

Luther's Cause

Response by Robert H. Fischer

Every generation, as Leif Grane has remarked, has to face the task of identifying »Luther's cause«. Fifty years ago, Luther specialists were warmly debating Karl Holl's suggestion that Luther's faith in its essence is »conscience religion«. For the jubilee of 1933 Rudolf Hermann wrote an essay on »Luthers theologisches Grundanliegen«,¹ and Heinrich Hermelink wrote another on »Das eigentlichste Anliegen Luthers«.²

Our age seems less inclined to make such magisterial pronouncements. Nevertheless, the scholar who ignores the problem of identifying Luther's cause simply indulges an unexamined assumption of what Luther was about.³ In varying ways, every speaker and every vocal participant in this present congress will expose his or her interpretation of Luther's cause. Since we seldom articulate such interpretations explicitly, however, even to ourselves, the risk of talking past one another will be enormous.

It is highly appropriate, therefore, that we devote a session not only to discuss *what* Luther's cause really was, but also to explore *how* we go about determining what his cause really was.

The two papers of Leif Grane and Martin Seils offer us an excellent launching pad for putting such a debate into orbit. The two colleagues agree that the interpretation and proclamation of the *gospel* of Jesus Christ lie at the heart of Luther's cause. Where they diverge in their approaches, it remains to be seen whether it explains anything to say that the one scholar writes as a historian and the other as a theologian. I would maintain that such a distinction is too ambiguous to be very helpful. Let me contribute four points to the discussion of our topic.

1. I especially commend Grane's insight that Luther's doctrine and his cause

1 Rudolf HERMANN: Luthers theologisches Grundanliegen. Greifswald 1933.

2 Heinrich HERMELINK: Das eigentlichste Anliegen Luthers. Christliche Welt 47 (1933), 961–967.

must be distinguished. Consider what a »cause« is. It has at least three features: a body of definite thought, the aspect of personal commitment or conviction, and the urgent need to communicate and share the first two elements. The first two features by themselves are not a cause, for they can remain private. A cause is a conviction which involves the person existentially, and which has the drive to step into the public arena, challenging people to decision. In so doing, it has to contend and compete with other causes. To identify Luther's cause requires us to discern what alternative causes it confronted – and still confronts.

Already for this reason, although I sincerely appreciate Seils' keen insights and the fine Luther texts which he cites, I have misgivings about his exposition of Luther's cause. In the first place, no matter how astutely one selects quotations from any and every Luther work, and fits them into a coherent whole, how does one prove that one has found the single, true master-key which opens all the doors of Luther's theological edifice? Seils suggests the concept of grace. Holl suggested conscience. Then, in terms of method, how shall we determine which is the correct key, or whether either scholar has discerned Luther's cause more accurately than, say, Albrecht Ritschl or Hartmann Grisar or any present-day scholar? In the second place, scholastics, humanists, Reformed and Left-Wing Protestants all have exalted God's grace. How does one prove that grace is a more fundamental category for Luther than for these contemporaries of his? Thirdly, can we say that any »interpretive category«, and »basic idea« (*Grundgedanke*), in itself is Luther's cause? These are questions which may invite some debate.

I have commended Grane's search among the concrete historical phenomena of Luther's career. I remind myself, also, that the term »Luther's cause« does not simply mean »what Luther intended« (viz., taking the word »Luther's« as a subjective genitive); it also means: what message or messages from Luther got through to people? In this sense, as Wilhelm Borth has shown, we must treat the word »Luther's« as an objective genitive. Great decisionmakers and commoners alike had to decide what to do about »the Luther case« (*causa Lutheri*).³ This insight implies, I think, that the theology of Luther's cause needs to be sought primarily among the writings and actions where Luther undertook to stand forth as a teacher of the Christian community at large, as an interpreter of the

3 Wilhelm BORTH: *Die Luthersache (Causa Lutheri) 1517–1524: die Anfänge der Reformation als Frage von Politik und Recht*. Lübeck 1970.

gospel and an adviser in current affairs. I commend both authors, therefore, for giving special attention to Luther's testament of 1528 and to his catechisms.

2. We may want to discuss whether, or to what extent, Grane's and Seils' papers help us to deal with two important charges against Luther's theology, often pressed for example by Roman Catholic scholars: that Luther's soteriological position is in the last analysis subjectivistic: his *fides*, it is alleged, is finally *credulitas*, lacking the objectivity of the Roman faith; and that Luther's interest is so onesidedly soteriological that it lacks a broad and sound philosophical foundation. In my opinion both charges are astigmatic. But the questions are indeed substantial, and I believe that they require answers in the context of discerning Luther's cause.

3. I call attention to two very debatable points in Grane's essay. The first is his argument against a late dating of Luther's »tower insight«. I agree with him; but I am sure that others will want to discuss the point. The second is Grane's contention that for Reformed Christians, »the doctrine of the church was always prior to the doctrine of justification whereas it was the other way round on Lutheran ground«. I find such a view confirmed neither by the structure and intent of Ulrich Zwingli's »De vera et falsa religione commentarius« and his »Fidei ratio«, nor by that of John Calvin's »Institutio christianae religionis« and »Geneva Catechism«, nor by that of the »Heidelberg Catechism«. Unless I am convinced otherwise by sound reasons, I would be inclined to file that hypothesis alongside the old misguided assertion that while Calvin began his theology from the glory or sovereignty of God, Luther started from God's love.

