7. See also Breisach, pp. 86-7.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Dahmus, *Seven Medieval Historians* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982), p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>47</sup> Guy and Cavanaugh, vol. 1, p. 372.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 388.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 379-80.

<sup>51</sup> *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, tr. and intro. Bernard Mc Ginn (Paulist Press, 1979), p. 102.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>53</sup> Guy and Cavanaugh, vol. 1, p. 413.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411.

<sup>55</sup> Breisach, pp. 149-50.

<sup>56</sup> *The Treatise of Lorenzo Valla on the Donation of Constantine*, tr. Christopher B. Coleman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), pp. 27 and 29.

<sup>57</sup> Breisach, p. 158.

<sup>58</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. and tr. David Wooten (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995), pp. 51-2.

<sup>59</sup> *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 140.

<sup>60</sup> Breisach, p. 158.

## Lecture Two: Luther the Historian at Work

by James G. Kiecker

Continuing from our first lecture, with Luther and the Reformation God is very much back in history. The question often arises as to the relation between the Renaissance and the Reformation, with some scholars aligning them, and at the other end some scholars totally separating them. For many years I've been middle of the road on this. The Renaissance, as I've indicated, stressed the capabilities of humans, first of all in temporal matters, but as humanism worked its way into the Church, also in spiritual matters. In fact, the medieval church was already inclined toward what men could do for their own salvation (we think of Gabriel Biel's statement *Facientibus quod in se est, deus non denegat gratiam*, meaning "to those who do what is in themselves, God does not deny grace"), the Renaissance pushed the church even farther in that direction. Ultimately you have Erasmus' *Freedom of the Will*, which, as a Roman Catholic statement of what man can do spiritually, has never been equaled. This toward a clean separation between the Renaissance and the Reformation. And this toward squeezing God out of history.

On the other hand, on a human level, the Renaissance did contribute much to the Reformation. Certainly, God did not need the Renaissance to reform his Church any more than he needed Luther (as Luther was well aware). God could have reformed his church any old time it pleased him. Nevertheless, the rebirth in learning centered first on the *bonae literae* of the ancient world, especially works in Latin and some in Greek, especially in Italy. It wasn't long before, in the Northern Renaissance, the attention turned to *sacrae literae*, the Greek and Hebrew of the Bible. While the Italians turned toward civic humanism, an attempt to reform society on the basis of presumably better pagan precedents, Northern humanists (while attending somewhat to human society as in the case of both Luther and Melancthon), turned toward biblical humanism, and attempted to reform the Church. Thus the Renaissance did have some impact on

the Reformation, and that's why I have been middle of the road on this issue. And this toward retaining God in history.

But the question is how best to show that for Luther God was definitely in history. And having shown this, is that enough to say about Luther as a historian? Surely we want to show more. What was Luther's attitude toward history, that is, his philosophy of history? What was his attitude toward history recorded in Scripture, history written by Christians, and history written by non-Christians? How did he himself write history? Did Luther accept what he read as being authoritative, or was he critical? How accurate was Luther in what he wrote? What, for that matter was his attitude toward historians? These and many more questions arise as we try to assess Luther as a historian.

A problem immediately arises. As has so often been said, Luther was not a systematic theologian. Well, he was not a systematic historian either. Just as you cannot pick up a book of his and read everything he has to say about baptism or the Lord's Supper, or government, or whatever, so you cannot pick up a book of his and find, neatly arranged, all he has to say about history. Just as you might be reading him on any topic, and suddenly find a gem of a thought on a completely different topic, so it is with him and his thoughts about history.

So how can you ever assemble everything Luther had to say on history? To comb all of his writings for his remarks on history and assemble them in a meaningful arrangement, the way Paul Althaus tried to do with Luther's theology and ethics, would be the work of a lifetime. I don't have time for that anymore, and it couldn't be squeezed into these lectures anyway.

So I have adopted the following *modus operandi*. I'm going to focus first on the work which is often considered the shortest and most coherent statement of his attitude toward history and historians, the *Preface to Galeatius Capella's History* of 1538. Then I'm going to focus on his *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539, which shows most if not all aspects of Luther as a historian. Then I will look over scattered statements of his about history from throughout his career. Finally, if time permits, I'll compare him as a historian to what is generally considered to be the make-up of a good historian nowadays. Following this methodology I will undoubtedly miss many of his statements on history, perhaps even some important ones. I welcome



any additions that you might make. But by following this methodology I think we will come away with a fairly good idea of Luther as a historian.

Sometime prior to 1532, when it was printed in Nürnberg, an Italian humanist and historian named Galeatius Capella wrote a history of the reign of Francesco II Sforza, the duke of Milan. This work was subsequently reprinted in Hagenau in 1535. Shortly after this, Wenceslaus Link, a supporter of Luther and reformer of Nürnberg, translated Capella's history from Latin to German, and this translation was printed in Wittenberg in 1538,<sup>1</sup> with a Preface by Luther, who had been impressed by the history. This fact is already important. It shows Luther's interest in history, and that he wasn't concerned that the author was a Roman Catholic and a humanist. Good history writing, he seems to be saying, is good history writing, whatever the source. The proper writing of history transcends theological and ideological bounds. At least four times in about three and a half pages Luther discloses his underlying philosophy of history, namely, that God is active in history. He says:

[H]istories are nothing else than a demonstration, recollection, and sign of divine action and judgment, how [God] upholds rules, obstructs, prospers, punishes, and honors the world and especially men, each according to his just desert, evil or good.<sup>2</sup>

[S]ince God's work goes on continually, as Christ says, "My Father in heaven is working still, and I am working" [John 5:17], it cannot fail that in every age something noteworthy should have happened, that one should rightly take note of.<sup>3</sup>

[H]istories describe nothing else than God's work, that is, grace and wrath.<sup>4</sup>

[I]n [history] one can indeed also see God's work, how marvelously he rules the children of men and how wicked the devil is and all his. ...<sup>5</sup>

But the question a modern, critical thinker asks is, Is this indeed so? After all, many people nowadays read history and do not see the hand of God in it. History is, as some have said, just one thing after the other, or the same thing again and again. History is simply what happens, and there is no need or place for God in it.

Here is where the Christian historian parts ways with the non-Christian. Luther puts the difference in terms of one of the many dichotomies that run through Luther's works, that of "hidden and revealed" or simply the "mask" or "veil" with which God hides himself. Though modern man doesn't see God, Luther would say that sometimes God reveals himself very clearly, and sometimes hides his presence behind a mask. It is only with the eyes of faith that a person can see God both revealed and hidden in the affairs of history. Luther does not bring out this faith aspect in this short Preface, but it is implicitly present, and we will find Luther later bringing it out explicitly.<sup>6</sup>

Luther frequently practices what is called "exemplar" history, i.e., the use of history to provide examples. He says:

[W]hat the philosophers, wise men, and all men of reason can teach or devise which can be useful for an honorable life, that the histories present powerfully with examples and happenings making them visually so real, as though one were there and saw everything happen that the word had previously conveyed to the ears by mere teaching.<sup>7</sup>

It's worth noting, as an example of Luther's use of the ancient classics, brought to his attention by his reading of church historians, that Luther gets his idea of exemplar history from the Roman writer Varro (116-27 BC).<sup>8</sup> This may also serve as an example to us of how Christians through the ages have used pagan writers when they found them acceptable. We are reminded of Augustine's use of the Jews carrying with them in the Exodus "the spoils of Egypt" as an indication of how Christians are to make use of whatever pagans can provide us.

Noting already that in his own day "there are many who do not acknowledge God or esteem him" (modern unbelief is nothing new), Luther believes that the examples provided by history should instruct them ("they must nevertheless come up against the examples and histories and be afraid lest they fare like those individuals whom the histories portray").<sup>9</sup> The implication is that such people might be driven to find God in history, but we know how often, though "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1), many people remain unpersuaded.

We read, said Luther,

not only in the Holy Scriptures but also in the books of pagans how they cited as witnesses and held up the examples, words, and deeds of forebears when they wanted to carry a point with the people or when they intended to teach, admonish, warn, or deter.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of this passage we see how exemplar history often overlaps with “pedagogical” history, or “practical” (useful) history, simply history used to teach, from which we learn “the lessons of history” (if indeed we learn anything, for as Hegel put it, “the only thing we can learn from history is that we learn nothing from history”).

Luther is aware that exemplar history can also be put in the service of national history, which was a further concern of German humanists. His own nationalist and humanist feelings come out when he says:

What should we Germans bewail more than that we do not have the history and example of our ancestors beyond a thousand years and know scarcely anything about our origin, except what we must use from histories of other nations, which perhaps must make mention of us out of necessity rather than to their honor.<sup>11</sup>

In this passage Luther already shows an awareness of bias in history, which we’ll return to.

Exemplar/pedagogical/practical history is contained in two more statements:

Upon thorough reflection one finds that almost all laws, art, good counsel, warning, threatening, terrifying, comforting, strengthening, instruction, prudence, wisdom, discretion, and all virtues well up out of the narratives and histories as from a living fountain.<sup>12</sup>

And from histories

... we learn to fear God and seek his counsel and aid in matters both large and small.<sup>13</sup>

At least twice in these few pages Luther practices what he preaches and uses examples of his own.

[A]lthough not everything can be collected, at least the most important events would be concisely preserved, as some intended to do who composed songs about Dietrich von Bern [Theodoric the Great (d. 526), who became a medieval German folk hero] and other giants, and in so doing presented many very important matters concisely and plainly.<sup>14</sup>

This passage also indicates Luther's understanding of the obvious need for selectivity when writing history, and also Luther's subscription to the so-called "great man" (now "great person") view of history, in which history is shaped by certain great individuals (of which Luther himself was a clear example). We'll refer to selectivity and the "great person" later.

Finally, Luther notes an example from his own everyday experience. Though no history is perfect

... we must tolerate it [just as we must tolerate it] that lax government teamsters along the way adulterate the wine with water, so that one cannot obtain a drink of pure vintage, and we must be satisfied with receiving the better part or something of it.<sup>15</sup>

Surely, such a striking example must have raised the hackles of many a hardy German.

We've already alluded to Luther's awareness of bias in history writing, and he treats this at length. He says that history writing

... requires a first-rate man who has a lion's heart, unafraid to write the truth. For a greater number [of historians] write in such a way that they readily pass over or put the best construction on the vices and deficiencies of their own times in the interest of their lords or friends and in turn glorify all too highly some trifling or vain virtue. On the other hand, they embellish or besmirch histories to the advantage of their fatherland and disadvantage of the foreigners, according to whether they love or hate someone. In that way historians become extremely unreliable and God's work is shamefully obscured, ... as the pope's flatterers have done up to now and

still do. In the end it comes down to this that one does not know what one should believe. Thus the noble, fine, and loftiest use of histories is ruined and they become nothing but bearers of gossip. Consequently, such an important work as writing histories is open to everyone. He then writes and ignores, praises, and decries whatever he likes.<sup>16</sup>

Since bias is frequent, as when people write “official” histories (whether of the papacy, or the synod, or the college, or whatever), Luther sees the need for careful, critical reading. He says that

... we must remain satisfied with our historians as they are and now and then reflect for ourselves and judge whether the writer is getting off the right track because of partiality or prejudice, whether he praises and blames too much or too little, according to how he is disposed toward people or things...<sup>17</sup>

But if historians do their best to tell us, in Ranke’s phrase, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, they are to be highly esteemed. He writes:

[H]istorians, therefore, are the most useful people and the best teachers, so that one can never honor, praise, and thank them enough. That may very well be a work of great lords, as the emperor, king, etc., who in their time deliberately had histories written and securely preserved in the libraries. Nor did they spare any cost necessary for supporting and educating such people as were qualified for writing histories. One can see especially in the books of Judges, Kings, and Chronicles that among the Jewish people such masters were appointed and retained. That was also the case among the kings of Persia who had such libraries in Media, as one can gather from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah [Ezra 6:2]. Nowadays the princes and lords must have their chancelleries for this purpose in which they preserve and file their affairs, both new and old. How much more should one have a history of the whole period of their rule drawn up about all or at least about the most important matters and leave it for posterity.<sup>18</sup>

Yes, if historians do their work properly, “it is only right that one should believe them, as though they were in the Bible,”<sup>19</sup> indicating that as highly as Luther thought of good historians, the biblical historians still set the standard.

Apparently Capella passed Luther's qualifications for history writers, since he writes near the end of his Preface:

[T]his historian Galeatius Capella impresses me as though he wishes to represent a genuine writer of history and to set matters forth not with long-winded, unnecessary words, but briefly and thoroughly. It is for all that a subject which ought to be read and remembered. For in it one can indeed also see God's works.  
 ...<sup>20</sup>

So there you have it, a *multum in parvo*, exhibit "A" showing Luther as a historian. Let's draw together what we've discovered in these few pages.

1. Luther is obviously interested in history.
2. Good history writing (according to his standards) is good history writing, whatever the source.
3. The basic, underlying principle in Luther's philosophy of history is that the Judeo-Christian God is active in history.
4. True, human beings do not always see this. Only through spiritual insight does the child of God see those places in history where God reveals himself, having hidden himself from the unbelieving and even sometimes from the believing in a sin-blinded moment, that is, God covers himself with a "mask" or a "veil." (Among the various places where God hides himself and yet reveals himself are in the sacraments, *Anfechtungen*, and the cross.)
5. Luther makes use of history for examples, and for teaching, thus making history practical and useful. Living at the time of rising nationalism in Europe, Luther shows how the use of history can aid German nationalism.
6. Luther subscribes to the "great man" view of history, meaning that the actions of certain exceptional individuals become the engine that shapes history and moves history along in a particular way.

7. Luther is aware that historians have to be selective in writing history, picking out those events which they deem worth recording.
8. This leads to Luther's awareness of bias and subjectivity in history, or put another way, historians are unable to write history with perfect objectivity.
9. But if historians try to avoid bias and to the best of their ability try to write what really happened, then they are to be held in the highest esteem and honor.
10. The best history writing, which sets the standard for all other history writing, is in the Bible.

But Luther was not just a historian, who, as a Christian and by faith, saw the hand of God in history, on the order of the twentieth-century British historian Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979). Luther was a historian whose primary interest was in Christianity, that is, he was a church historian. This becomes clear in the second of Luther's writings which I have chosen to dwell on, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539). The background, briefly, is this: In 1520 Luther called for a "free, general, Christian council" in which church reformers could freely discuss their ideas with church traditionalists, until finally, hopefully, the council would cleanse the church of its unchristian practices and doctrines, and the church would again proclaim the pure Gospel of forgiveness of sins by faith in the perfect sacrifice of Christ himself to assuage God's wrath and procure God's grace. That was Luther's initial hope.

But over the years this hope was repeatedly dashed, sometimes by a sluggish papacy fearful of reform, sometimes by wars, often by political maneuvering. Councils were called and councils were postponed until the Council of Trent convened in 1545, less than a year before Luther's death. By this time Luther had despaired of ever having the kind of "free, general, Christian council" he had hoped for, for even if a council were held, it would be under the control of the pope and Roman traditionalists, and there would be no true reform. Had Luther lived, he would have seen this, for before the Council of Trent concluded in 1563 it had made only surface changes in the church, while not changing unscriptural doctrine, in fact, hardening the latter. In this context Luther wrote the document before us.

As we work through this document we will see some new elements of Luther as a historian, who focuses his attention on the church. Therefore I will generally steer away from those elements of Luther as a historian which I have already dwelt on, and focus more on new elements such as the sources which Luther used as a historian, and his treatment of them, which sometimes became critical. We will assess his attitude toward history as contained in Scripture versus history contained in the writings of the church fathers and the statements of church councils. We will also enter the area of the accuracy of Luther in his use of his sources. All of this should round out our view of Luther as a historian.

