

# Luther's Cause

By Leif Grane

To open a discussion about Luther's cause at a congress for Luther research is not an easy matter. When almost everybody is present who in our time has made an attempt to understand and interpret Luther, it seems like offering bread to the baker's children. On the other hand, even in a gathering of Luther and Reformation scholars is it not a matter of course that everybody has felt it his task to reflect on the question: what was it all about for Luther? What was on his mind? How did he interpret his own intentions? What did he, above all, want to say? Questions of this kind might be more interesting for some of us than they are for others, but it is not likely that anybody who claims an interest in the Reformation of some kind should consider them irrelevant for the study of Luther. We are an assembly with very varied convictions and ideas, not only about the Reformation, but also about the task of the historian. We have different ideas not only about history as a way of human knowledge, but also about methodology. The emphasis which we are ready to give the topic in question will depend on these ideas. In order to come to the point, however, it will be necessary to desist from any attempt to cover all kinds of departures and admit at once that this contribution to the discussion has been made with the conviction of the extreme importance of such questions, not only in a theological context, but also for any historical account of Luther's life and work worth considering.

The impossibility of a scholarly Luther study without a clear conception of his fundamental theological teaching is confirmed in the »Thesen über Martin Luther«, published by a group of historians in the German Democratic Republic, under the auspices of the Akademie der Wissenschaften. This interesting document, to be considered as something like the official statement along the lines of the GDR and its ruling theory, Marxism-Leninism, leaves no doubt about the necessity of a diligent study of Luther's theology. In the second thesis we find it stated that Luther turned against the trade of indulgences »aus theologischen Gründen«. In his ninety-five theses, we are told, »Luther verwarf



den gesellschaftlichen und politischen Herrschaftsanspruch der Kirche und verwies auf die Predigt des Evangeliums als auf ihre eigentliche Aufgabe«. He rejected the papal and sacerdotal domination of the conscience, wanted to liberate faith from clerical guardianship and to tie it to the word of God in the Bible alone whereas the Christian in all other matters should be submitted to the »natural« reason and the secular authorities. It is further said that Luther by this »schuf' . . . theologische Grundlagen für die Herausbildung einer reformatorischen Ideologie«.

It is not the intention to analyse and discuss these utterances here, only to make clear that the historians belonging to the group behind the »Thesen über Martin Luther« incontestably emphasize the importance of Luther's theology. In order to come to the social effects of the Reformation which above all interest them they confirm the necessity of a precise knowledge of Luther's theology. These statements are remarkable, because they show clearly that Marxist historiography has a common ground not only with western scholars of social history in the Reformation period, but also with theological scholars of Luther's work. This does not mean, of course, that any agreement along broader lines is within sight, but it does mean that the rather uninteresting exchange of statements can be substituted by a real debate on more or less equal terms. With no offence intended – on the contrary – one could be tempted to compare with the later development in the relationship between Roman-Catholic and evangelical Luther scholars.

One way to treat our topic would be to give a systematic account of whatever one might find to be the center of Luther's work. It has been done several times by many different scholars, particularly in connection with one or another Luther or Reformation anniversary. It could, of course, be done again, and I welcome the prospect of such an attempt by Martin Seils. It might be the more noble way, but hardly the only one. Another way would be to see the different stages in Luther's public appearance as expositions of a cause, not at once summarized in a single concept, but seen from different angles and maybe at last expressed in some sort of a conclusion. Such a path will be followed here.

1. Luther's first public activity was the antischolastic campaign.

The fascinating insight in the genesis of Luther's theology which we can obtain through the study of his early, but not published lectures, can sometimes almost make us forget that his contemporaries had no opportunity to get all this



information. It must be reasonable to think it to be of some significance what Luther aimed at when he first left the lectureroom with the intention to influence his fellow men. Until 1516 his aims were bound to the immediate duties in the auditorium, in the monastery and in the pulpit. Since 1515 his most important task had been the interpretation of the Letter to the Romans. He did not have any »Lutheran« doctrine of justification or the like, and still less did he dream of taking any specific part in the reform of the Church. In his struggle to understand the biblical text he was amazed to discover how remote several traditional theological opinions were from the teaching of St. Paul and of St. Augustine, his most truthful interpreter. Accordingly, Luther came forward, not as a reformer of the Church, but as a reformer of theology, using the means at his immediate disposal: the disputation.