4. I should like to offer a few suggestions for pursuing our common task of accurately and profoundly discerning Luther's cause.

Luther's volcanic temperament and lack of restraint have often been headlined. It should prove enormously instructive, however, also to study comprehensively the major instances when Luther exercised deliberate self-restraint for the sake of his cause. I cannot recall ever having seen this task addressed systematically. Let me suggest a few instances; you all can easily extend the list. Ulrich von Hutten and Franz von Sickingen volunteered to defend Luther's cause by revolutionary arms; Luther refused the offer. Landgrave Philip of Hesse wished to use the Turkish threat as leverage to wring political concessions for the Evangelical cause; Luther answered no, for the welfare of the empire. Again, in the eucharistic controversies within the Evangelical camp, what does it really mean for Luther's cause that he could not

approve of Cornelisz Hendricxs Hoen's simple solution for the exegesis of the Verba, that he rejected Martin Bucer's plea that theological differences over the eucharist were not important enough to divide the Evangelicals, and that at the end of the Marburg Colloquy it was Luther who proposed a formula of unity-in-diversity?

The place of mystery and awe in Luther's theology and action needs to be more sensitively explored than it commonly is. Luther pours scorn on theologians who speak as if they have sneaked up into God's heavenly strong-room while God was asleep, or as if they have swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all – yet Luther sometimes gives the impression that he too belongs in that company. To what extent can Luther's cause be identified with his claims to know God's cause? Luther insists that a person must be certain that God is gracious to him or her; but does this insistence mean that Luther no longer suffers »Anfechtung«, and no longer risks and gropes? What does it really mean for Luther's cause that he charges Jacobus Latomus the scholastic with »diminishing the knowledge of the mystery of Christ«, or with being unable to deal honestly with »the mystery of grace and sin«?⁴ Here, I think, it is not enough to work out Luther's »theology of the cross« in a narrow theological frame; we must also explore how that theology relates to the actual practice of worship, to the actual administration of authority within the church, and to the church's actual guidance of moral behavior.

Such an exploration may force us to revise our conception of the nature of theology. We who are participants in this congress are presumably engaged in the quest for theological and historical sophistication. The path is booby-trapped, not least by our own human pride and our intellectual pretension. What does it mean for the definition of a theologian, when Luther declares against Latomus and others, that St. Agnes at the age of fourteen, or St. Lucy or St. Anastasia, were better theologians than the academic professionals?⁵

Finally, we ought to investigate in what contexts and in what spirit Luther himself used the term »cause«. So, about 16. February 1520, when he was approaching the climax of his first great crisis: »Good heavens, Spalatin, how excited you are! . . . I wrote you before not to assume that this affair [rem] was begun or is being carried on by your judgment or mine or that of any man. If it is of God, it will be accomplished quite contrary to, outside, above and below your

4 WA 8, 112, 21; 103, 23 f.

5 WA 8, 127, 13 f.

or my understanding.«⁶ Again, to Spalatin, 4. November 1520: »See whether those who are offended by my bitterness may not be persons who hold the cause of the Word cheaply . . . «⁷ Again, to Melanchthon, 27. June 1530 from the Coburg, when Luther had not yet learned that the »Augsburg Confession« had been publicly read: »Christ knows whether it comes from stupidity or the Spirit, but I for my part am not very much troubled about the cause. Indeed, I am more hopeful than I expected to be. God, who is able to raise the dead, is also able to uphold his cause when it is falling, or to raise it up again when it has fallen, or to move it forward when it is standing still. If we are not worthy [instruments to accomplish his purpose], it will be accomplished through others.«⁸

The cause was not proprietarily »Luther's«; it was a cause on which princes and free city governments and common people also were staking their lives. Nor was the cause just »theirs« collectively; it was, they were convinced, the cause of God, who could also maintain it without them. Because it was God's (so Luther encouraged Elector John), »our prayer is right and the cause is just«.⁹ Thus, God's cause involved a call to responsible action. Luther's response included a bold, positive ecumenical proposal: If the gospel is left free to us, we can live under the Roman bishops' jurisdiction.¹⁰

All these dimensions belong to »Luther's cause«. To it he devoted himself with such energy and confidence that he could declare publicly: »Whether we fall prey to Turks or Tartars, pope or devil, no matter, our cause stands secure . . . «¹¹

6 WA Br 2, 43, 2–6 (255).

7 WA Br 2, 211, 21–23 (351).

8 WA Br 5, 400, 27–31 (1605); cf. 405–407 (1609), Luther to Melanchthon 29 June 1530.

9 WA Br 5, 327, 83 f (1572), 20 May 1530.

10 WA 30 II, 340, 20–342, 2; WA Br 5, 407, 75 f (1609); cf. Augsburg Confession Art. 28, 69–78 (BSLK, 131, 36–133, 3).

11 WA 30 II, 272, 34–273, 18.