As to the sources themselves, our work has been made easier by the editors of *Luther's Works*, who have nicely enumerated them. They are:

1. The *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea, covering the period from the apostles to Constantine the Great (324);
2. The *Eleven Books of Ecclesiastical History* by Rufinus, who supplemented and elaborated Eusebius' work until 395;
3. The *Historia Tripartita* of Cassiodorus Senator, who edited and continued these earlier works until about the year 560. Cassiodorus based his work on excerpts from Theodoret of Kyros, Socrates, and Sozomenus of Constantinople;
4. The collections of the fathers and canon law;
5. The *Concilia Omnia*, a newly published two-volume work of Peter Crabbe and Peter Quentel;
6. The *Lives of the Popes* by Bartolomeo Platina, also recently written.

The location of all these works, in Latin and English, is also provided by the editors, and need not be repeated here.<sup>21</sup> I am not so much interested in the sources *per se* as in Luther's use of his sources.

Luther divided this lengthy work (covering about 178 pages in *LW* 41) into an introduction and three parts. To help give our work some structure, we will divide our assessment accordingly.



The short Introduction need not detain us long, yet two points are worth noting. The first is Luther's use of rhetoric (probably picked up from his humanistic training) in his writing as a historian. As often elsewhere, Luther employs rhetorical elements such as sarcasm, irony, and pure wrath. For example, angry at the pope's plan to stack the council with theologians favorable to him, Luther observes that

... the [course of the] council is already determined, before it even convenes, namely, not to undertake any reforms... Isn't that a splendid council? It has not yet convened and already it has done what it was to do when it met... Thus we now have the final decree of the future council at Vicenza [a council which never met] and the severe verdict of the latest (so estimable) council [the council now called for Trent in 1545]. ...<sup>22</sup>

After roundly cursing the pope and his supporters ("these accursed damned people"<sup>23</sup>), Luther sets off on another rollicking bit of sarcasm:

But we poor, weak Christians ... ought to be happy and of good cheer [at the lack of a council]. We ought to praise and thank God the Father of all mercy with great joy for taking such good care of us and for smiting our murderers and bloodhounds with such Egyptian blindness and such Jewish madness that they are determined to yield on no point and let Christendom perish rather than to allow the most trifling idolatry (with which they are stuffed full and overfull) to be reformed. Of this they boast and this they do. Cheerful (I say) we ought to be; for thus they make our case better than we could ever have desired, and make theirs worse than they might think. They know and admit that they are wrong on many points and on top of it have Scripture and God against them, and yet they want to butt their heads against God, and knowingly defend wrong as right... [T]hey would let Christendom perish, that is, they would have the devil himself as god and lord, rather than have Christ and abandon even a small fraction of their idolatry.<sup>24</sup>

I'll probably not return to Luther's use of rhetoric later in this paper, but it occupies a prominent place in his work as a historian, and his use of various kinds of rhetoric throughout his writings is probably worth a separate study.

The other point in the Introduction to this document which bears notice is Luther's often expressed feeling that the end of the world is near. He writes:

If the Last Day were not close at hand, it would be no wonder if heaven and earth were to crumble because of this [the pope's] blasphemy. However, since God is able to endure this, this day cannot be far off.<sup>25</sup>

This feeling of an imminent end to history discloses a great deal about Luther's attitude toward history. First of all, it's firmly in line with the Judeo-Christian view of history as linear in distinction from the ancient and sometimes modern cyclical view, which we discussed in our first lecture. Secondly, it shows that Luther has picked up a lot by his reading of medieval, millennialist views of history. The feeling was that, after the "calamitous fourteenth century" (Barbara Tuchman's description) which saw the start of the Hundred Years' War, the Black Death, and peasant rebellions in France and England, with the Hundred Years' War continuing until the middle of the fifteenth century, things just couldn't get much worse before God would end this world. In Luther's case this led to an attitude toward history which I carefully call "care-less," that is, no Christian should get overly concerned about the many dreadful things that happen in history, since the Christian is firmly in the hands of a loving God who will turn it all out for the best. The Christian can experience a blessed unconcern, even if he is vitally interested in earthly events on a day-to-day basis (as Luther was). One can see here, I think, the influence of Augustine's "two cities" theory.

As we enter "Part I" of *On the Councils and the Church* we encounter several new elements in Luther as a historian. One is his regard for his sources (church fathers and church councils) and his regard for Scripture as the source which surpasses the other sources. Ultimately this will show us the "polemical" use of history by Luther, that is, history used as a weapon when dealing with one's opponents. This was not the first time history was used in this fashion, and as the breach between the various Protestant churches and the Roman church grew wider, it became more and more a method used by all sides.

Luther's goal in "Part I" is to show that the sources (fathers and councils) often contradict each other, and therefore are not as reliable as Scripture on that basis. Though he does tend to accept his sources as accurate, he also begins to examine them more critically, which we will see more of in "Part II," where he enters into textual criticism.

Furthermore, in this section we will raise for the first time the question of Luther's accuracy as a historian, and the importance of motive in history. And then, as a minor but noteworthy element, we'll note his apparent acceptance of legends, which indicates Luther's connection to his medieval predecessors.

The major sticking point between Luther and his opponents, which became quite clear during his debate with John Eck at Leipzig in 1519, was the Roman insistence on using the fathers and councils as well as Scripture as the basis for doctrine, and Luther's insistence on Scripture alone, since the fathers and councils have, he contended, often contradicted themselves, not to mention strayed from clear Scripture.

Making use of Crabbe's recent collection of the documents of the councils, Luther notes that "they [the Romanists] make ... great claims for the sanctity of the fathers and councils, which we do not uphold; nor do they" for "they themselves pay the fathers and councils no heed and yet they would force us to do so. ..."26 Yet there are many people, even some reformers, who feel a strong pull toward the use of the sainted fathers. Luther's retort is:

To the others, who mean well and hope, albeit vainly, that a fine reformation such as they have in mind might perhaps still be achieved on the basis of the councils and fathers, even despite an unwilling pope's attempt to thwart it, I reply, also with good intent, that I regard this as an impossible undertaking, and indeed do not know how to go about it.<sup>27</sup>

Luther then lists the many times he himself made use of the writings of the fathers, especially in his exegesis of Scripture, which leads him to boast (quite accurately) that he used the fathers even more than his opponents.<sup>28</sup> Turning the tables on his opponents Luther then cites Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153, often referred to as the last of the fathers) who himself regarded the earlier fathers highly, but

did not heed all their sayings, setting Scripture above them. The bottom line for Luther, throughout this whole treatise, is that “Scripture ... must remain master and judge. ...”<sup>29</sup> To those who still want to use the fathers, Luther’s response is, “it is obvious that the councils are not only unequal, but also contradictory. The same is true of the fathers.”<sup>30</sup>

After citing Gratian, the church lawyer who attempted to bring some harmony into canon law in his *Concordantia Discordantiarum* of about 1140, and, in Luther’s view, failed to do so, Luther makes the same use of Augustine (354-430) that he made of Bernard, that is, Augustine too concluded that no one is obligated to follow the fathers. Yet Augustine does consider the first two councils, the one at Nicea in 325 and the other at Constantinople in 381, which were the only ones he lived to be familiar with, as authoritative, since they simply endorsed plain Scriptural teaching. Here, as in the case of Bernard, Luther as a historian agrees with his source.<sup>31</sup>

To conclude Luther’s use of Augustine at this point, Luther refers to an exchange between Augustine and Jerome (c. 340-420), after Augustine had criticized a point in Jerome’s commentary on Galatians. Augustine very gently told Jerome: “Dear brother ..., I hope that you do not expect your books to be regarded as equal to those of the apostles and prophets. ...”<sup>32</sup> With this support Luther returns to his underlying theme, that Scripture is the master source of Christian teaching.

It is in these pages that we first encounter the problem of the accuracy of Luther as a historian. This problem has seldom been dealt with by Luther scholars. Foremost here is an 1897 book by Ernest Schäfer, and a more recent book by John M. Headley. We will have to deal with this problem.

While discussing Augustine, Luther mentions that “in this year 1539 [Augustine] has been dead for eleven hundred and two years.”<sup>33</sup> This would mean that Augustine died in 436. Modern scholarship places Augustine’s death in 430. Luther got the year 436 from a chronology of world history written by a mathematician named John Carion, with the help of Philip Melanchthon, and published in 1532. In 1541 Luther published his own compilation of world history entitled *Supputatio Annorum Mundi* or *Chronika*, and simply took over the dates arrived at by Carion and Melanchthon. Or as Schäfer puts it,

Nur von seinen Freunden gedrängt gab er sie heraus und nahm in der Vorrede Gelegenheit, auf das „*Chronicon Charionis Philippicum*“ hinzuweisen, welches die beste Berechnung der Jahre der Welt sei, und nach dem er auch diese *supputatio* gearbeitet habe... Luther die Fehler, welche Carions Berechnung hatte, in seine Chronik mit übernommen hat; vor allem diejenigen, welche sich aus der um sechs Jahre zu späten Ansetzung von Konstantins Tode ergeben. Durch diese verschieben sich von 337 an auf eine längere Reihe von Jahren sämtliche Daten.<sup>34</sup>

There will be more examples like this. The question is, in the case of accuracy of dates, should Luther be held to modern day standards? This seems unfair.

Luther intends to deal primarily with the councils of Nicea and Constantinople to show the unreliability of councils, but as he says, “to play absolutely safe ... we shall take up the very first council of the apostles, held in Jerusalem”<sup>35</sup> (Acts 15:5-19, about the year 44 or 45). He deals first with what he considers the secondary issues of the council, and then, in his typically unsystematical way, deals with the main issue of the council some thirty-five pages later. The secondary issues, proposed by St. James, were that the Gentile Christians should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from the meat of strangled animals, from eating blood, and from unchastity. Luther points out that the church is not following these directives, except for condemning unchastity, even though Scripture explicitly says that they are directives of the Holy Spirit. Luther then challenges his opponents: “If we wish to be conciliar, we will have to keep this council above all others. If not, we need not keep any of the other councils either, and thus be rid of all the councils.”<sup>36</sup> Luther says that the church is correct in not following these secondary issues. He doesn’t follow them, and he knows his opponents won’t follow them either.

The main issue of the Jerusalem council was whether or not Gentiles would have to be circumcised before they could become Christian. With some glee Luther points out that it was Peter who denounced this, saying that Gentiles were cleansed by faith, and that Gentiles and Jews will both be saved through the grace of God.<sup>37</sup> This was the main motive for holding the Jerusalem council. Thus Luther shows an interest in historical motivation or causation, which has become of major importance for recent historians.

Luther then examines the Jerusalem council critically. How can the gospel statement of Peter be harmonized with the law statement of James? Luther's suggestion is bold: "[I]f we cannot make them agree, we must dismiss St. James with his article and retain St. Peter with his chief article, for the sake of which the council was held."<sup>38</sup> Yet Luther is kind to James, excusing him on the basis of not wanting to give offense to the Jewish Christians among whom the Gentiles lived. In this respect James is no different from Paul, the foremost preacher of Christian freedom from the law, who circumcised Timothy for the same reason. Luther concludes: "So these two articles, that of St. Peter and that of St. James, are contradictory and yet they are not. St. Peter's deals with faith, St. James's with love."<sup>39</sup>

Luther then turns to the Council of Nicea, but immediately the question of Luther's accuracy is again raised. Our work here is made easier by the footnotes in *Luther's Works*, which in turn are dependent on the footnotes in the Weimar Edition. Luther notes correctly that the council decreed in Canon XII, according to Rufinus' history,<sup>40</sup> that apostate Christians should be readmitted to the church after seven years of penance. He goes on to say "The same council decreed that those who give up warfare for the sake of religion and later go to war again are to spend five years among the catechumens and are then to be admitted to the sacrament after two more years,"<sup>41</sup> that is seven years of penance. However, Canon XIII deals with warfare, and says thirteen years of penance. The editors suggest that Luther's eyes simply slipped back to Canon XII, and Luther reused the number seven.

Likewise, the word "religion" does not appear in Canon XIII of Rufinus' history. It is, however, found in an edition of canon law entitled *Decreti, Secunda Pars, De Penitencia*, distinction V, Canon V. Canon V deals with giving up warfare for the sake of religion, Canon IV deals with the readmission of apostate Christians. Again, Luther's eye might have slipped, so that he dislocated "religion" in Canon IV instead of Canon V. Yes, these are inaccuracies. They are the kind of inaccuracies that all historians make from time to time, and which I'm sure we're all guilty of.

Disregarding these inaccuracies, Luther asks "whether this article, that no soldier can be saved or be a Christian, [has] been kept before, or whether it can be kept on and on as a matter of law."<sup>42</sup> Here

Luther makes use of the legends of St. Maurice (late third century) and his namesake St. Martin of Tours (fourth century) as examples of soldiers who gave up warfare for Christianity, and in the later case, monasticism. It's quite obvious to Luther that this decree on giving up warfare for Christianity is no longer followed by Christians, least of all "the pope and all his followers,"<sup>43</sup> quite possibly a jab at Pope Julius II (reigned 1503-1513), often called the "warrior pope" for leading his armies into battle against fellow secular rulers.

Since this decree is so obviously not followed, Luther exercises a bit of literary criticism and suspects that this decree is a later interpolation. He says:

I cannot escape the suspicion that a fraud was committed and that the dear holy fathers never did set up such an article. Surely they would have spared the emperor Constantine this, he who had liberated them from the tyrants ... with war and sword. It looks as though the other loose bishops [Luther's term for Arian bishops] pasted it in or smuggled it into the records later.<sup>44</sup>

In the same way Luther dismisses the decree that the Roman bishop should have charge over the churches not only in Rome but in, perhaps, all of Italy, and gradually be expanded to include all churches elsewhere.

Returning to Rufinus' history of the councils, Luther notes correctly that Canon I decreed that those who emasculate themselves because of lust shall not be admitted to the clergy or to any other office in the church. He then, however, misunderstands Canon III. Canon III of Nicea did not outlaw clerical marriage, however it did outlaw other women living in the bishop's house except for a mother, sisters, aunts, or other near female relatives. What Nicea was concerned about was "spiritual marriage," in which a bishop would live with unrelated women, as a sort of test of his ability to remain chaste—a test that was often failed. Luther, then, an opponent of clerical celibacy, is a bit too quick in seeing Nicea already forbidding clerical marriage.<sup>45</sup>

With a brisk "Let us stop talking about the councils for a while and take a look at the fathers,"<sup>46</sup> Luther enters some new territory. His point is to show that as the decrees of the councils are not followed, so the statements of the fathers often disagree. The contest here is between St. Cyprian (d. 258) who believed that those who had been baptized by heretics should be rebaptized, and St. Augustine (354-

430) who said (and rightly so, in Luther's estimation) that they should not. Furthermore, Rufinus' history records a letter of Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria (d. c. 264) to Bishop Sixtus of Rome (reigned 257-258) which said that rebaptism of heretics was the general rule among African bishops and had been decided on by the Council of Iconium in Asia Minor (c. 235). Thus rebaptism of heretics seemed to go far back into church history.

Luther then misread that the Council of Nicea had endorsed the practice, when actually it had endorsed only the rebaptism of those who rejected Nicene Christianity. Finally, Luther employed the spurious *Canones apostolorum*, which purported to be the teachings of the apostles but actually dated to the late fourth or early fifth centuries, to again show that heretics should be rebaptized.<sup>47</sup> Here again Luther employed elemental textual criticism and wondered if the apostles actually said this.