2. Luther's antischolastic attitude was of another kind than similar attitudes among his contemporaries. This is testified by two things: a) it was to him a matter of life and death, and, therefore, b) he had to take action.

The interesting thing about Luther's first attempt to fight scholasticism outside the classroom, the theses on human will by Bartholomäus Bernhardi of September 1516, is not their rather clumsy adherence to Luther's exegesis of the Romans, considered as elements of thought. It is the disputation as action before the university, as a result of the combination of Luther's exegesis and the consequence of it as a compulsion to do something about the theological teaching at the university. Whether Luther's ideas on this matter were more or less original than those put forward by others at the same time or maybe even before, is not in itself very important. The question is: did such ideas have consequences, did they bring their keepers to act upon them? In Luther's case we know the answer, and this action was not an isolated event. From now on he tried very hard to intensify his fight against scholastic theology. Even if this contest was a scholarly one, the matter in question was far more to Luther. It was a fight *pro re theologica et salute fratrum*<sup>1</sup> and, therefore, a matter of life and death. His vocation as a friar made it impossible for him just to be a scholar or a man of culture. It could be that we are often too interested in the »Klosterkampf« to realize the general significance of Luther's calling for his whole attitude as a theologian.

1 WA Br I, 71, 42 (27).



3. The ninety-five theses of October 31, 1517, were in Luther's eyes not intended to lead away from the general antischolastic campaign.

From Luther's point of view the famous theses on indulgences brought about nothing new compared with the campaign already started, but he was here offered an opportunity to discuss a current question closely connected with this campaign. He was wrong in so far as the question of indulgences led on to far more dangerous issues, but for the time being he upheld this understanding of the matter. The following facts confirm it: a) The »Heidelberg disputation« is a theological programme, far more along the lines of the disputation against scholastic theology than in consequence of the questions raised by the new contest on penance, confession and indulgences. b) The explanation of the ninety-five theses is throughout a scholarly book in which Luther is above all concerned with the question of theological proof, thus defending his own right as a doctor of Holy Scripture. c) During the contest and while the trial against him was already versing Luther never lessened his efforts in working for the reform of the university whereas we find no trace in him of any intention to influence the practical course of church administration. d) From the beginning of the conflict, one of the main apprehensions of Luther was the effect it might have on the reputation of the Wittenberg University.

4. The chain of events from the disputation in 1516 to the dispute with Johann Eck in Leipzig seems to leave no room for a »reformatory discovery« of a decisive character during this period.

The picture of Luther as the biblical and antischolastic theologian is still valid beyond the last possible moment of the so-called reformatory discovery, namely the autumn of 1518. For those who are in favour of an early discovery no difficulties are involved, because they will be able to see Luther's campaign as a natural sequel. Those who prefer a late date, in most cases some time in 1518, must interpret Luther's early lectures somehow as »prereformatory«. The problem is that no description of the contents of the discovery seems to change the appearance of any individual link in the unbreakable chain of events, actions and writings from the »Lecture on the Romans« to the meeting with cardinal Thomas Cajetan in October 1518 and further on to the dispute with Eck in June 1519. If the discovery, somewhere on the way, is decisive, it would be reasonable to assume that it contributed considerably to the explanation of the course



of Luther's attitudes. It is, however, not easy to see in what way this should be the case.

It is not the intention by these remarks to deny that Luther made discoveries. It is certainly no small merit to have emphasized the significance of Luther's intensive analysis of the sacraments as Ernst Bizer and a number of scholars have done in various forms. The recognition of this achievement is possible without taking directly part in the discovery discussion, which is above all concerned with the contents of the discovery: where do we find the real »reformatory« theology? That is not the crucial point here where we are concerned with the logical – and real – connection between Luther's actions and the events they provoke – seen as an unbroken chain. The disagreement is a question of approach: is it the essential thing to emphasize a specific statement in theological terms, or is it more important to follow the coherence of Luther's actions in the context of events? This is not really an alternative, of course, and it is still possible to learn from each other.

5. Luther's understanding of his own responsibility as a theologian gave him no choice when the conflict was extended to the question of ecclesiastical authority.