Luther excuses Cyprian on the basis that Cyprian probably believed the correct baptismal formula had not been used by the heretics, and thus did not actually believe that he was rebaptizing them but baptizing them for the first and correct time. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between Cyprian and Augustine stands. Luther's conclusion is, "the fathers themselves disagree as much as do the councils."<sup>48</sup>

So what are Christians supposed to do until this is settled? Live in doubt? "No," says Luther, "there must be another way than proving things by means of councils and fathers,"<sup>49</sup> and that is to base all one's teachings on Holy Scripture. "In summary," he says, "put them all together, both fathers and councils, and you still will not be able to cull from them all the teachings of the Christian faith, even if you culled forever."<sup>50</sup>

In "Part II" of *On the Councils and the Church* Luther deals with the first four church councils, Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. Recall that he has already discussed Nicea, and likewise the Council of Jerusalem, which he also refers back to. Along the way a number of elements in him as a historian reappear. However, two elements stand out, his search for the main motive for calling each council, and an increased use of textual criticism. We shall focus on these latter two, but we shall mention some of the other elements too. Perhaps my method seems repetitious and eclectic to you, and I agree,



it is. But that is only because that is the way that Luther writes. Grant me this: By following my method we will get the flavor of Luther as a historian—the sound of Luther—and that also is an element in Luther as a historian.

Luther begins with a summary of a statement by St. Hilary (c. 315-367): “He who wants to understand what is said must see why or for what reason it was spoken,” and Luther goes on to explain, “In the same manner, actions are best understood by understanding what motivates them.”<sup>51</sup>

Turning to the Council of Nicea, Luther spends more time on the main motive for the meeting, i. e., to dispose of Arius and his teaching that Jesus was not equally divine with God the Father. While mentioning the bishops who attended the council Luther casually mentions two who according to his source had performed miracles. In medieval fashion Luther does not question his source. Since Luther has already dealt with subsidiary motives for the meeting,<sup>52</sup> he simply alludes to them here, referring to them as “sheer clerical squabbling”<sup>53</sup> and notes that his sources can’t agree on how many of these subsidiary articles there are, suggesting in a critical way that perhaps Arians added or subtracted articles later.<sup>54</sup>

However, “one ember from the wooden articles has kept on glowing, namely, the one about the date of Easter,”<sup>55</sup> which Luther colorfully calls a “wobbling”<sup>56</sup> festival. He notes that Constantine settled the issue in the way it has remained to our own time, but he can’t resist a long digression on how he would prefer to see the date of Easter fixed on the same date each year, Sunday or not.<sup>57</sup> He also digresses to his belief that “the Last Day is imminent.”<sup>58</sup>

Luther then drifts back into the Council of Jerusalem, which he had covered earlier. Though Luther becomes repetitious, we will not, except that in the matter of fornication, Luther refers to the edict of Caesar Augustus that Romans ought to marry rather than commit fornication. We mention this here simply to show that Luther as a historian had a wide range of historical knowledge to draw from.<sup>59</sup> Luther also notes a so-called “lesson of history.” It was often said that Arius tricked Constantine into becoming an Arian. Though Luther does not believe this,<sup>60</sup> he does draw the lesson that we ought “to pray faithfully for great lords, for the devil seeks them out more than others since he can do the greatest damage through them.”<sup>61</sup> This

comment also shows us that, for Luther, not only was God active in history, but so was the devil. With this Luther lays aside the Council of Nicea.

Turning to the second council, the one at Constantinople called again by an emperor, Theodosius I, Luther immediately errs by saying that Arius at Nicea had denied the divinity of Christ and the divinity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>62</sup> Actually the divinity of the Holy Spirit was not an issue at Nicea. But now it was. A certain Macedonius and his followers were teaching that the Holy Spirit was not true God. Luther's methodology is the same here as it was in dealing with Nicea. The main motive for the Council of Constantinople was to state that the Holy Spirit was equally divine with the Father and the Son.<sup>63</sup> But along the way the council settled two other issues. One was, of course, to depose all heretical bishops who agreed with Macedonius. The other, Luther gleefully again notes, was to put the Roman bishop in his place. The council had the nerve to call Constantinople a new church and appoint their own bishop. It also named Antioch the first and oldest church, since that was where believers in Christ were first called Christians [Acts 11:26], and appointed a bishop there. Finally the council declared Jerusalem the mother of all churches because Christ himself had been bishop there, and again the council named a new bishop.<sup>64</sup> All this without consulting Rome! Thus we see Luther employing history as polemics against his opponents, which, as we said above, became more and more common.

Luther had said earlier that the first two councils after Jerusalem, Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381, were the main councils. At the same time he allowed that the next two councils, at Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451, were important too. Therefore he now turns to the third council, at Ephesus, which he can't refrain from noting was again called by an emperor, Theodosius II, and not the pope, though he accuses "the Latin writers," even one of his main sources, Crabbe, of trying "to weave the pope into the story."<sup>65</sup> Again he gives the main motive for the council, and leaves aside other issues which were dealt with there. The emperor Theodosius II (note: emperor) chose as Constantinople's bishop a man named Nestorius. His error was to refrain from calling Mary the mother of God. Here Luther becomes very critical of his sources, saying that they seem to imply that Nestorius made two persons out of Christ, namely, God

and man. Luther doubts this very much and offers a bit of historical interpretation, and challenges his readers to “see if I hit the mark.”<sup>66</sup> What Luther suggests is that Nestorius was a “proud and unleavened man,” who, being made a bishop, thought “he should be looked upon as the most learned man on earth.”<sup>67</sup> He believed that Jesus was, in one person, divine and human, and he allowed that Mary was the mother of Jesus as a man, but not the mother of Jesus as God, since after all, Mary was only human. Nestorius “insisted on the literal meaning of the words ‘God born of Mary,’ and interpreted ‘born’ according to grammar or philosophy, as though it meant to obtain divine nature from the one who bore him.”<sup>68</sup> This, Luther suggests, showing the influence of his scholastic training, is because Nestorius did not understand the *communicatio idiomatum*, namely, what is said about Jesus as a man can also be said about Jesus as God, and vice versa.<sup>69</sup> Therefore he was rightly condemned.<sup>70</sup> But, again critical of his sources, Luther contends they misspoke themselves. They said, “Nestorius denies that Christ is God in one person.” They should have said, “Although Nestorius confesses that Christ, true God and true man, is one person,” he “does not ascribe the *idiomata* of human nature to the same divine person of Christ. ...”<sup>71</sup>

With this Luther turns to the fourth council, at Chalcedon, in 451. Again he is critical of his sources, claiming that “no trustworthy history has been committed to us,” and therefore “we ... have to depend upon the pope and his histories.”<sup>72</sup> This makes it difficult to know exactly what the problem was. However, it seems that in Constantinople there was an abbot named Eutyches who claimed “that Christ was one person only in the divine nature, against which the fathers in the council resolved that Christ is one person and two natures.”<sup>73</sup> This makes Eutyches the exact opposite of Nestorius. Again Luther suggests an interpretation and challenges his readers again to see “if I hit the mark. ...”<sup>74</sup> Just as “Nestorius does not want to give the *idiomata* of humanity to the divinity in Christ, even though he maintains that Christ is God and man,” so “Eutyches ... does not want to give the *idiomata* of divinity to the humanity, though he also maintains that Christ is true God and true man.”<sup>75</sup> But again, Luther bemoans the fact that the historical sources are so vague, making it difficult to determine exactly what Eutyches taught. One thing is certain. Like all the other councils, “we find that this council too did

not establish any new article of faith; again it furnishes no proof that councils were vested with the authority to foist new doctrines on Christendom, for this article is far more abundantly and firmly grounded in Scripture,<sup>76</sup> and “for me Scripture is far more reliable than all councils.”<sup>77</sup>

Then why have councils? Luther lists ten reasons, but they all boil down to the same issue. Councils are not held to institute new doctrine, only to proclaim the clear doctrine of Scripture over errors that arise in the church. A council does on a grand scale nothing more than a God-fearing pastor or schoolteacher does in his local parish.<sup>78</sup> With that, Luther finishes his comments on church councils.

The document we’ve been dealing with is entitled *On the Councils and the Church*. The introduction and Parts I and II deal with the councils and church fathers, and Part III deals with the Church. However, examining Part III reveals very little about Luther as a historian, though much about him as a theologian (for example he lists seven marks of the Church, instead of just the Gospel and the Sacraments as we usually do). But since it adds little to our understanding of Luther as a historian, I have decided to omit it from my comments. Instead, I will try to summarize what the rest of the document tells us about Luther the historian.

1. Luther employs rhetoric in history writing, in this case sarcasm, irony, and wrath.
2. Influenced by the frightful history of the preceding two centuries, as well as by millennialists’ and scriptural statements, Luther feels that the end of the world is near.
3. This also indicates that Luther, in keeping with Judeo-Christian historiography, adopts a linear rather than a cyclical pattern to history.
4. Rather than despair over the impending world collapse, Luther adopts a “care-less” attitude toward history, since finally it is in the hands of God.
5. Luther shows thoroughness in his work by examining his sources, sometimes accepting them, but frequently becoming critical of them.

6. In all matters, what is said in Scripture outranks whatever is contained in other sources.
7. Luther employs history polemically, as a weapon to attack his opponents.
8. Luther's inaccuracy and misunderstanding of his sources is evident, yet certainly no worse than other historians and in fact better than most.
9. The matter of motive or what is often called historical causation becomes of great importance to him in properly understanding history, which puts Luther on track toward much later developments in historiography.
10. On the other hand, reminding us that Luther is on the borderline between medieval and modern times, he does tend to accept uncritically medieval legends.
11. Though Luther is a historian of the church, he shows a wide, general knowledge of history, including pagan.
12. Luther believes in using history to provide us with lessons of what is good and bad.
13. As Luther restored God to his rightful place in history, so Luther sees the devil at work in history as well, both of which beliefs put Luther at odds with most contemporary, secular historians.
14. Luther believes that often it is necessary for the historian to make an interpretation of his sources, so that history becomes intelligible.
15. The influences of his scholastic training as well as his humanistic training are evident in his history writing, reminding us that Luther lived at the time of the transition from the former to the latter, which was going on at Erfurt just during the time he was a student there. Luther received a good dose of both.
16. Though Luther frustrates the modern reader by his repetitious, digressive, and unsystematic writing, this nevertheless gives us an insight into the flavor of Luther as a historian, which after all is an important part of the make-up of all historians.

With this remark we will end our second lecture.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 34:272-3. Hereafter *Luther's Works* are cited as *LW*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*:275-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*:276-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*:277.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*:278.

<sup>6</sup> See John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953).

<sup>7</sup> *LW* 34:275.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*:275, n. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*:276.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*:275.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*:278.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*:277.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*:278.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*:277.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*:278.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*:276.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*:277-8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*:278.

<sup>21</sup> *LW* 41:7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*:9, 10, 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*:10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*:10,11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*:13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*:16.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*:17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*:20.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*:22-3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*:26.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.:21.

<sup>34</sup> Ernest Schäfer, *Luther als Kirchenhistoriker* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1897), pp. 101, 103. See also John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 109-111.

<sup>35</sup> *LW* 41:27.

<sup>36</sup> *LW* 41:29.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.:69.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.: 73.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.:77.

<sup>40</sup> See above, footnote 22, source two.

<sup>41</sup> *LW* 41:34.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.:41.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.:42.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.:43.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.:44-45.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.:47.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.:52.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.:53.

<sup>52</sup> See above, notes 22-29 .

<sup>53</sup> *LW* 41:59.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.:60.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.:61.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.:62.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.:64.

<sup>58</sup> See above, note 25.

<sup>59</sup> *LW* 41:78.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.:84.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.:79.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.:86.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.:91.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.:86-93.

<sup>65</sup> *LW* 41:93-4.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.:97.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.:98.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.:100.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.:99.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.:104.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.:106-7.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.:107.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.:108.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.:109.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.:118.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.:119.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.:123-142.



## Lecture Three:

# Luther at Work (Continued), and an Appraisal of Him in the Context of Later Historians

This past summer I had a 300-foot well dug, and along with the digger's bill came a chart showing the different strata of soil and rock he dug through, and how wide each stratum was. What I'd like to do in this third lecture is sort of bore down through Luther, chronologically, and uncover his ideas about history throughout his career. Again, I won't touch all his works, but I hope to give you an idea of the progression of his thought. And, to let the cat out of the bag right up-front, we'll discover that his ideas on history were pretty constant all through his career.

In Lecture 2, when we discussed Luther's *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539, we noted Luther's interest in historical chronology. But in his 1516 and 1517 lectures on Galatians, published in 1519, he already showed the same interest. In Galatians 3:18 Paul says the Law was given 430 years after the Promise. Luther is at pains to show that in order to get 430 years one has to count from the time Abraham left Ur to the time of Moses' eightieth year. This leaves only sixty-five years for slavery. But as he says, Paul probably simply took the 430 years from Exodus 12:40. And Stephen, in Acts 7:6, making use of Genesis 15:13, says 400 years. Somewhat frustrated, as scholars since then, Luther says, "Let others concern themselves as to whether this [Luther's] reckoning is correct. I agree with St. Jerome who says: 'This matter has been investigated by many, and I [Jerome] do not know whether the answer has been found.'"<sup>1</sup>

Also, in Lecture 2, we noted among Luther's sources for his *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539 Platina's *Lives of the Popes*. But already in 1519, at the Leipzig debate, Luther was using the same source. (Platina, of course, was arguing that the popes were given their authority by Constantine, while Luther was arguing that the popes usurped their authority in the early middle ages.)<sup>2</sup>

It was also already at the Leipzig Debate that Luther pointed out that neither the ancient fathers such as Augustine and Jerome accepted papal supremacy, nor did the Greek Church. And it was at the Leipzig Debate that Luther already elevated scriptural authority over conciliar authority.<sup>3</sup>

Nor was Luther's Preface to Capella's *History* of 1538 the first time that Luther praised the importance of history. In 1520, in his *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, in the section in which he makes suggestions about improvement in German society (in this particular case, education) he says (the influence of biblical humanism is showing), "In addition to all this there are, of course, the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew languages, as well as the mathematical disciplines, and *history*"(emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

As I mentioned already in the first lecture, one is liable to find references to history scattered throughout almost any of Luther's works. So it is with Luther's *Commentary on the Magnificat* of 1521, originally a devotional tract dedicated to Prince John Frederick (1503-1554). The entire work is a virtual paean to God's work in the world and in history, in humbling the mighty and exalting those of low degree, in distinction from the trend of the Renaissance to set God aside. We've selected a few choice remarks.

Already in the second paragraph Luther writes: "[T]he welfare of many people lies in the power of so mighty a prince, once he is taken out of himself and graciously governed by God. . . . Thus God would instill His fear in the mighty lords, to teach them that they can think nothing without His special inspiration."<sup>5</sup>

Much of what Luther says about God's work in history is set in the context of his *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus* dichotomy:

[God] can make Himself known only through those works of His which He reveals to us, and which we feel and experience within ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

They [the faithless] are unable to love and praise the bare, unfelt goodness that is hidden in God.<sup>7</sup>

In the Scriptures the "arm" of God means God's own power, by which He works without the medium of any creature. This work is done quietly and in secret, and no one becomes aware

of it until all is accomplished; so that this power, or arm, can be known and understood only by faith.<sup>8</sup>

[W]hen God Himself works . . . a thing is destroyed or raised up before one knows it, and no one sees it done. Such works as these He does only among the two divisions of mankind, the godly and the wicked. He lets the godly become powerless and to be brought low, until everyone supposes their end is near, whereas in these very things He is present to them with all His power, yet so hidden and in secret that even those who suffer the oppression do not feel it but only believe. There is the fullness of God's power and His outstretched arm. For where man's strength ends, God's strength begins, provided faith is present and waits on Him. And when the oppression comes to an end, it becomes manifest what great strength was hidden underneath the weakness. Even so, Christ was powerless on the cross; and yet there He performed His mightiest work. . . . On the other hand, God lets the other half of mankind become great and mightily to exalt themselves. He withdraws His power from them and lets them puff themselves up in their own power alone. For where man's strength begins, God's strength ends. When their bubble is fullblown, and everyone supposes them to have won and overcome, and they themselves feel smug in their achievement, then God pricks the bubble, and it is all over.<sup>9</sup>

Many more examples of God hidden and revealed in history can be cited from the *Magnificat*.