Nobody will probably contest the importance of the meeting with Cajetan and of the dispute in Leipzig as decisive turning-points in Luther's life and in the history of what came to be the Reformation. The first of these events did not change Luther's understanding of his own task as a theologian, but it altered his outlook. From now on he was beginning to understand that he might be in conflict, not only with an (in his eyes) inferior, erratic theology, but also with the highest church authorities. Still, he did not have any programme of church reform. In the winter of 1518–1519 he studied Canon law and church history, not in order to shake the Roman Church and eventually bring it to fall, but in order to have his scholarly arguments ready for the dispute with Eck about ecclesiastical authority as a question of truth. A typical instance of Luther's view of his own situation in this period we find in his letter to the elector Friedrich of Saxony from January 1519, after he had seen the papal decretal on indulgences of November 9, 1518. Luther discusses the possibility of submission, but rejects the idea with reference to the new conditions of theology »in our times«: Scripture and the Fathers have been brought forward, and it is now asked in the whole world, not what is said, but why something is said. On these



conditions, Luther maintains, it would be utterly unbelievable, if he should recant on account of »a mere word« by the Pope.<sup>2</sup> In other words: in questions of truth the responsibility of the doctorate is superior to the obligations towards ecclesiastical authorities. The famous answer in Worms must be understood along the same lines and so must Luther's reaction in Leipzig when Eck forced him to deny the infallibility of the general councils.

6. The extension of the conflict to the denial of the traditional concept of church authority implied the necessity to inform the people.

When Luther, if not welcomed, then at least felt obliged to be led from his selfimposed conflict with scholastic theology into the contest on church authority, this was to him an unavoidable consequence. His opponents had demonstrated the necessity to go this way, if he wanted to uphold convictions from which he was no longer able to retreat. Considering the way he did go we have to realize that he was on the move before he had a clear conception of the right understanding of authority in the church. He had turned against the false theology (as he saw it) without questioning the papal authority. When he then turned against the Pope it was to him not a new enterprise, but just truthfulness to the cause which he had already taken up with his theology of the cross. The papal and councilary authority was used against him in such a way that he had to see it as contrary to the truth. Speculations as to what might have occurred if the Curia had been less incompetent or the meeting with Cajetan more successful will not help us to understand Luther's position. As it was he had to realize what he had hitherto been unaware of: the incompatibility of his own theology, concerned as it was with »the salvation of the brethren«, and the traditional understanding of church authority. As soon as this new knowledge was obtained, however, the brethren had to share it. It was Luther's obligation to distribute his insight among the people. Precisely for this reason the stream of popular writings begin after the dispute in Leipzig. It is true, the inclination to inform the people existed also before Leipzig. As a preacher and confessor the concern for the teaching of the common man was natural to Luther, but now it became an absolute necessity, because salvation depended on it.

<sup>2</sup> WA Br I, 307, 37 – 308, 60 (136).



7. Until the diet of Worms Luther was still acting as a theologian, not as a reformer of the church.

The first attempts after Leipzig to inform the people, as for instance the sermons on the sacraments from the autumn of 1519, were soon substituted by less cautious writings. Nevertheless they were part of a programme, partly continued in 1520, partly interrupted by the resumption of the trial against Luther in Rome. From Luther's point of view this was merely an extension of his responsibility as a doctor of Holy Scripture. At least until the diet of Worms he was still acting as a theologian, not as a reformer of the church. Nikolaï Frederik Severin Grundtvig is not completely wrong when he calls the event in Worms »a victory of the School over State and Church«. Whereas the »victory« can be an issue of debate, Grundtvig is in harmony with Luther when he sees him as a »schoolman« in conflict with the authorities of state and church. There is more than a trivial truth in this, because it is confirmed by the state of mind which gave Luther the possibility to enjoy a vast support in this period.

As a man of truth, as a »modern« scholar, he was hailed in these years by the young humanists and other enlightened people. Until the dispute in Leipzig very little was known, apart from Luther's antischolastic polemics. It was not before he began to publish exegetical works (the interpretation of a few Psalms and the »Commentary on Galatians« in 1519) that the learned public could begin to form an opinion about the fundamentals of Luther's theology as we know them. It must certainly have been difficult in these years to distinguish between »Erasmians« and »Martinians«. Martin Bucer will hardly have been the only one who saw the most obvious difference in the circumstance that Luther said openly what Desiderius Erasmus merely suggested.<sup>3</sup> This was, of course, to some extent changed by Luther's writings and actions of 1520.

8. It seems to be a likely conclusion concerning the years 1516–1521 that the whole complex of Luther's actions and writings has to be considered if we want to understand his »cause«.

In »De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium«, 1520, Luther ironically thanks his opponents who are making him wiser every day. He invites the readers to burn his writings of the previous years in which he did not fully

3 CORRESPONDANCE DE MARTIN BUCER. Bd. 1/ hrsg. von Jean Rott. Leiden 1979, 61, 54–56 (3).



understand the indulgences and the papal primacy.<sup>4</sup> In 1520 the changes of attitude happen with amazing speed. In »Von dem Papsttum zu Rom wider den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig« Luther had still declared his willingness to accept everything which the Pope decides and does, provided he (Luther) is allowed to judge it by Holy Scripture, but as he doesn't think such a permission to be very likely he nevertheless appeals to the secular powers. Besides this freedom to judge according to Holy Scripture he fights for one other thing: he will not stand that men form new articles of faith.<sup>5</sup> These statements deserve a few comments.

First, Luther's rejection of his previous writings seems to be concerned with indulgences and papal primacy alone. There is no indication of regret concerning the theology of the cross or the antischolastic polemic. This is not, of course, in itself conclusive, but what could Luther in the early summer of 1520 possibly think of when he maintains that he is fighting against new articles of faith, except his own antischolastic campaign and its sequels? Another passage in »Von dem Papsttum zu Rom . . .« might support this suggestion. If the reader wants to know why Luther is attacked so vehemently, his answer is this: he has interfered with lofty things concerning faith and the word of God; they couldn't do anything about that, and instead of it they have attacked him on account of indulgences and papal power.<sup>6</sup> If we look at a list of Luther's published works before the summer of 1520 – for only in connection with the published writings does Luther's remark make any sense – the basis will become very narrow, if only such works may be taken into consideration in which those in favour of a late »discovery« find the right kind of talk about faith and the word of God. Should Luther maybe think that he is interfering with lofty things concerning faith and the word of God, when he, for instance, maintains the impossibility of good works outside grace? The alternative would be that his cause was really a theological formula or, for that matter, a combination of formulae, and not the whole trend of his Pauline theology. I would like to suggest that he himself was unaware of such a conception of his cause. In order to avoid a lengthy discussion of the 1545 preface it should be added that the seriousness of Luther's difficulties with Romans 1, 16 f is hereby not questioned.

Secondly, what does Luther mean by stating his unwillingness to allow new articles of faith to be formed? If we look at the contest in sequel of the ninety-

4 WA 6, 497, 7–20.

5 WA 6, 322, 2–5.

6 WA 6, 289, 15–20.



five theses, we might find an answer: in the view of the history of theology developed in his polemical writings. According to Luther the erratic process began with the scholastic theology, and, as was soon added, the rise of the papacy.<sup>7</sup> What prevents us from concluding that Luther sees his whole campaign against scholastic theology as a fight against the tendency to create new articles of faith? In that case the whole complex of his actions and writings – and the uncompromising coherence of them – in the years 1516–1521 becomes significant as far as his »cause« is concerned. After 1521 it becomes considerably more complicated to discuss Luther's cause in the way chosen here. It would be necessary to analyse how he reacts at the different stages of the contest with the Roman Church and with evangelical groups and persons; to notify the discoveries which he makes in sequel of the attacks upon him and of the course of the Reformation movement; to sort out the various ways in which he formulates his case; to be aware of the increasing certitude and the skill in extending his basic convictions on still wider fields; and to observe the situations to which he has no real answer. Such investigations, and more still, should all be undertaken in order to draw a reliable picture of his cause. Here, however, a few suggestions will have to suffice.

9. Not even the final breach with pope and emperor in 1521 could shake Luther's belief in the existence of one, true church.

When we think of Luther's activities during his stay at Wartburg castle it is significant to notice what he did – in so far as he could decide that for himself: he translated the New Testament and wrote sermons on the sunday texts. He did not make preparations to establish a »Lutheran« church. A German Bible and examples of Gospel preaching were to him the most urgent needs of the church. Apart from that he did not want to build anything, only to destruct institutions and convictions contrary to the Gospel, such as the misuse of the mass and the *vota monastica*. It has justly been remarked (Heiko A. Oberman) that in the Reformed Church, the tradition from Ulrich Zwingli and Johannes Calvin, but also in certain southern German cities, the doctrine of the church was always prior to the doctrine of justification whereas it was the other way round on Lutheran ground. This is not only an interesting point, but an essential one, for the understanding of Luther's point of departure as well as for the history of