A few other things, common to the later Luther, also turn up here in 1521. Luther makes allusions to contemporary events: "This one becomes a Carthusian, that one a Franciscan. . . . Everyone claims to be the greatest and despises the others, as our bragging and blustering Observantines do today."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, "[N]ow the world is captive to a dreadful abuse—the sale and distribution of good works. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

Luther drops in legends as "good illustrations," such as the woman who had a vision of three virgins accosted by a boy who suddenly and mysteriously leaped out from the altar by which the virgins sat. The way the boy treats the virgins indicates whether they are totally self-seeking, partially self-seeking, or free from all self-seeking.<sup>12</sup> Similarly there is the tale of two proud cardinals who are taught humility by an unlearned shepherd.<sup>13</sup>

In this document, too, Luther mentions the proclamation of the Council of Ephesus in 431 that Mary is the Mother of God by virtue of the *communicatio idiomatum*. That was not something of which he first became aware nineteen years later in *On the Councils of the Church*.

Finally, to stress the point over his Renaissance contemporaries, God is indeed active in history:

We see in all histories and in experience that He puts down one kingdom and exalts another, lifts up one principality and casts down another, increases one people and destroys another; as He did with Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, though they thought they would sit in their seats forever.<sup>14</sup>

Above all, “the very greatest of God’s works [is] the Incarnation of the Son of God”<sup>15</sup> for all those whose eyes are opened by faith to see it.

At seminary we were advised not to let our knowledge (such as it was) overwhelm people from the pulpit. (With our higher educated congregations nowadays that’s less likely to happen.) In some sermons preached to the townsfolk of Wittenberg in 1522 Luther feels he has to inject some history, but, in deference to his audience, keep it “history-lite.” For example, when preaching on the use of images in the church, he says by way of background:

A great controversy arose on the subject of images between the Roman emperor and the pope; the emperor held that he had the authority to banish the images, but the pope insisted that they should remain, and both were wrong. Much blood was shed, but the pope emerged as victor and the emperor lost.<sup>16</sup>

There, short and sweet. He’s used his knowledge of history to teach his people, without mentioning the Iconoclastic Controversy, or Emperor Leo III or Pope Gregory II or 718 or 843, or even the hand Charlemagne had in the controversy.

Similarly, when preaching on the Lord’s Supper, Luther drops in the comment that the pope erred by making once-a-year attendance mandatory (“All Christians must go to the sacrament at the holy Eastertide, and he who does not shall not be buried in consecrated

ground”<sup>17</sup>). Nothing is said about Pope Innocent III or the Fourth Lateran Council or 1215, yet Luther uses his knowledge of history to teach what is important.

And so Luther continues to make use of history, in various ways, during the rest of the 1520s. There are few surprises. In 1523, in his plea for patience with the Jews, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, he uses both Scripture and history in a polemical way to convince the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. Using the same sources that he used later in his *On the Councils and the Church*, as well as Daniel 9:24, he remarks:

Now let someone tell me: Where will one find a prince, or Messiah, or king, with whom all this accords so perfectly, as with our Lord Jesus Christ? Scripture and history agree so perfectly with one another that the Jews have nothing they can say to the contrary.<sup>18</sup>

In 1524, in *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, he sounds like he did in his *To the Christian Nobility* of 1520, emphasizing the exemplar or paedagogical value of history:

[I]f children were instructed and trained in schools, or wherever learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses were available to teach the languages, the other arts, and history, they would then hear of the doings and sayings of the entire world, and how things went with various cities, kingdoms, princes, men, and women. Thus, they could in a short time set before themselves as in a mirror the character, life, counsels, and purposes—successful and unsuccessful—of the whole world from the beginning; on the basis of which they could then draw the proper inferences and in the fear of God take their own place in the stream of human events. In addition, they could gain from history the knowledge and understanding of what to seek and what to avoid in this outward life, and be able to advise and direct others accordingly.<sup>19</sup>

Later, spelling out a very rich program in the liberal arts, he adds:

Among the foremost would be the chronicles and histories, in whatever languages they are to be had. For they are a wonderful help in understanding and guiding the course of events, and especially for observing the marvelous works of God.<sup>20</sup>

Many of us will recall the stressing of history in our preparation for studying God's Word.

In 1525, in *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, Luther is already using the *Historia tripartita* by Cassiodorus, just as he did later in 1539 in *On the Councils and the Church*. In this instance history teaches him that the term "collect" has an ancient connection with the mass.<sup>21</sup>

Luther's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, which began as lectures in 1526, and which his students and co-workers turned into a commentary and published in 1532, is a *tour de force* of illustrations from history (also from pagan poets, philosophers, and collections of proverbs). Once again, in contrast to Renaissance humanism, God is definitely involved in history. He writes:

All human works and efforts have a certain and definite time of acting, of beginning, and of ending, beyond human control. Thus this is spoken in opposition to free will. It is not up to us to prescribe the time, the manner, or the effect of the things that are to be done; and so it is obvious that here our strivings and efforts are unreliable. Everything comes and goes at the time that God has appointed.<sup>22</sup>

God is involved in the daily struggle to preach the Gospel:

We today want to be of service to Germany through the Gospel, and we used to hope that everyone would embrace it. But the very people whom we were aiding to be free from the tyranny of the pope are covering us with their excrement, and those whose helpers we thought we would be are treading us underfoot. What are we to do here? Should we not become indignant? Should we not let everything go? No. Let other people envy, despise, and persecute. We, in accordance with our abilities, will stick to our teaching, working, writing, and learning, because this is what God wills.<sup>23</sup>

God is involved in the past and in the present:

Here no one knows what is to take place: whether Antony will live, whether Brutus and Cassius will be victorious. When Julius had once succeeded, he began to think about establishing an empire, but he perished in the very midst of his thinking. Why, then, are we so upset about our ideas, when the things that are to come are never in our power for a single moment? Let us, therefore, be content with the things that are present and commit ourselves into the hand of God, who alone knows and controls both the past and the future.<sup>24</sup>

Luther frequently mixes secular history, even myth, with Bible history. It's all of one piece, as if no distinctions:

Problems and troubles are endless here, as is evident both from all the histories in Holy Scripture and from the stories of all the poets. Consider the labors of Hercules, the monsters whom Ulysses and others had to overcome, the bear, the lion, and the Goliath with whom David had to contend.<sup>25</sup>

Secular history and biblical history are blended in such a way that secular history furnishes an analogy for biblical history:

Lycurgus thought that he had given laws to the Lacedemonians that they would keep until he returned, that is, forever. With this in mind he departed never to return, hoping for the future and supposing that in this way his laws would be perpetuated. But he accomplished nothing. Augustus used to say that he had laid such foundations for the state that he hoped it would stand forever, but those who followed soon overthrew it all. The Roman people longed for the death of Nero, supposing that then the state would be better, but afterwards the state was no better off. Solomon governed his realm in such a way that he hoped it would last forever, but it was divided right after his death. For Rehoboam, who succeeded Solomon, was not content with his father's wise administration of the state; he ruined everything, and his kingdom was cut into two parts.

But this does not happen only in external and political affairs, where such foolishness is more tolerable, since it does damage only to physical matters, but also in religion and in the Word of God. . . . Alexander the Great may serve as an example.

Even after he had conquered all of Asia, his heart was not satisfied. If this is true of outward affairs, why would it be surprising that it is true of the Gospel?<sup>26</sup>

Some of you may have studied the emphasis that Luther places on a person's calling or station (*vocatio, Beruf, Amt*) in life. After citing examples as diverse as Caesar, Catiline, Antony, shoemakers, and pastors, Luther uses Solomon to show the folly and frustration which accompany those stepping outside the place in history which God assigned them.

[T]he history both of the Gentiles and of the Jews teaches us that work undertaken outside one's assigned station cannot accomplish anything, whether it be done by a wise man or a fool, except that the history of the Jews was carried on in the Word of God and teaches us that everything happens by the ordinance of God and that therefore it is safer for us to stick to this. Otherwise, the history of the Gentiles is equally wonderful and great, but it was carried on apart from the Word of God.<sup>27</sup>

Finally from Ecclesiastes (though many more examples could be used), Luther notes that "just the right moment" the *καιρός* or *ῥῶρα* in history when God acts. After citing biblical history (Joseph), and current history (Matthias, king of Hungary) of people whose circumstances quickly changed, he comments:

Such things happen often in human affairs, as Roman history attests perhaps most clearly. Valerian, who was not an evil emperor, was taken captive and made the footstool of the king of Persia, remaining so all the way to his death. But why did this happen to him? Because his appointed time, as set by God, had arrived.<sup>28</sup>

Just as *On the Councils and the Church* (1539) provided Luther with the opportunity to use his knowledge of the history of church councils, so his 1527 *That These Words of Christ, "This Is My Body," etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics* affords him the opportunity to use his knowledge of the ancient fathers in polemics against his foes Oecolampadius and Zwingli. The argumentation is long, and I shall try to summarize as much as I can.



It is well known that all sides at the Reformation, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anabaptist tried to use Augustine on their particular side. Luther grants that Augustine often used the word “sign” when speaking of the Lord’s Supper. But he says:

[A]lthough St. Augustine often says that the bread in the Supper is a sacrament and sign of the body of Christ, Oecolampadius has not yet established thereby that mere bread and not Christ’s body is present, because one can say that Christ’s body is invisibly present under a visible sign, as the same St. Augustine says, “The sacrament is a visible form of an invisible grace.”<sup>29</sup>

Luther then uses several quotes from Augustine to prove Augustine meant “body” by “bread,” not just the sign of the body. He quotes Augustine’s letter to Januarius, in which Augustine talks about fasting before the Lord’s Supper, but at the same time indicates Christ’s true body.

But it pleased the Holy Spirit that in honor of so great a sacrament the Lord’s body should enter the mouth of the Christian before any other food.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly,

Again, on *Psalms* 33, Augustine says, “Christ was carried in his own hands when he gave his body to the disciples and said, ‘This is my body.’ Yes, he carried the same body in his hands.” Is this saying also obscure?<sup>31</sup>

Luther also draws on Tertullian. He grants that Tertullian may have mistranslated Jeremiah 11 [19] (“They said, ‘Let us put wood on his head’”) (NIV: “Let us destroy the tree and its fruit”), but Luther argues that’s not the main concern here. Rather, the important thing is how Tertullian interprets the passage, identifying Christ’s body and bread:

Without doubt the wood is put on his body, for so Christ himself expounded it when he called the bread his body, which body the prophet of old had proclaimed as bread.<sup>32</sup>

Irenaeus, in his fight with the Valentinian heretics, who taught that Christ was not God's Son and that there was no resurrection of the flesh, is also employed by Luther, who summarizes Irenaeus as follows: "Among other things he cites this proof against them: If the body is not to be saved also, why should it be fed with the body and blood of the Lord in the sacrament?"<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, Luther summarizes the beliefs of Hilary against the Arians:

Here, indeed, Hilary says that in the food of the Lord, i. e., in the sacrament, we truly take the Word who became flesh, or as we might say more directly, the enfleshed Word; and for that reason Christ remains in us naturally, or with his nature and substance, not only spiritually as the fanatics dream. And he calls the sacrament "a sacrament of the flesh distributed among us in common."<sup>34</sup>

Luther quotes Hilary and summarizes him several more times, to the same effect.

So Luther also uses Cyprian who perished during the Decian persecutions of about 250:

[W]e see that for Cyprian *communion, eucharist, and peace* are one and the same. He speaks of proffering the sacrament to strengthen those who are about to fight; and he asserts distinctly that they receive the Lord's body and blood in this proffering.<sup>35</sup>

The treatise contains a number of other quotations from Augustine, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Hilary, and Cyprian which Luther summarizes against his opponents.

During 1527 and 1528 Luther wrote a similar treatise against those whom he termed the *Schwärmer*, entitled *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, intended to be his last work on the subject. The objects of his wrath are again Oecolampadius, but especially Zwingli. He includes the interpretations of ancient fathers such as Ambrose and Gregory. He writes:

[A]mbrose . . . says, "If the blood of Christ, as often as it is shed, is shed for sin, then I should properly receive it daily, because I sin daily. . . . Again Gregory: The blood of Christ is poured into the mouth of believers."<sup>36</sup>

But having shown his opponents that he knows the history of the eucharistic controversy as well as they do, Luther finally falls back upon Scripture, what he considers the clear words of Luke and Paul: “This [bread] is my body, this [wine] is my blood.” That is enough.

Luther’s lectures/commentary on Isaiah, also done in 1527 and 1528, presents a few new remarks on the use of history. His opening comments are instructive for the use of history in studying Scripture:

Two things are necessary to explain the prophet. The first is a knowledge of grammar, and this may be regarded as having the greatest weight. The second is more necessary, namely, a knowledge of the historical background, not only as an understanding of the events themselves as expressed in letters and syllables but as at the same time embracing rhetoric and dialectic, so that the figures of speech and the circumstances may be carefully heeded. Therefore, having command of the grammar in the first place, you must quickly move on to the histories, namely, what those kings under whom Isaiah prophesied did; and these matters must be carefully examined and thoroughly studied.<sup>37</sup>

You’ll immediately recognize the grammatical-historical method of biblical interpretation currently employed in conservative circles.

Well familiar with the allegorical method of interpretation employed by many early church fathers, until it was replaced in the twelfth century by more emphasis on the historical sense (here Nicholas of Lyra in the early fourteenth century stands out and is frequently quoted by Luther), Luther warns against the tendency to immediately read the scriptural text allegorically, and ignore the text’s surface historical literalness.

Let us forewarn here concerning allegory that it may be handled wisely in the Spirit. For playing such games with the Sacred Scriptures has the most injurious consequences if the text and its grammar are neglected. From history we must learn well and much, but little from allegory. You use allegory as an embellishment by which the discourse is illustrated but not established. Let history remain honest.<sup>38</sup>

After giving examples of what he means, he adds, “In this way the histories must be treated, and allegories will be profitable. Then make the application to the pope and the bishops.”<sup>39</sup> Similar comments are scattered throughout Isaiah, representing warnings given in other lectures perhaps months apart.

The familiar theme of history as instructive to the life of faith also turns up. For example,

[T]he goal of all histories [is] to teach and to learn faith, fear, and humility and to reprove pride, presumption, and trust in the flesh.<sup>40</sup>

More elaborately he later binds Law and Gospel, in the past and present, to history:

This is the summary of Scripture: It is the work of the Law to humble according to history, externally and internally, physically and spiritually. It is the work of the Gospel to console, externally and internally, physically and spiritually. What our predecessors have experienced according to history externally and physically, this we experience according to our history internally and spiritually.<sup>41</sup>

One more quote from the 1520s will have to suffice, and for this I choose Luther using history as a warning to European kings in his 1529 *On the War Against the Turk*. Sounding like Churchill warning about Hitler, Luther warns against taking the Turks too lightly.

The king of Bohemia is a mighty prince now, but God forbid that he match himself alone against the Turk! Let him have Emperor Charles as his captain and all the emperor’s power behind him. But then, let whoever will not believe this learn from his own experience! I know how powerful the Turk is, unless the historians and geographers—and daily experience, too—lie. I know that they do not lie. . . . [L]et individual kings and princes set upon him—yesterday the king of Hungary, today the king of Poland, and tomorrow the king of Bohemia—until the Turk devours them one after another.<sup>42</sup>

As one enters the 1530s, a new tone enters into Luther’s writings, caused no doubt by frustration and disillusion. This tone

will be heard frequently hereafter. The Reformation of the Church, based on what he considered the obvious, clear meaning of Scripture alone, was not turning out exactly as he had hoped and prayed for. Luther, who always applied Scripture very personally to himself, now does so even more. God's enemies in Scripture become his personal enemies on this earth. More and more, like scriptural writers, he falls back on his faith that God will uphold his people—would uphold Luther himself—and destroy his enemies—and Luther's enemies in particular. It is an interesting reading of history which is applied directly to himself.

In June of 1530, while the Augsburg Confession was being read about 100 miles to the south, Luther was in the Castle of Coburg, commenting on what he himself called “my own beloved psalm,” the 118<sup>th</sup>. Quite likely he is worried about the aftermath of the Confession's reading, the forces that will be unleashed against him and the confessors. On the first page of the psalm he writes:

When emperors and kings, the wise and the learned, and even saints could not aid me, this psalm proved a friend and helped me out of many great troubles. As a result, it is dearer to me than all the wealth, honor, and power of the pope, the Turk, and the emperor. I would be most unwilling to trade this psalm for all of it.<sup>43</sup>

Though the enemies of David—and of the reformers of 1530—do not realize it, God is still in control of history.

Our sword and human wisdom are of no avail, even though some mad princes and lords presumptuously claim that they rule land and people with their power and govern them by their reason. Especially the haughty bigwigs among the nobility and the smart alecks in the cities imagine that they run everything, as though God could not get along without them. But sensible lords and nobles know better. And David, the foremost of all kings and princes, also declares otherwise. Whoever will not believe, let him read history, in Scripture as well as in Roman and pagan literature. There is abundant evidence.<sup>44</sup>

As God gave victory to David, a type of Christ, so God will give victory to Luther, a type of David.

Since God will not suffer His name to be blasphemed, and we still pray and ask that it be hallowed and honored, don't you

believe that this prayer will discharge the gun? And the bullet? Perhaps it will be the Turk or some other sentence or plague of God, bringing death and destruction. The explosion will cause princes, bishops, lords, priests, lackeys, and monks to lie down and scream so that it will re-echo in heaven and resound on earth. They are asking for it. He shot the obstinate Jews with the Romans, the Romans with the Goths and the Wends, the Chaldeans with the Persians, and the Greeks with the Turks. He will also find a bullet for us Germans. to hit us and not miss; for we have pushed things too far and still refuse to quit.<sup>45</sup>

For this victory God's people will give thanks to God. Note that Luther is already zeroing in his wrath on the Jews. This attitude will continue to his dying day, especially in his 1543 *On the Jews and their Lies*.

Here God rejects and discontinues all the sacrifices of the Old Testament, which were images and symbols of these thank offerings and which could be offered by both the pious and the wicked. These thank offerings, however, can be offered by no one except the pious and the righteous, or Christians. This is clear from history, when the Jews raged in the days of the apostles just as do the work-righteous of today, when their works and wisdom are rejected. They refuse to be humble, and they blaspheme instead of thanking. They revile, persecute, and murder, under the impression that their service must be a most acceptable offering to God (John 16:2).<sup>46</sup>

Though it cannot be substantiated, some scholars feel Psalm 118 was the psalm most quoted by Luther, who applied it most personally to himself. To this day, a wall plaque at the Coburg Castle contains Psalm 118:17 in Latin, "*Non moriar, sed vivam, et narrabo opera Domini.*" This was not only David speaking, nor Christ through David, nor Christians of all ages, but Luther himself, as far as he was concerned.

Between 1530 and 1532, in the absence of John Bugenhagen, Luther's pastor, from Wittenberg, Luther preached on the Gospel of John, later turned into a commentary. In John 7, in a section dealing with the way Nicodemus tried to protect Christ, one can't help but feel that Luther is applying history directly to himself and to those who protected him and other evangelicals from their enemies. He writes:

Whenever the princes convene, deliberate wickedly, have evil intentions, and agree to carry out their measures in furious anger, may God send a Nicodemus into their midst to take a hand, thwart all their plans, and throw them into confusion. Thus He will show that He holds their thoughts and even their hearts in His hand.<sup>47</sup>

Immediately Luther thinks of an example of the same kind. When Absalom is advised by Ahithophel to strike quickly against his father David, God thwarts Absalom with the advice of Hushai, which is to pull back. Luther comments:

This is the way of our God. Hushai's advice was downright ridiculous, but through him God defeated the wise and clever counsel of Ahithophel. God is a master at this.<sup>48</sup>

One senses this same personal application of history to himself in Luther's comments in 1532 on God's defeat of his enemies in Psalm 110:1. He says:

[God] has established [his victory] not merely with words but has demonstrated it quite genuinely and powerfully in action and in history. There have always been many enemies who opposed themselves to this King and undertook to lift Him from His throne and to erase His name. But until now they have had to let Him remain seated. Because they would not desist, they themselves were knocked down and overturned; and now they lie beneath the ground. First, the city of Jerusalem, together with the entire Jewish nation and its kingdom and priesthood, has been overturned and destroyed; the Jews have neither country nor city, neither their own governmental authority nor their own officials. Everyone despises and rejects them like dogs. So far as the Jews are concerned, this verse has been literally fulfilled; for everyone tramples on them. They are a footstool for everybody, even for the least on earth.

Later on the Roman Empire opposed itself to Christ with all its power and attempted to eradicate His name. Christians were martyred and murdered without number. But what did the Romans accomplish, except that they all exhausted themselves against Christ and were compelled to put their heads into the earth under His feet? And since they would not stop their raging and persecution of Christ, God struck back at them. Their kingdom, power, and might were torn apart internally through murder and revolt as well as externally by foreign

nations, with the result that it collapsed completely and can never rise again to its former condition. Also, the glorious city of Rome itself has often been destroyed, razed, and finally reduced to dust and ashes. There it still lies, for of ancient Rome little more is left than a few ragged ruins. As a penalty for their contempt and persecution of the Gospel, God has similarly allowed other great kingdoms, but especially the beautiful lands of Greece and Asia Minor, to be miserably and shamefully devastated and destroyed by the Saracens and Turks.<sup>49</sup>

On another note, Luther's acceptance of the "great man" theory of history, makes another appearance:

God has two kinds of people on earth in all walks of life. Some have a special star before God; these He teaches Himself and raises them up as He would have them. They are also the ones who have smooth sailing on earth and so-called good luck and success. Whatever they undertake prospers; and even if all the world were to work against it, it would still be accomplished without hindrance. For God, who puts it into their heart and stimulates their intelligence and courage, also puts it into their hands that it must come to pass and must be carried out; that was the case with Samson, David, Jehoiada, and others. He occasionally provides such men not only among His own people but also among the godless and the heathen; and not only in the ranks of the nobility but also among the middle classes, farmers, and laborers. For instance, in Persia He raised up King Cyrus; in Greece, the nobleman Themistocles and Alexander the Great; among the Romans, Augustus, Vespasian, and others. In Syria, too, He brought all success and prosperity through one man Naaman (2 Kings 5:1). I do not call such people trained or made but rather created; they are princes and lords directed by God.<sup>50</sup>

Returning to his sermons/commentary on John in 1537, Luther continues to read himself and the Reformation back into history. Many of these passages are long, and I beg your indulgence in including them. Luther criticized his own work as "wordy."<sup>51</sup> There seems to be no way to get at the thought of Luther without being wordy as well.

Commenting on Jesus' comforting words to his disciples in John 14:23, that He and the Father will love them, Luther states: (Note the "me," "we," and the "us.")



Here you will object and say: "The actual state of affairs looks far different to me. It seems to me that the world has the upper hand and is successful in its undertakings against the Christians. God is siding, not with me but with them; He is dwelling with them. And they defiantly boast against us: 'Here is where God dwells; here is the church.'" But you must not look at every single phase of the present life as it passes and stands before your eyes now; your view must encompass the entire existence and realm of Christendom. For in days past Christendom was also persecuted; and, as history informs us, 70,000 were murdered on one day. Then it was assumed that Christianity would be exterminated. But what did its enemies accomplish? Christianity survived in spite of them; and the more they applied torture and murder, the more it grew. "For," says Christ, "We are at home here, I and the Father; We will dwell here. You will not prevent this; and if you try, you shall perish in the attempt, as Jerusalem and Rome did."

That is what they are plotting against us now too. They are deliberating and conferring with one another about how to wipe us out completely by hanging or drowning or beheading us or burning us at the stake. But God sits up in heaven and says: "My dear angry lords and junkers, take it easy! Only please let Me keep a little cottage where I may live!" They refuse to believe this and are determined to put an end to us. They will persist in their attempts until they, too, lie in a pile of ashes.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, on John 15:5:

[T]he spiritual and devout hermits of our time, the Carthusians and other monks, and I myself at one time . . . strive with great earnestness for piety; they want to go to heaven. Or look at the heathen. See how well they have governed lands and people, established law and order, maintained peace and discipline, fostered knowledge of many kinds. As a result, the whole world praises and admires their wisdom. Furthermore, we read that some heretics lived a much stricter life and performed greater works than the true Christians. I am thinking of the Cathari and the Encratites. The forty-day fast was also introduced by the heretics, and it is said of the Turks that many among them lead a very ascetic life and perform wonderfully great works: fasting, giving alms, etc. And now all factions cry out against us and our doctrine for not devoting ourselves to this as they do. They say that we do not have the Spirit, because we do not live as they do.<sup>53</sup>

Later, on John 15:13 and 14, after describing the legalistic burdens imposed by the medieval church, Luther writes:

How we used to torment ourselves under the papacy as we ran in all directions and gave and did all to make sure that we were serving God! What infernal torture we found just in private confession, to say nothing at all of everything else! How gladly we would have given large sums of money to rid ourselves of this burden or even to have it lightened! But now that this is past history, no one thanks us for it. We could forget about the ingratitude if this liberty were not abused and if the people were not getting worse than they used to be before.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, from the 1530s, this extremely personal self-application of history, from Luther's 1539 *Against the Antinomians*.

I believe that I alone—not to mention the ancients—have suffered more than twenty blasts and rabbles which the devil has blown up against me. First there was the papacy. Indeed, I believe that the whole world must know with how many storms, bulls, and books the devil raged against me through these men, how wretchedly they tore me to pieces, devoured and destroyed me. At times, I, too, breathed on them a little, but accomplished no more with it than to enrage and incite them all the more to blow and blast me without ceasing to the present day. And then when I have practically stopped fearing such blasts of the devil, he began to blow at me from a different hole by Münster and the revolt, by which he almost succeeded in extinguishing the light. When Christ had nearly stuffed up this hole, he broke a few panes in the window by means of Karlstadt, and rushed and roared so vehemently that I feared he would carry light and wax and wick away. But God again helped his poor candle and kept it from being snuffed out. Then came the Anabaptists, who flung door and windows open as they tried to extinguish the light. They did create a dangerous situation, but they did not achieve their aim.

Several also raged against the old teachers, both the pope and Luther together: for example, Servetus, Campanus, and others like them. I will not mention here the others who did not attack me openly in print, whose venomous and base writings and words I personally had to endure. I only wish to say that since I paid history no heed, I had to learn from my own experience that the church, because of the precious word, indeed, because

of the cheering, blessed light, cannot live in tranquility, but must forever live in expectation of new gales from the devil. That is the way it has been from the beginning, as you read in the *Tripartite Ecclesiastical History* as well as in the books of the holy fathers.<sup>55</sup>

We have, of course, already referred to the *Historia ecclesiastica tripartita* earlier as one of Luther's chief sources for church history.

Though it would be inaccurate to say that after 1539 Luther never applies history directly to himself, this does appear less often. Instead, history is used more in a polemical way. Of the two major works we examined, this is already obvious in his *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539. From thereon polemics becomes dominant in his later writings, such as *Against Hanswurst* in 1541, *On the Jews and their Lies* in 1543, and *The Papacy at Rome, an Invention of the Devil* in 1545.

In *Against Hanswurst*, a reply to a violent attack by the Catholic prince Henry of Braunschweig/Wolfenbüttel on Luther's prince John Frederick, in which Henry referred to John Frederick as Luther's "dear and revered Hanswurst" (literally, "John Sausage," a German comic figure dressed as a clown, with a leather sausage around his neck), Luther turned the term "Hanswurst" against Henry, and replied in an even more violent personal attack.

It was a well-known bit of recent history that Henry, like far too many princes, lived a debauched life. One gets the flavor of Luther's polemics in the following passage:

For you know that everybody realizes how you treat your worthy princess—not only like an utterly mad brute and drunkard, but also like a senseless raving tyrant, who daily and hourly gorges and fills himself up, not with wine, but with the devil, like Judas at the Last Supper [John 13:27]. Out of your whole body, in all you do and are, you simply spew out the devil, with blaspheming, cursing, lying, committing adultery, raving, flaying, murdering, setting fires, etc., so that one cannot find your like in history (as we shall see). Moreover, you cannot carry out your shameful whoredom and adultery except by insulting and dishonoring the divine name, and hiding the wretched whore, like one dead, beneath your sacred worship, mass, and vigils. [A reference to Henry's affair with Eva von Trott.] You have learned that from your comrade at Mainz,

who also has to commit his whoring and adultery in the guise of holy things, though you are probably able to invent such virtue by yourself. [There was a rumor that Cardinal Albrecht of Mainz placed the body of his dead mistress in a casket and said it was the body of St. Margaret. The pious worshiped it as a relic.] Truly, you are well-behaved people, who know how to preach about drunkenness and debauchery.<sup>56</sup>

But the polemic against Henry of Braunschweig/Wolfenbüttel hardly compares in violence with Luther's attack on the Jews of 1543, *On the Jews and their Lies*. When I discuss this with my students, I tell them that it is impossible to excuse Luther in terms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, using current standards of right and wrong. But I also tell them that it is possible to understand Luther if one thinks historically, i. e., puts oneself back into a past time, which a modern historian must do. In this way several reasons for Luther's fury become clear. First of all, Luther was disappointed. In 1523, when he wrote *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, urging patience toward Jews, he was quite sure that if the Jews finally had a chance to hear the pure Gospel, many if not all would become Christians. But after twenty years, very few Jews had. He began to think of them as stiff-necked, just as the Lord, Moses, and Stephen said (Exodus 32:9; Deuteronomy 9:6; Acts 7:51). Then too, Luther was ailing, which tends to make people disagreeable. Besides, Jew-bashing was common among popes, princes, and scholars. It also seems that Luther took offense at the remarks of some Jews he had recently encountered. Finally, he had just read a pamphlet (now unknown) written by an apologist for Judaism. So his wrath boiled over.

For the most part, Luther bases this polemic on biblical history. This comes out especially in the second part of the treatise, through Luther's exegesis of four passages which had been frequently turned against the Jews from the ancient church to Luther's own time: Genesis 49:10 ("The scepter shall not depart from Judah . . . until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples"); 2 Samuel 23:2 ("The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me, his word is upon my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel. . ."); Haggai 2:6-9 ("For thus says the Lord of hosts: once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, so that the consolation of the Gentiles shall

come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The splendor of this latter house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in the place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.”); and Daniel 9:24 (“Seventy weeks of years are decreed concerning your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.”).