7 Siehe z.B. WA I, 677, 9–11.



Lutheranism. The doctor of Holy Scripture, as well as »the ecclesiast in Wittenberg«, had no business to build a church. When Luther pointed out that neither he nor anybody else should reform the church, but the word of God alone – »ohne Hand« – it was not only a clear consequence of the apocalyptic views so apparent in his writings, but also a testimony of his belief in the unbroken continuity of the church. His well known assertion of the existence of the church under the Pope<sup>8</sup> is another convincing statement of this belief. If nothing else, then at least baptism guarantees the survival of the church, even if in periods it might have consisted of babies alone.<sup>9</sup>

Luther's ideas of the church is not a new »doctrine«, intended to form the basis of a »Lutheran« church, but an exposition of the New Testament teaching, with no immediate practical demands on church organisation involved. The proclamation of the *laeta libertas* of all Christians<sup>10</sup> is in Luther's conception nothing but a rediscovery of what is already in the church, in spite of the papacy. Considering Luther's conviction of the unbroken continuity of the church, i.e. of the community of true believers, as the bearer not only of tradition, but of the word of God, we should, maybe, not talk about Scripture as the foundation of the church, in the way so familiar in the Lutheran tradition. Luther, the constant interpreter of Scripture, did not think of the church as an association of readers, but as a congregation, gathered to hear the message of Christ, preached, and spoken in the sacramental words. It was not a joke when he wrote in the »Wartburgpostille« that the Gospel is not really Scripture, but a spoken word.<sup>11</sup> Luther's Bible and its interpretation do not constitute the church. On the contrary, the existence of the church is a precondition for the significance of Bible study. Luther reads it as a person who is already in the church, and only on that background it is so important to interpret it rightly. Consequently, he saw his own books as instruments in order to remove obstacles to the Gospel, not as everlasting statements to be authorized in the church.

10. The main difficulty in pinning down Luther's cause merely by describing his »doctrine« is due to his way of dealing with theology.

Since 1521 Luther's working conditions changed constantly for the rest of his life. The Reformation movement, spiritualism, the organisation of visitations,

8 WA 26, 147, 13–26.

9 WA 6, 301, 5 f.

10 WA 6, 567, 25–31.

11 WA 10 I 1, 17, 7–12.



the education of the young, the politics of empire and estates, and his many combats gave him one opportunity after another to rethink, and to react in new ways. Whereas the way to Worms had mainly been a question of sticking to the theology of the cross and to the denial of speculation, metaphysical theology, and of righteousness by works, moral theology, the way from Wartburg castle onward was less straight and much less familiar. The many problems raised by circumstances on which he had no influence involved a lot of questions to which he had no ready answers. Experience did not infrequently change his outlook. In some cases he was led astray, because his view was blurred by failing knowledge, especially in political matters, but even where he was well informed he often had to go beyond earlier statements in such a way that not only Luther scholars, but also many contemporaries found him to be inconsistent and self-contradictory. As far as the matter at issue is concerned, it is not essential if such an accusation might be right in some cases. Why should Luther have been sheltered against all mistakes? What we have to observe, however, is the very way of dealing with the current problems.

There is, I think, an analogy between Luther's progress in the years 1516–1521 and the way in which he after 1521 handles the problems as they emerge. The point of departure for Luther's antischolastic campaign was his exegesis, centered on sin and justification, i.e. man coram Deo, and this remained the basis also when he was challenged by his opponents to widen the field. In spite of the irony it is true that he could thank them for more and more new insights. Step by step he went further, often after a short hesitation, because his basic views of the *res theologica* gave him an always ready point of departure. He did not *know* what to say when the question of papal primacy was raised, but he could find out in the light of Scripture. After 1521 things were much more complicated as far as the challenges did not only come from his opponents, but were often caused by demands of advice in practical matters, by hostile behaviour within the evangelical camp or by the necessity of interfering with political matters. Even in such cases Luther acted as a theologian, not offering theories to be carried into practice, but interpreting what he saw and listened to. Just as he interpreted each single passage of Scripture in the light of the context, he interpreted political and social matters in the light of Scripture, i.e. of law and Gospel. In this sense he did precisely what he had previously done in questions concerning the church: pointed out and condemned what he considered to be perversions and talked to the Christian conscience.