To rehearse Luther’s rebuttals of Jewish exegesis of these passages, and to then give Luther’s interpretation, would require copying most of the treatise, which isn’t necessary since I’m sure most of you are familiar with it. I wish only to mention two items. First of all, in his argumentation, Luther relies heavily on the early fourteenth century Franciscan biblical exegete, Nicholas of Lyra, who commented twice on the entire Bible in his *Postilla litteralis* between 1322 and 1331, and his *Postilla moralis* of 1339. Luther also relies on Paul of Burgos, a convert from Judaism to Christianity, who wrote the *Additiones ad Postillam magistri Nicolai de Lira* in 1429. In general, Paul of Burgos agreed with Lyra’s exegesis, though he did find fault here and there. Hence his use of the more polite term *Additiones* rather than, perhaps the abrasive *Contradictiones*. Lyra focused on a literal and historical interpretation rather than the previously heavily favored spiritual and allegorical. However, take it from one who has spent some time studying Lyra’s exegesis, Lyra still frequently gives what for centuries was regarded as a spiritual/allegorical interpretation, except that Lyra insists this interpretation is the true literal/historical interpretation. This is found especially in Lyra’s interpretation of Old Testament prophets, poetry, and wisdom literature, and in Revelation.

Luther was strongly influenced by Lyra’s methodology (for example, Luther insists that the true literal/historical meaning of the Song of Songs is really God informing Solomon, and by extension, all princes, how they should rule their people). Luther, however, advances beyond Lyra, and looks for the prophetic or christological sense throughout Scripture, which he then insists is the true literal/historical sense. All Scripture points toward Christ. And that is how Luther, as a historian, treats the above four Old Testament passages. Needless to say, Jewish interpreters offered Jewish-centered interpretations,

which then in Luther's eyes were nothing but "lies" (hence the "Lies" in the treatise's title).<sup>57</sup> Not only does Luther restore the activity of God to history, which even the Jews did; Luther restored the God who was incarnate in Christ.

The other item I wish to draw attention to is Luther's inclusion of legends from "history books" as he calls them. This has been pointed out earlier. But in these anti-Jewish polemics he seems especially eager to use them, though he softens his remarks with just a touch of critical judgment. For example:

[T]he history books often accuse them of contaminating wells, of kidnapping and piercing children, as for example at Trent, Weissensee, etc. They, of course, deny this. Whether it is true or not, I do know that they do not lack the complete, full, and ready will to do such things either secretly or openly where possible. This you can assuredly expect from them, and you must govern yourself accordingly.<sup>58</sup>

Citing common beliefs of his day, but also calling on the converted Jew Paul of Burgos for support, Luther writes:

Why, their Talmud and their rabbis record that it is no sin for a Jew to kill a Gentile, but it is only a sin for him to kill a brother Israelite. Nor is it a sin for a Jew to break his oath to a Gentile. Likewise, they say that it is rendering God a service to steal or rob from a Goy, as they in fact do through their usury. For since they believe that they are the noble blood and the circumcised saints and we the accursed Goyim, they cannot treat us too harshly or commit sin against us, for they are the lords of the world and we are their servants, yes, their cattle.<sup>59</sup>

Modern historians, basing their work on a lack of credible evidence, dismiss these statements as medieval legends and beliefs.

Luther's polemic against the Jews, as was indicated, was based primarily on biblical history, which Luther unquestioningly took to be accurate. Aside from the fact that his 1545 *Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil* is his most vitriolic polemic against anyone, its chief difference from *On the Jews and their Lies* is that, in addition to biblical history, Luther also uses church history. In general he covers the same ground that he had been covering since at least 1520, only in a much more heated version.

In his introduction he says, “I wanted to cover three things:

first, whether it is true that the pope in Rome is the head of Christendom—above councils, emperor, angels, etc.—as he boasts; second, whether it is true that no one may sentence, judge, or depose him, as he bellows; and third, whether it is true that he has transferred the Roman Empire from the Greeks to us Germans, about which he boasts immeasurably and beats his breast.”<sup>60</sup>

Luther dismisses the first point, “that the pope in Rome is the head of Christendom,” on the basis of church history, using basically the same sources that he used in 1539 in *On the Councils and the Church*. He draws up a long list of church fathers and councils which argue against papal supremacy:

For they [i. e., the Roman bishops] did not begin this loathsome papacy in ignorance or weakness; they knew quite well their predecessors—St. Gregory, Pelagius, Cornelius, Fabian, and many other holy bishops of the Roman church—never practiced such a horror, as declared above. They knew well that St. Cyprian, Augustine, Hilary, Martin, Ambrose, Jerome, Dionysius, and many other holy bishops in all the world had known nothing of the papacy, had not been subject to the Roman church. They knew well that the four great councils—Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon—and many other councils had never acknowledged such a papal horror.<sup>61</sup>

Luther then proceeds to an evangelical interpretation of Matthew 16:17-19 and Matthew 18:18, making the “rock” refer to Christ, a frequent interpretation even among Roman Catholic scholars, not to Peter and his successors,<sup>62</sup> nor to Peter’s confession of faith which is common in our circles.

Luther also uses John 21:15 (“Feed my lambs”) in his polemic based on bible history. Many Roman scholars saw this passage as the basis for the papacy. Again Luther gives an evangelical interpretation, applying the passage to himself and all pastors:

I am a preacher of the church in Wittenberg; now I must take to heart Christ’s command, “Feed my lambs,” for it applies to all the pastors and preachers in the whole world, in general and in particular. But because my Lord Christ did not say to

me specifically “Feed my lambs in Wittenberg,” but just “Feed my lambs,” suppose I set out to make Christ’s sheep in all the world serve me, and make myself lord over them, regardless of the fact that he has many other preachers in other places. What should one do to me? One would have to come running with bonds and chains and say that I had become stark, raving mad. In the same way, although the pope knows, or at least should know, that Christ did not send Peter alone, but twelve apostles and St. Paul into the world as his stewards to pasture his sheep, he nevertheless sets out to apply the words of Christ to St. Peter alone, because Christ did not say specifically, “Feed my lambs in Rome.”<sup>63</sup>

Luther dismisses the second main point in this treatise, “whether it is true that no one may sentence, judge, or depose him”<sup>64</sup> by again using a polemic based on Scripture, and in fact a polemic which he had used at the beginning of his career, in his 1520 *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. On the basis of the simple fact that Christians have been baptized, secular princes can remove the pope, people can interpret Scripture as they wish, and councils are above popes. Luther says sarcastically, “[T]he answer here to this point is briefly: of course no one on earth has the right to judge or condemn the pope—except only everyone who is baptized, or still in possession of human reason, and all God’s creatures.”<sup>65</sup>

In the case of Luther’s third main point, “[W]hether the pope has transferred the Roman Empire from the Greeks to us Germans,”<sup>66</sup> Luther uses church history as his polemical weapon. He reverts all the way to the exposure of the *Donation of Constantine* as a forgery, written in 1440 by Lorenzo Valla, but first published by Erasmus in 1505, after which Luther read it. If, as Valla showed, Constantine never in fact gave all of western Europe to Pope Sylvester I, then

... how could he give what he did not himself have? He himself, in Rome, was not safe from the Lombards, who had at that time ruled in Italy for two hundred years. What a fine present that would be for me, if I, a preacher in Wittenberg, were to give the kingdom of Bohemia or Poland to the Elector of Saxony. And, to give an example from our day, wasn’t it a fine gift when Pope X gave King Francis of France the empire of Constantinople.<sup>67</sup>



It is often said that if Luther were on a modern theological faculty, he'd be considered a professor of Old Testament, since that's where he spent most of his time giving lectures. In June 1535 Luther began a long series of lectures, often interrupted, on the Book of Genesis, finishing the fifty chapters in November 1545, hardly three months before his death. Later, these lectures like many others were published in commentary form by his associates (who quite possibly enhanced them and may even have altered some of his theology<sup>68</sup>).

Though there are echoes in the *Genesis Commentary* of his other writings of this period which we have already mentioned—the reading of himself into history during the 1530s, his philosophy of history in the late 1530s, and his blasts against his enemies in early 1540—still there is a different general tone to his remarks. It's almost as if the self-analyzing yet belligerent old historian puts all this aside, and settles down peacefully with God's Word, to ponder it carefully and take it to heart. Luther is in his true element.

It would be possible, I'm sure, if there were time, to find in the *Genesis Commentary* examples of all the elements of a historian that we enumerated after examining the *Preface to Capella's History*, *On the Councils and the Church*, and the elements noted in Luther's other writings of the 1520s and the 1530s. In retrospect, I should probably have spent as much time on the *Genesis Commentary* as I did on the works I focused on in Lectures Two and Three. Also, in self-criticism, I know I did not sufficiently credit the secular sources that Luther uses, for Luther was almost as conversant with these sources as he was with Scripture, the church councils, and the church fathers.

What I have decided to do is wind down these lectures by focusing on the point I made in Lecture One, that with Luther, God is very much active again in history.

There is ample evidence of this. Commenting on the huge amount of history contained in the relatively small space of Genesis 1-11, in which God is the main actor, Luther states:

Secular histories have nothing like this. Whatever is extraordinary in them has to do entirely with the glory and privilege given to man when he is commanded to have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heaven, etc. (Gen. 1:28); that is, secular histories present nothing but what mankind has achieved by dint of reason and effort. But the

Word of God is a greater gift, just as the Spirit, by whom the hearts of the godly are ruled, is a greater gift than reason. The former are earthly, but the latter are heavenly and divine; and for this reason they deserve our highest praise and admiration.<sup>69</sup>

Commenting on Genesis 12:3 (“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you” NIV), Luther says:

If you desire to reduce to a few words the history of the church from the time of Abraham until today, carefully consider these [words]. You will see the blessing, and you will also see some who curse; but these, in turn, God has cursed so that they utterly perished, while the eternal blessing of the church has remained unshaken. . . . Hence the divine wisdom is truly admirable, that such important matters and the history of all ages, so far as it concerns the church, have been reduced to a few words in this passage.<sup>70</sup>

Commenting in Jacob’s return to Bethel, during which God stopped the Canaanites from harming Jacob and his household, Luther draws a parallel to God’s actions in secular history:

The providence and government of God shines forth also in the histories of the heathen. Hannibal could have gained possession of Rome without any trouble and difficulty after slaying the warlike leaders and armies of the Romans. But he was checked by God, and when the others did not understand this, they cried out: “Hannibal, you know how to conquer, but you do not know how to exploit victory.” But he was not destined to get any further. Charles captured the king of France after he had been defeated in a great battle near the river Ticinus in the year 1525. In the next year he took Rome by storm and his army plundered it, and so he had two very powerful monarchs in his power. Nor did he lack opportunity and strength to carry out an illustrious campaign against the Turkish tyrant in the year 1532 after gathering together a very select army from the farthest limits of the Roman Empire. But he did not make use of this opportunity, and he will seek to obtain it in vain in the future. For it is God who takes away the spirit of princes and is terrible to the kings of the earth. With a single word or nod He shatters the spirits of the great warriors Pyrrhus, Hannibal, etc.<sup>71</sup>

And commenting on the dreams of Joseph in Genesis 37, which angered his brothers enough to sell him into slavery, Luther says:

If we do not have Holy Scripture lighting and governing our actions, this whole life and the universal light of reason, all wisdom, and, in short, all plans are darkness and confusion. Augustus, Alexander, and Caesar are held fast in the thickest darkness; they do not know what they are doing. It is so also with Nebuchadnezzar, Pharaoh, and all other kings and monarchs except that they seem to themselves to be doing things excellently and exercising outstanding wisdom. But they are mere dreams, as is stated in Isaiah: “The multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel . . . shall be like a dream, a vision of the night” (cf. 29:7). So also the achievements of the heroes celebrated in the poems and histories of the heathen, of Hector and Achilles, for example.<sup>72</sup>

Without the light of Holy Scripture to clarify history for us, we really don’t understand it, but like the secularists of the ancient past we live in historical darkness, without even realizing it.

If I were to give a title to these three lectures which sums up Luther’s attitude to history, and my own, I could think of nothing better than the words italicized in the following statement:

But what are the histories of the heathen written by Vergil, Homer, Livy, or others, no matter how much they are decked out with words? They are histories of the Greeks, of Alexander, and of Hannibal. But they lack the magnificence, the glory, and the crown of the Word and promise of God. This diadem they do not have. Therefore they are records of things that have no value rather than actual histories. *For what is history without the Word of God?*<sup>73</sup>

For what is history, if God is not active in it? It is, as Shakespeare said, “A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

The doing of history has undergone many changes since Luther’s time.<sup>74</sup> The polemical history of his later years was continued during the rest of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as each side of the Reformation debate sought to use history to defend its own position. The *Magdeburg Centuries* of the Lutheran Matthias Flacius Illyricus comes to mind, as does the rebuttal of the Catholic Caesar Baronius. But at least God was still a decisive player in history.

Seventeen hundred is a watershed year in human existence, ushering in the Enlightenment or Age of Reason, under the influence of which most humans still live. God as the prime mover in history was out, as human reason was employed to discover the causes and effects of events. Enlightenment and Voltaire are almost synonymous. As a crusader against Christianity, his slogan was *écrasez l'infâme*, and, without much research into the past, he concluded that virtually no data was reliable, therefore history was “a pack of tricks we play on the dead.”

Little known during the eighteenth century, but now recognized as the precursor of modern historiography, Giambattista Vico sought to restore history to a rightful place among men of reason. Because God had created nature, he said, only God could grasp the totality of it. In contrast, because human beings had made history, they possessed the ability to arrive at a correct understanding of it. By no means was this a restoration of God to history, but only an attempt to show that, via reason, truth in history was possible. Careful attention had to be paid to sources—to philology, to bias, to legends, to legal systems, to diplomacy, to economics, to everyday society in distinction from the society of the royal and the wealthy—all concerns of present-day historians such as the *Annales* school in France.

It was the nineteenth century which put history on the intellectual map, and the leading figure here must be the Lutheran Leopold von Ranke. Like Vico, he stressed the need for research in the sources, letting the sources lead the researcher where they would, to praiseworthy deeds or evil, whether one liked the results or not. To those who sought to use history for their own purposes, Ranke gave the perfect retort. Writing in his *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations from 1494-1514* he said:

History has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing our times for the benefit of future years. This essay does not aspire to such high offices; it only wants to show how it had really been—*wie es eigentlich gewesen*.<sup>75</sup>

Ironically enough, the founder of modern historical methodology and historiography has been faulted by present-day secular historians for daring to discern the hand of God at work in history, the very thing for which these lectures have been arguing.

In the twentieth and now on into the twenty-first century, the doing of history has splintered into a multiplicity of fragments, often lumped together under the catchall phrase “social history,” since each fragment deals with some segment of society. Hence, Toynbee and Spengler notwithstanding, there is an absence of patterns in history, be they linear or cyclical, rather a stress on more or less recent causes, events, and results. One finds economic history, progressive history (history used as a tool to “better” society), Marxist-Leninist history, feminist history, psychohistory, black history, gay and lesbian history, to name a few, each one certain to produce a revisionist history. The Reformation has become just one of the many reformations of the sixteenth century, with religion maybe not even as important as the reformations in society, economics, science, and many similar upheavals. Almost all of twentieth-twenty-first century history is united only in one way: God is irrelevant.

So we come now to the assessment of Luther as a historian. When I undertook this study, I suspected for no good reason that Luther would come off quite medieval in his historiography, simply expanding uncritically on his historical predecessors. Or worse yet, since there was such a paucity of material on Luther as a historian, perhaps I would not find enough in his writings to take up even fifteen minutes.