On this background there is nothing surprising in the fact that Luther never lectured on anything else than the Bible. Neither is it strange that he never made any systematic summary of his theology. Interpretation of Scripture and polemic, that was all. There was no need for anything more, because everything depended on the story of Christ becoming real, i.e. happening to us, such as it does in the preaching of the Gospel and in the administration of the sacraments – whenever God wills. In this conviction we also have the explanation of Luther's seeming hardness against his opponents. In all his big combats, as for instance against Jacobus Latomus, Andreas Bodenstein from Karlstadt, Erasmus, Zwingli or Johann Agricola, he is unable to discuss the question at issue in a quiet way, because he saw the conflict in each of these cases as a fight about everything. In all these combats he found the whole cause of theology at stake. »Remove Christ from the Scriptures, what will you find?« he said to Erasmus, but the question expresses well what he had to say to his other opponents as well.

11. It is true that the doctrinal elements in Luther's theology became more and more expanded in later years.

This is not very surprising, because he had to take up new questions all the time. His »doctrine« in later years was certainly not less depending on its context than in the early years, i.e. on the events and circumstances to which it was a reaction. As Luther's theology was never identical with his cause, but merely an instrument to serve the cause, it is no wonder that he had to change the accent according to the demands of each situation. Most of the damage which has been done in the church under Luther's name since the sixteenth century has been accomplished by neglecting this point of view. His successors made dogmas of his opinions and convictions, but by becoming »Lutherans« and Bible-worshippers they repeated him in a framework totally alien to him. They neglected the only thing which could possibly be inherited directly: his way of interpreting the Gospel by removing the current obstacles to its understanding. Instead of that they took his theology as they understood it as truth itself. In spite of all their correct formulae, easily to be found at different places in Luther's works, they changed what had in him been deeds in order to defend the Gospel into some kind of textbook ruling the preaching of later generations. Nothing, however, could be more contrary to Luther's views than a »Lutheran« doctrine if it means Luther's actual ideas reduced to handy formulae.



12. Luther's faith in Christ as the word of God in person is not only devastating for any human speculation or righteousness by works, but also denouncing any secular government interfering with spiritual freedom as an ungodly tyranny.

Luther's apocalyptic views, so typical for his time, are closely connected with the conception of the papacy as Antichrist. There is no doubt about the importance of these views to Luther, but however interesting and significant for the interpretation of many Luther texts they are, it would hardly be adviseable to see them as the decisive factor. At a time when these thoughts were almost an obsession with Luther – during the stay at Wartburg castle – he admits his adherence to them, but he also explicitly assures us that he doesn't want to bind others to them.<sup>12</sup> He was convinced of the approaching last judgment and interpreted many facts as signs of it, thus giving his contemporaries what he thought to be the best possible advice, but also apart from this conviction an eschatological view in a broader sense was already given with the faith in Christ as the word of God. Not only the rejection of the church apparatus as part of the revelation, but also the limitation of the secular power to earthly matters was a clear consequence of that faith.

It is well known how Luther's view of history (*larva Dei*) has often been interpreted as if he really wanted to separate the two kingdoms from each other. The fatal consequences of this interpretation is clearly seen in the famous (and notorious) discussion of the »Zweireichelehre« in the thirties of this century. Although the topic »Luther and society« will be discussed in a later plenary session at this congress, it is necessary, I think, in connection with »Luther's cause« to maintain that his political mistakes were caused by failing information or poor judgment, not by any principle permitting princes and cities to do as they liked. The so-called theory of the two kingdoms is not really a theory, but a sermon intending to depict the rule of God. It is certainly polemically turned against the interference of the church in matters of civil law, but not in order to give the secular power unrestricted permission to rule regardless of the needs and demands of the immediate rule of Christ.

The famous words from the second stanza of »Ein feste Burg« are not just a »religious« statement, but an assertion of God's rule:

12 WA 10 I 2, 95, 17.



»Mit unsrer Macht ist nichts getan, / wir sind gar bald verloren;  
es streit' für uns der rechte Mann, / den Gott hat selbst erkoren.  
Fragst du, wer der ist? / Er heißt Jesus Christ,  
der Herr Zebaoth, / und ist kein andrer Gott,  
das Feld muß er behalten.«

Any nicely arranged separation between the fields of church and state, religion and politics, is here turned down. »... und ist kein ander Gott«, that means also: any government trying to take decisions and using force in spiritual matters is a tyranny. When Luther called the rulers of his day, as he found them to be in most cases, »fools and rascals« (Narren und Buben), it was not just an emotional outburst of desperation, but a concise description of what he saw: governments interfering with spiritual freedom or in some other way acting against the law of God.