To be sure, Luther does drag with him certain no-no’s for modern historians. In the works we studied he does push the “lessons of history” as preparations for the future, which many academic historians would consider a half-truth at best. He does employ history to hype German nationalism, much as Herder did in the nineteenth century, but now frowned on by globalist historians as politically incorrect. Luther gives a little too much credence to the “great man” as the engine that drives history along, which nowadays, even if changed to the “great person” theory, does not take into account the many other forces causing history to assume the shape it takes. He employs sarcastic, ironic, and wrathful rhetoric which modern historians would eschew in favor of blandness. He believes the world will end soon, whereas we all know it will still last for millions or billions of years(!) He dares to find a pattern in history, whereas modern historians would call this the imposing of one’s worldview on history.

He's much too polemical in this "I'm O.K., you're O.K." age. He does, frankly, make mistakes. Tut-tut. He's too ready to accept medieval legends, instead of delving beneath the surface to that to which the legend points. Not only is God present, but so is the devil. And he obviously needed a good editor.

Yet, in what really counts, Luther is surprisingly modern. He bases his writing solidly on sources, both churchly and secular, which he examines critically and carefully, searching for authenticity and rooting out bias. He accepts all history writing which meets his standards, whatever the source. He knows the importance of historical causation, that thing which moves history along. He tries to interpret history, so that history becomes intelligible for the reader (even the student who doesn't like history?). These are all the basic tools of a modern historian. But the most important respect in which he differs from most modern historians is, as we have now frequently remarked, his belief that there is a personal God, and that, not to get too trite, history is his story.

And the would-be Lutheran Christian historian needs to follow in Luther's footsteps. Such a historian must be on a par with all serious historians, able to do research with the best of them, up on all the latest historical mutations. His/her goal must be nothing less than excellence in this field, or one will never be taken seriously by the community of historians. At the same time, Lutheran Christian historians will look for the God who is often hidden in the events of history, and discernible only by the eyes of faith. The field of history must not be surrendered to the secularists. For to do so would be to lose the God incarnate, the author and finisher of our faith, and the hope of eternal life.

Thank you.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *LW* 27: 267-8.
- <sup>2</sup> *LW* 31: 315.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 322.
- <sup>4</sup> *LW* 44: 202.
- <sup>5</sup> *LW* 21: 297.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 300.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*: 309.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 339.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: 340.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: 304-5.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*: 318.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 310.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*: 320-1.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*: 344.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: 349-50.
- <sup>16</sup> *LW* 51: 81-2.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*: 93.
- <sup>18</sup> *LW* 45: 228.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 368-9.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*: 376.
- <sup>21</sup> *LW* 40: 121.
- <sup>22</sup> *LW* 15: 49.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*: 64.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*: 104.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*: 5.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 42-44.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*: 103.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*: 71.
- <sup>29</sup> *LW* 37: 104.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*: 105.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: 106.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*: 113.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*: 115.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*: 120.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*: 122.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*: 329.

<sup>37</sup> *LW* 16: 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*: 136.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*: 137.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*: 169.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*: 327.

<sup>42</sup> *LW* 46: 203.

<sup>43</sup> *LW* 14: 45.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: 52.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: 74.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*: 95.

<sup>47</sup> *LW* 23: 301.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *LW* 13: 256-7.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*: 182-3.

<sup>51</sup> *LW* 14: xi.

<sup>52</sup> *LW* 24:158-9.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*: 228.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*: 253-4.

<sup>55</sup> *LW* 47: 115-7.

<sup>56</sup> *LW* 41: 239.

<sup>57</sup> For more on Lyra see James George Kiecker, "The Hermeneutical Principles and Exegetical Methods of Nicholas of Lyra, O. F. M. (ca. 1270-1349)," Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 1978. Also by the same author "The *Postilla* of Nicholas of Lyra on the Song of Songs" (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), and "Comparative Hermeneutics: The *Glossa Ordinaria*, Nicholas of Lyra, and Martin Luther on the Song of Songs" in *Ad fontes Luther: Toward the Recovery of the Real Luther: Essays in Honor of Kenneth Hagen's Sixty-fifth Birthday* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), pp. 104-129.

<sup>58</sup> *LW* 47: 217.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*: 226-7.

<sup>60</sup> *LW* 41: 289-90.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*: 308.

<sup>62</sup> See John E. Bigone III, *Faith, Christ, or Peter: Matthew 16:18 in Sixteenth Century Roman Catholic Exegesis* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981).



LSQ 42:1

<sup>63</sup> *LW* 41: 350-1.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*: 289-90.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*: 359.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*: 371.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *LW* 1: ix-xii.

<sup>69</sup> *LW* 2: 236.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*: 265-6.

<sup>71</sup> *LW* 6: 244.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*: 335.

<sup>73</sup> *LW* 5: 353.

<sup>74</sup> For much of the following survey I'm indebted to Gilderhus, *op. cit.*, and Paul K. Conkin and Roland N. Stromberg, *Heritage and Challenge: The History and Theory of History* (Arlington Heights, IL: Forum Press, 1989).

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Gilderhus, p. 45.

## The Search for a Usable Luther

*by Cameron A. MacKenzie*

Historians are often at pains to discover a “usable past,” i.e., an explanation of history that is relevant to their own concerns and the issues of their own society. This is one of the reasons that there seems to be no end of historical writing regarding any particular person or period. Each historian brings to his subject matter the questions of his own times in an effort to provide understanding for the readers of his own generation. And in this respect, church historians—even Confessional Lutherans—are no different from their secular counterparts; so we investigate questions like what was Luther’s doctrine of church and ministry or how did 16th century Lutherans worship, because we are interested in church, ministry, and worship today and think that the answers of the past may be relevant to the issues of our own times.

Especially for Confessional Lutherans, the 16th century remains fertile ground for historical investigation on account of our ongoing commitment to documents written in that period while Luther himself remains *the* theologian for us to study and to interrogate historically, because our Confessions recognize that “By a special grace our merciful God has in these last days brought to light the truth of his Word... through the faithful ministry of that illustrious man of God, Dr. Luther” (FC SD Rule.5). Luther was God’s man, and so we continue to consult him regarding questions of doctrine and practice. In general, therefore, historians are interested in presenting a usable past; but we have a particular interest in discovering a usable Luther.

And Dr. Kiecker has done just that for us regarding Luther as a historian. Although he acknowledges several deficiencies in Luther’s approach to history—at least by contemporary standards—still he can conclude that “Luther is surprisingly modern. He bases his writing solidly on sources, both churchly and secular, which he examines critically and carefully, searching for authenticity and rooting out bias. . . . He knows the importance of historical causation, that thing which moves history along. He tries to interpret history, so that history becomes intelligible for the reader.” Sounds good, and I guess we can

all breathe a sigh of relief, for even here—regarding history—we have a usable Luther.

But do we, really, and is it significant whether we do or don't? These are questions that I think worth exploring in the light of Dr. Kiecker's very fine and stimulating presentation. So, first of all, let's consider the question of significance: Does it matter to us today how Luther approached history? On the one hand, it seems obvious that the answer is no. It doesn't matter. After all, our Confessions commit us only to Luther's doctrine based on the Word of God. We say in the very first sentence of the Solid Declaration of the Formula, "By the special grace and mercy of the Almighty, the teaching concerning the chief articles of our Christian faith... was once more clearly set forth on the basis of the Word of God and purified by Dr. Luther" (FC SD Preface.1). The Confessional documents themselves are presented as "the sum and pattern of the doctrine which Dr. Luther of blessed memory clearly set forth in his writings on the basis of God's Word and conclusively established against the papacy and other sects" (FC SD Rule.9); and Luther's Catechisms are called the "'layman's Bible'" for "they contain everything... which a Christian must know for his salvation" (FC Ep Rule.5).

So it would seem, then, that according to the Lutheran Confessions, it is Luther's doctrine that is important, but not necessarily his thoughts on history any more than say his approach to the natural sciences. For instance, Luther uses heated iron as an example of two substances, fire and iron, existing together in a way similar to the bread and body of our Lord in the eucharist (LW 36:32, 282). Today, we don't think of fire as an element, and so Luther's analogy doesn't work for us. But who cares? Luther's understanding of physics is not important. His doctrine is.

But is that also the case with history? Can we so easily separate what Luther says about the past from his understanding of Christian doctrine? Or is history an integral part of what Luther teaches in connection with God's Word? For one thing, of course, it is necessary to recall that Christianity is a historical religion. Already in the second article of the Apostles' Creed, we confess that our Lord suffered "under Pontius Pilate," a reference to a real person who lived at a particular time and place and through whom God accomplished His redemptive purposes.

The New Testament writings present themselves either as eyewitness accounts, or as accounts once removed from the eyewitnesses, of what God has accomplished once and for all in history by means of a real human being—and much more than a human being—Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, those same documents present our Lord's coming as the culmination of many previous divine interventions in time and space as evidenced by the Old Testament. Thus, the fundamental documents of the Christian religion are filled with history—history that matters in terms of our salvation—and, therefore, to be a Christian means among other things to confess a certain history. Our religion is not a set of disembodied truths or precepts. But instead, we believe that God has acted in time and space for the salvation of people. Take away history, and in a very real way, you take away Christianity.

So Luther's view of the past *is* significant, particularly as it concerns biblical interpretation, and it is more than a little useful in today's context to recognize, as Dr. Kiecker has pointed out, that Luther treats the biblical narratives of Isaiah, David, Abraham, and all the rest as real history. In earlier eras of the church, there had been a tendency to minimize the historical character of the biblical writings, especially the Old Testament, preferring to find in them symbols and pictures of spiritual realities; but Luther was part of a movement to recover the real, flesh and blood figures who populate the pages of holy writ. For him – as for us – biblical history is the record of God at work among people like us to save people like us through faith in the historical Jesus, God's Son and our Savior.

But what about post-biblical history or secular history? Do our faith commitments have any relevance to our study of the persons and events not recorded in Scriptures? And does Luther provide us with any model here? Once again, Dr. Kiecker's insights are helpful, for in his conclusion he urges us to follow Luther in what is very definitely *not* a characteristic of modern historiography, and that is his commitment to all of history—and not just biblical history—as the record of God's activity in time and space, “Lutheran Christian historians will look for the God who is often hidden in the events of history, and discernable only by the eyes of faith. The field of history must not be surrendered to the secularists. For to do so would be to lose the God incarnate, the author and finisher of our faith, and the hope of eternal life.”

Now, I like that and Luther would too, for an affirmation of God at work in history *is* part and parcel of the biblical doctrine of providence, the idea that God is guiding human affairs in the interests of His Church. This means then that there is some sense to what happens, that there is significance to what human beings do. Christians do not believe in a universe governed by randomness or chance but in a God who governs the universe for the sake of His people. God is at work in history; and we can see it—at least with the eyes of faith—as Dr. Kiecker demonstrated in quoting Luther’s introduction to Capella’s history, “Histories are nothing less than a demonstration, recollection, and sign of divine action and judgment, how [God] upholds, rules, obstructs, prospers, punishes, and honors the world and especially men, each according to his just desert, evil or good” (LW 34:275-76).

I do have a question, however, at this point regarding the implications of belief in divine providence for how we read and write history. Are we saying that the Christian historian will, like Luther, make judgments regarding the hand of God in history and that his interpretation of the past will include explicit statements regarding the fulfillment of God’s purposes? It sounds good, but if that is the case, how does one go about actually doing this? If, for example, I am writing a history of American politics in the 1990s, should I describe the election of Bill Clinton over George Bush the elder as God’s punishment for permissive abortion laws in the United States? Sounds reasonable—it had to be a punishment for something! But then, how do I explain the election of the younger Bush in 2000 when the laws have remained the same? As a Christian, I will confess my belief that both results happened in accordance with divine providence but can or should I say anything more as a Christian historian about the contents of the divine plan in history?

Dr. Kiecker is certainly correct that the great turning point in western historiography occurred at the time of the Enlightenment, when the search for historical explanations became, frankly, more scientific. But that was only because the same change had occurred earlier and successfully in the natural sciences when men like Newton—a convinced theist—nonetheless looked for and discovered natural laws in astronomy and physics. Scientists ever since have concentrated on what theologians might call the secondary causes of natural phenomena and not the ultimate cause which in Christian theology remains

God. But just as a Christian can be a natural scientist today without incorporating into his work explicit statements regarding divine causality, so I believe a Christian historian can study the proximate causes of historical events—the social, ideological, economic, personal factors—that explain outcomes without necessarily compromising his faith. To use our 1990s political example again, it is not a denial of divine providence to point out that voters in 1992 were influenced by the state of the economy when making their choice for president. It is simply a recognition that divine providence works in and through the deliberations and choices that men make.

Nor do I think that Dr. Kiecker is saying that historical writing of this sort involves a denial of divine providence. But my question remains, how does one employ a providential reading of history in the manner of Martin Luther in a post-Enlightenment world?

But providence is not Luther's only point regarding history; and our search for a usable Luther is not complete unless we also consider how he actually interpreted post-biblical history in connection with the Scriptures. In 1536, Luther explained his thinking in a preface to *The Lives of the Popes*, written by one of his English followers, Robert Barnes, in which he commented on the value of history, "Though I was not at first historically well informed, I attacked the papacy on the basis of Holy Scripture. Now I rejoice heartily to see that others have attacked it from another source, that is, from history. I feel that I have triumphed in my point of view as I note how clearly history agrees with Scripture. What I have learned and taught from Paul and Daniel, namely, that the Pope is Antichrist, that history proclaims, pointing to and indicating the very man himself."<sup>1</sup> For Luther, then, history is an arena that vindicates the Bible. In particular, what Luther believed, is that in certain critical points, God has revealed in the Scriptures what was going to happen in post-biblical times, especially, the manifestation of anti-Christ. But this is not just a matter of showing how the pope fits the descriptions of anti-Christ in certain passages like those of 2 Thessalonians. No, it is also involves reading history as the fulfillment of the visionary literature that we find in Revelation and Daniel.

In his September Bible of 1522, Luther had dismissed the book of Revelation as non-apostolic, "The apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear and plain words ... For it befits the apostolic office to speak clearly of Christ and his deeds, without images

and visions... I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it” (LW 35:398); but by 1530, Luther had changed his mind and was ready to suggest that the “first and surest step toward finding its interpretation is to take from history the events and disasters that have come upon Christendom till now, and hold them up alongside of these images [from Revelation], and so compare them very carefully” (LW 35:401). Although Luther did not insist on this approach from others, he himself employed it and proceeded to identify the figures of Revelation with persons in church history. So, for example, the four angels of tribulation in Chapters 7 and 8 represent Tatian, Marcion, Origen, and Novatus from the early church, and the two beasts of chapter 13 represent the Roman Empire and the papacy—the beast with two horns the papacy on account of papal claims to temporal power as well as spiritual (LW 35:402-03, 406).

And there’s more, but you get the idea, for Luther viewed history as more than the record of God’s providence. It was also the record of fulfilled prophecies – milestones along the way from biblical times to the last day. Obviously, there is nothing wrong here – but if by Luther’s day history had exhausted Revelation’s prophesies, then what can we say about the centuries since? Did we reach the end of history in the 1500s?