It was part of the *theologia crucis* to suffer the injustice of the world without becoming violently rebellious, but it was still the duty to preach – and pray – against such tyrants. Although Luther suffered many disappointments and sometimes acted as if he had himself forgotten the sermon about the two kingdoms and thus taken upon himself some part of the responsibility for the development of Lutheranism, it should be admitted that not this sermon, but the neglect of it created the princely state-church, blindly obedient to the secular master and sticking to the inner life of the so-called soul alone. Luther's »failure« to deliver a theology on which a church in the institutional sense of the word could be organized became probably to some extent fatal for the »Lutheran« church, but it might – at the same time – be an important negative testimony of his fundamental truthfulness to his – cause.

13. In Luther's confessions it must be reasonable to search for the most direct expressions of his cause.

The »Confession« of 1528 is explicitly written as a »testament« in which Luther confesses his faith, but also »The Schmalkaldian Articles« have this character. It is significant that he makes no attempt to forward his own theology, i.e. his own specific way of formulating Christian doctrine. Both confessions are meant to express the faith of all Christians, not to explain anything private. The trinitarian composition of the 1528 »Confession« has the same dramatic-epic form as Luther's hymns. He is just retelling the great works of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The »Confession« is at the same time very



characteristic of Luther and still devoid of any »Lutheran« theologoumena. The same is the case with the central article of Schmalkalden. We find there no »doctrine of justification«, just a composition of important christological passages of the Bible. And this is the article on which he would stand even if heaven and earth collapse. The second article in the Great Catechism is of the same sort. Jesus became our Lord by freeing us from sin, devil, and death whereas we were until then prisoners under the power of the devil. The tyrants have now been expelled. Jesus has done all this by becoming man, by suffering, dying and rising from the dead, just as the ecclesiastical year relates. On the understanding of this article, Luther adds, depends the whole Gospel which »we« are preaching, for on the article itself, i.e. on the reality here reported, depends our salvation. It is to be interpreted in the same spirit when Luther could consider the »Augsburg Confession« a clear and glorious confession of faith in Christ and wholeheartedly call it »our« confession although he was not particularly happy about its form. He could do that because he did not see the Melancthonian work as a norm to be followed, but as a report on the already existing preaching and practice.<sup>13</sup> It was neither his nor his friend's business to set up new articles of faith.

Is it that simple? Yes, it is, but the defence of the simplicity of Christian faith is far from simple. Although the power of sin, devil, and death has been broken we are still living under the cross. That makes the constant fight necessary, not only the fight of conscience in individual man, but also the public fight against evil doctrine and evil deeds, in the church and outside it. That's what theology is for. It has often been assumed, not only in the theological tradition of old, but also in modern scholarship that polemical writings cannot be taken at full value. It is hardly recommendable to interpret Luther according to such principles. It is not accidental, but very significant that some of his greatest theological works are connected with some of his more prominent combats. For the same reason Luther cannot write a confession without rejecting false doctrine and false practice at the same time. To tell the story of Christ which is the cause itself, demands a permanent fight against the enemies of the Gospel, not only the enemies from outside, but also within oneself. It was not a boast of clairvoyance when Luther maintained to know the satanic forces active in Erasmus, but self-knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> WA Br 8, 653, 34–36 (3425).

<sup>14</sup> WA Br 3, 2, 545, 26–29 (499).



14. Without a clear understanding of Luther's cause any account of his theology is bound to miss the point.

This paper consists, roughly speaking, of a thesis (no. 1-8) and a hypothesis (no. 9-13). The thesis tries to show the coherence of Luther's work on the way to Worms. To follow up the thesis for the rest of his life would need more than the few pages at disposal here. A choice of a few, but important points, therefore, seemed advisable. These points were chosen in order to indicate that Luther's cause was directing his theology also after 1521. As the sum of the points chosen lacks the firmness of the thesis in the first part of the paper, I call it a hypothesis, although not one, I hope, without some substance to support it. With an emphasis on such points as Luther's belief in the continuity of the church, his restriction of the limits of secular government, and the expansion of doctrinal elements over increasingly wider fields it was maintained that Luther's theology was never identical with his cause, but an instrument to serve the cause.

I would like now to suggest that the hypothesis is supported by a number of circumstances. The interdependence of biblical interpretation (exegesis and sermons) and polemic makes it almost impossible to isolate formulae or phrases in order to state their representative value as »doctrine« argued by Luther. The doctrinal elements which are certainly there cannot be considered as constituents of any enduring »system«. It is an issue of debate whether this is due to changing conditions alone or whether it depends on Luther's basic approach to theology. This paper is a vote for the latter possibility. It could be argued, I think, that Luther's way of disposing of his opponents confirms this way of looking at his theology. Whatever the topic, Luther tends to expand the discussion. Only his exclusive focus on the Gospel makes it understandable that, for instance, the maintainance of the free will and the denial of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist are both leading to a refusal of Christian community with the keepers of such doctrines. In the same direction we are led by the fact that Luther absolutely refused to set himself up as an authority. His so-called traditionalism concerning ecclesiastical customs, so difficult to understand by many of his contemporaries, also seems to indicate that not Luther's theology, but the distinction between necessity (the preaching of the Gospel) and freedom (matters of church order) is the decisive factor.

Admitting the deplorable brevity of these considerations the hypothesis seems, if tenable at all, to indicate the indispensability of a clear view of Luther's way of doing theology for any account of the contents of this theology.



It has been suggested here that this way is depending on the »cause«. That means that even if a distinction between faith and theology must be maintained, this distinction can never allow a separation of theology from faith, because the essence of theology is the defence of faith. This being so, Luther's theology is »historical« in the sense that it is fundamentally bound to time and place. It can, therefore, only be misunderstood as soon as it is seen in a framework independent of its historical context. A »Luther's theology«, meaning a survey of his »doctrine«, or an exposition of Luther's doctrine of this or that, can, therefore, never be in accordance with Luther unless it interprets everything in connection with the precise historical conditions. To say it bluntly: the contents of Luther's theology is inseparable from the way and the form. One could be tempted to use Søren Kierkegaard's expression: the way is all.

15. Luther's cause seems to raise some difficulties if we compare it with the cause of Luther research.

It has been attempted here to express Luther's cause indirectly. In a strict sense his cause could only be handled justly if it was taken up directly, i.e. put forward by preaching. As we all agree, however different in attitudes and convictions, that preaching is not compatible with research, it follows, very ironically, that an interpretation of Luther's cause which is totally in harmony with the topic is forbidden by our own standards of »Wissenschaft«. A sense of humour isn't necessary in any great amount in order to see the fun. (Those who might have a lot of other gifts, but not this one, are asked to go on with their important work without letting this unseemly remark disturb them.) What are we to do then?

As this is not a recommendation to change the Congress for Luther Research into a series of sermons, it must be asked in what way we can come as near as possible to our topic, provided we are still talking about research, i.e. expositions which are discussable and controllable. Some suggestions have been made already. It seems to me that all of us, historians and systematic theologians as well, could learn something from the study of literature. To see Luther as an author means to consider his work, neither as a somewhat chaotic body of doctrines which needs to be sorted out and put into a consistent form of so many paragraphs (the temptation of the systematic theologian), nor as elements of thought to be traced back in history as if they were thus fully explained or just as some factors in a broader context of which the effect only is interesting, what-



ever their original intention might have been (some ways of historical approach), but as the result of the interdependence of a certain person's experience and the events in which he became involved. This means to search for the driving forces of this person's way of expressing himself, but also to respect the very form of the expression, because the evaluation of his work, as well as of its effect, becomes arbitrary unless the key to the understanding of him has been found. To use Luther's works as a heap of opinions or as some reflections of historically conditioned social or ideological attitudes alone, is no better than interpreting a great poem regardless of its form. A poem can very well contain opinions, and it can, of course, reflect certain attitudes of importance for the description of a certain period, but it is not fully understood unless the necessity of its form has become clear. The implication of these remarks would be an enterprise which involves a level of reflection far more complicated than the usual prejudices of historians admit.

As this is not meant to be a discussion of the philosophy of history, a discussion certain to become endless in an assembly as multicoloured as this one, it might be a good idea to stop here. If the thesis – and hypothesis – in this paper has any substance at all – for I am well aware that some of those present at the congress will probably think it to be a lot of nonsense – these last remarks amount to the suggestion that we should try just to take Luther as a person and as an author almost as seriously as we take ourselves. Are we ready to do that it shouldn't surprise me if we became able to interpret his cause, and, consequently, his theology, in a way not too alien to its meaning.