More problematical and clearly less biblical (in the strict sense of the term) than his identification of prophecies fulfilled is Luther’s scheme of world history, his *Supputatio Mundi*, first published in 1541. Following many others, Luther divides human history into six thousand-year periods,<sup>2</sup> each of them dominated by a particularly prominent world ruler, e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, and Caesar Augustus. As James Barr has pointed out, this work clearly reveals that in Luther’s thinking, the period of time since the days of Christ was simply a downward path to Judgment and that he, Luther, was living in the sixth and last millennium, the ruler (or “governor”) of which was no human figure at all but the Devil himself. Once again, the papacy looms large in Luther’s thinking, first making its appearance in the seventh century when the emperor recognized the primacy of the pope. But around the year 1000, Luther notes, Satan is actually loosed upon the world and the bishop of Rome becomes Antichrist with the power of the sword. Therefore, Luther calls Gregory VII “the mask of the Devil (*Larva Diaboli*)” and a “monster of monsters who first deserves to be called the man of sin and son of

perdition.” Not surprisingly, therefore, in his last note in this work, written in 1540, Luther concludes that the end of the world is to be expected;<sup>3</sup> and elsewhere, in a “table-talk” item also from 1540, Luther says that he does not expect the pope to complete his thousand years of rule (#5300, LW 54:407).

In Luther’s reading of history, therefore, time was following a divinely determined pathway from the days of Christ and the apostles to the last times, which were his own times. Luther’s history is marked especially by the progressive revelation of anti-Christ; and the trajectory that it follows is all downhill.

Significantly, for the most part, Luther avoided an obvious corollary to his conviction regarding the end times and that is that the earlier centuries were a kind of golden era in the history of the church, as if to say, that the early church was closer not only in time but also in character to the church of the apostles. As Dr. Kiecker has pointed out, Luther was no romantic—or should we say, eastern Orthodox—regarding the fathers and the councils. He knew that they had contradicted each other and were sometimes wrong.

Catholics and Calvinists as well as Lutherans were hastening to adduce the evidence of the early church in support of their respective positions in the 16th century. But for Luther, it was the Scriptures that determined doctrine, not church history.

Nevertheless, Luther’s reading of history in the light of the Scriptures is difficult for us to use today, because we have 500 more years of it to explain—not only the Enlightenment, but the American Revolution; not only Leo X but John Paul II. And in terms of the church, the 16th century that produced the likes of Luther, Melanchthon and the Lutheran Confessions looks preferable in many ways to an era dominated by Rudolf Bultmann or John Spong and in which Lutherans are subscribing to the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” Like the doctrine of divine providence, then, Christian eschatology remains a part of our faith commitment (“from thence He will come again to judge the living and the dead”), but I do not see how we use it very well in understanding or writing history. For Luther, it was obvious; for us, far less so.

In short, to find a usable Luther when it comes to history remains a challenge. Dr. Kiecker has done a splendid job in highlighting aspects of Luther’s thought that we often overlook, particularly Luther’s convictions regarding God’s work of mercy and judgment in



the story of mankind—convictions that Luther substantiated by careful, if not perfect, references to real history read in the light of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, on account of his ready resort to divine providence as well as to imminent eschatology to explain history, I find Luther much more usable as an exegete of the Scriptures than as an interpreter of the past.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Martin, Luther, Preface to Robert Barnes, *Vitae Romanorum pontificium*“ (1536) as quoted in Neelak S. Tjernagel, *Henry VIII and the Lutherans* (St. Louis: CPH, 1965), 148. For original, see WA 50: 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> See John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 108f., for a discussion of Luther's periodization of history.

<sup>3</sup> *Supputatio annorum mundi*, WA 53:1-184, especially pp. 142, 153, 154, and 156. For these and other observations, see James Barr, “Luther and Biblical Chronology,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 72 (1990): 51-67.

# Final Reaction

## 2001 Reformation Lectures

by Mark O. Harstad

Thank you, Dr. Kiecker, for doing for me, these last two days, what a good teacher ought to do. You forced me to think hard about important things, things that relate both to the kingdom of this world where we function under the light of nature and reason, and things that pertain to the kingdom of God where we function under the light of grace and faith. And, as we were powerfully reminded yesterday in the Reformation Vesper Service, all the things that we puzzle about here will finally be resolved under the light of glory, where the truth that was once fractured and divided by the Fall will once again be brought into unity and perfect clarity.

For my closing comments I intend to do the following: First I propose a definition of History (which a questioner called for yesterday), and then I want to do a little reflection about the nature of the truth which historical study produces, and the issue of finding God in or through historical study.

An exercise that I like to do with college students at the beginning of a semester is to assign them to come up with a definition of History as an academic discipline. We do this for the purpose of clarifying how history deals with the world as to methodology and epistemology, and also to clarify the uniqueness and place of history among the academic disciplines. After some discussion students usually arrive at all the essential components. The following paragraph pulls together most of the essentials.

History is the rigorous and systematic inquiry into human experience of the past, based primarily on a critical examination of the written records which human beings have left. The purpose is to make sense out of what those who have gone before us have thought and done, so that we can make better sense of our own experience. Historical study produces narratives which set forth clarifications of the various aspects of human endeavor: the social, the political, the economic, the cultural, scientific, artistic, spiritual, etc.

Is history a science? No and yes, but mostly no. Yes, in a loose sense of the word science, in the sense that it pursues its truth with intellectual rigor and method. But no, because by its very nature it deals with things that are not measurable and are not repeatable. Therefore, the laboratory of the historian is, as one scholar recently put it, a “make-shift laboratory”, one which resembles a genuine science laboratory in some ways, but which can never really be a true laboratory where things can be precisely quantified, and where phenomena can be scrutinized through repeated experimentation.

Dr. Kiecker has demonstrated ably that Luther deeply appreciated the study of history as he showed in his preface to his work of Galeatius Capella, and that Luther practiced that work himself with the rigor and methods of modern historians as he showed in his piece *On the Councils*. But Luther also accepted certain assumptions and methods which would not be held in high regard by the modern historian.

The study of history, like the study of anything else that pertains to this world, connects with the First Article of the Creed: God has given us our eyes, ears, and all our members, our reason and all our senses. The application of these gifts of God to the study of history is a good and noble vocation which I hope many bright young minds will pursue. The study of history plays a very important role in the general preservation of culture and civil society, and the preservation of truth and right in both state and church, against tyranny, the abuse of power and the manipulation of truth for false ends.

But will we find a saving knowledge of God by putting into practice the canons of modern historical inquiry? Or will we find certain knowledge of the will of God for us by historical inquiry? Certainly not, because here we are dealing with the *Deus Absconditus*, the God who hides himself in this fallen creation. The light of nature and reason may give us an occasional fleeting glimpse of a powerful supreme being, but it can never show us the God of our salvation.

But when the light of grace from the divine Word is combined with faith, then we see and know the saving will of God toward us expressed in the giving of His Son. In the Gospel a gracious God pulls back the veil which has hidden him since the Fall into sin, and shows us how we are reconciled to him and how we have the hope of resurrection to eternal life.

As long as we are in this world we will have to live with this paradox of the God who is at one and the same time hidden to our physical eye and the eye of reason, whose actions puzzle us and leave us asking, “Why?” and “How long, O Lord?” and who is also revealed to us in the reassuring words, “In the world you will have trouble, but I have overcome the world. Things are not what they appear to be.”

Can we see this God in history? Our answer again is a yes and no answer. Our essayist said: “Without the light of Holy Scripture to clarify history for us, we really don’t understand it” (Lecture 3). But with that light we can begin to see in hazy outline what we will see with perfect clarity under the light of glory.

The secular study of history today seems to reside somewhere on a spectrum between the misplaced confidence and precision of a discredited logical positivism, with its reliance on rational observation, on the one end, and the skepticism or even cynicism of postmodernism, with its rejection of universal, rational, scientific explanations, on the other end. We don’t have to be driven to either extreme. On the issue of finding God in history, we can just acknowledge that now we see through a glass darkly, but one day we will see face to face with perfect clarity.

Was Dr. Luther a historian? Not in the strict sense of the word. But he was an individual who could ably use the work of historians for his purposes as a theologian, and do that work himself when he had to. If Luther was not a historian, was he an exegete? A systematician? A practical theologian? The amazing thing about Luther is how he could function in all the major branches of theological study. There is a powerful lesson in this. The study of theology is a unified whole. It presents to us at different times its various facets, exegetical, systematic, historical, and practical, but these are not separate things. We can separate them out for academic purposes, but their essential unity is most important. Dr. Luther stands before us as an exemplary practitioner of the theologian’s craft. When the historian’s craft was called for in his work, he used the work of others and practiced it himself, though this was not his primary field of interest or expertise.

# Book Review:

## Documents From the History of Lutheranism 1517-1750

by Gaylin R. Schmeling

Eric Lund, editor, *Documents From the History of Lutheranism 1517-1750*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. 330 pages.

Order from our Bethany College Bookstore at  
1-800-944-1722. Price: \$30.00

This book is an excellent resource for students of the Reformation. It is an anthology of source materials from the Reformation period, many of which are not easily accessible in the English language. Documents from the Reformation, Lutheran Orthodoxy, and Lutheran Pietism are included.

The book contains source material from Luther's life and the Reformation proper. Information is provided concerning each of the controversies that led to the composition of the Formula of Concord. Writings of Flacius, Mörlin, Osiander, Amsdorf, Heshus, Gallus, and others are presented. Among the formulators of the Formula of Concord Chemnitz and Andreae received special mention. According to Lund, the formulators did not belong to either the Gnesio-Lutheran party or the Philippists.

Through patient negotiating, the mediating party managed to check the tendency of the opposing factions to drive each other into increasingly extreme positions. They were also successful in moving the churches toward a new consensus that was articulated in the most elaborate of the traditional Lutheran confessional documents, the Formula of Concord. (p. 181)

At the same time he maintains that they were more favorable to the theology of the Gnesio-Lutherans than the Philippists. (p. 186)

The portion of the book describing Lutheran Orthodoxy and Lutheran Pietism is extremely valuable because there are so few primary sources in English from this period. Here there are selections from the systematic writings of Gerhard, Quenstedt, Hunnius, Hollaz, and others. There is also a summary of the works of the leaders of Pietism, including Spener, Francke, and Bengel.

An especially interesting section of the book refers to the seventeenth century devotional literature and hymnody. Here one will find writings by Arndt, Gerhard, Scriver, and Müller. It is interesting that little is said about Martin Moller and Valerius Herberger, both of whom were important Lutheran devotional writers. Herberger (1562-1627) was a pastor at Fraustadt in Posen where he produced his famous *Herzpostille*. Moller (1547-1606) was a pastor at Goerlitz in the eastern part of Germany. He was the author of the well-known *Praxis Evangelica*, a practical and popular exposition of the pericopal texts for the church year, a work which has endeared him to generations.

This book is a valuable resource for the study of the Reformation, especially for those who do not have the ability to use the original languages of the writings of the Reformation and Post-Reformation era. This anthology gives insights that enrich one's understanding of confessional Lutheranism and helps fill the gaps in many present day histories of the Lutheran Church.

## Book Review:

# The Life of John Gerhard

by Gaylin R. Schmeling

Erdmann Rudolph Fischer, *The Life of John Gerhard (Vita Johannis Gerhardi)*. Translated by Richard J. Dinda and Elmer M. Hohle. Malone, Texas: Repristination Press, 2001. 458 pages.

Order from our Bethany College Bookstore at  
1-800-944-1722. Price: \$30.00

Repristination Press has provided an invaluable service for confessional Lutheranism in the publication of this exhaustive biography of John Gerhard. The author of the biography is Erdmann Rudolph Fischer (1687-1776). He was general superintendent in Coburg where Gerhard spent a portion of his ministry. Written in 1723, Fischer's *Vita Johannis Gerhardi* still stands as one of the finest histories of the life of Gerhard.

John Gerhard (1582-1637) was one of the important seventeenth century theologians. In fact he was the greatest of the dogmaticians. It is said that Gerhard was third (Luther, Chemnitz, and Gerhard) in the series of Lutheran theologians and after him there was no fourth. If one were to speak of a fourth, the position would be assigned either to the Prussian theologian, Abraham Calov, or to his nephew, John Quenstedt. Even in his lifetime he was considered to be one of the three greats of Lutheranism. Michael Walther wrote in a letter dated 1635 to Gerhard's successor, Salomon Glassius:

That heavenly David, Christ Jesus, has from the beginning of the time of a very necessary Reformation, seen and nourished more theologians of this sort in the orthodox Church, truly courageous and very learned. Three of them, however, have without any doubt taken first place ahead of all the rest. There is no one who can reach easily their singular gifts and activities, namely, our countrymen [*Megaländer*] Luther, Chemnitz and Gerhard. (pp. 98-99)



This biography indicates that Gerhard was a theologian with a true pastor's heart. He meticulously carried out each detail of his responsibilities always concerned about the souls in his care. In his multi-volume systematic theology, *Loci Theologici*, Gerhard without a doubt shows himself to be the greatest theologian of the time. Yet his concern was not only with sophisticated theological analysis for the highly educated. In his devotional literature (*Erbauungsliteratur*) he provides practical spiritual guidance for all believers. Here he offers spiritual nourishment for the faith-life of the believer that touches the heart with the Gospel of Christ's forgiveness. This literature was intended to strengthen and edify ordinary believers, encouraging repentance and spiritual renewal. His two most well known devotional writings are: *Sacred Meditations (Meditationes Sacrae)* and *The School of Godliness (Schola Pietatis)*.

Chapter 19 is a very important portion of this book. It gives an outline and summary of Gerhard's major works. For instance in the section concerning the *Loci Theologici* a summary of each of the nine volumes is given. (pp. 318-320) His writings are divided on the basis of language. First his books published in Latin are presented and then those in German. This is a valuable tool for anyone interested in the works of Gerhard. In a concise form one has a digest and general overview of his major works.

Most people today are very unfamiliar with Lutheranism in the seventeenth century. This book provides a taste and flavor of Lutheran Germany of the time. Places such as Jena and its university come alive for the reader. Individuals who are usually mentioned only in dogmatics notes are daily acquaintances of Gerhard. The reader meets John Arndt, Balthazar Mentzer, and Nicolaus Hunnius. One is introduced to Johann Major and Johann Himmel, who together with Gerhard formed the so-called Johannine Triad of Lutheran orthodoxy at Jena. (p. 131) Included are also Dilherr, Dannhauer, Balduin and many more. The origins of the *Weimar Bible* are explained, to which Gerhard contributed at the request of Ernest the Pious of Saxony. It became the Lutheran study Bible of the time. (pp. 358-360)

During the latter part of Gerhard's life the Thirty Years' War was raging around him. This biography pictures the calamity and misfortune faced by the Lutheran church in Germany during this time.

Gerhard lost valuable property and other possessions through the continual struggle that surrounded him. At times his life was endangered. On the one hand imperial soldiers devastated the land only to be followed by the Swedish forces. (141-148) This is a first-hand description of life during the Thirty Years' War.

As his end drew near, Gerhard's piety was as evident as it had been throughout his life.

He then bade his colleagues farewell, and on the same day he confessed his sins before God and his pastor, Master Adrian Beyer, archdeacon of Jena. He also took care to equip himself with his final very sacred viaticum. In the burning godliness of his heart he feasted upon the body and blood of His Savior, and with a loud voice immediately began to sing the eucharistic hymn which our blessed Luther composed (or rather corrected) for the use of communicants: "Let us praise and bless Thee, God, etc." (p. 289)

He fell asleep in the Lord assured of the resurrection on August 17, 1637, two months before his fifty-fifth birthday.

The age of Lutheran Orthodoxy is a neglected period of church history in America. This is especially true of Gerhard and the other seventeenth century dogmaticians. Still this period is vitally important in the study of Lutheran dogmatics. Think of all the dogmaticians mentioned in Hoenecke's and Pieper's dogmatics. The publication of this biography in English is a significant contribution to the study of Lutheran orthodoxy which has exerted a tremendous influence on Lutheranism down to the present day.



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